

Oana Ivan



**Lost Shorelines
and Fragile Social Ties:**
On Fishing Culture,
Tourism, and Filmmaking
in the Danube Delta

Presă Universitară Clujeană

OANA IVAN

LOST SHORELINES AND FRAGILE SOCIAL TIES

On Fishing Culture, Tourism and Filmmaking in the Danube Delta

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PRESA UNIVERSITARĂ CLUJEANĂ
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Front cover picture: The local fisherman, Remus,
fishing on a summer morning.

Back cover picture: My very own fishing session,
to understand fishermen's point of view
(photo by Alexandru Sidorencu).

All photographs featured in this book
were taken by the author.

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"there are hundreds of scientists interested in saving the fish,
frogs and birds but nobody cares if people live or die here"

Fisherman, Sfântu Gheorghe

Introduction

I arrived in the Danube Delta for the first time in July 2007. Born and raised in Cluj- Napoca, 800 kilometres away, I knew very little about this place. I knew it is second largest river delta in Europe, it is a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, and my general impression based on the images seen on TV and the internet, was that Danube Delta is an aquatic paradise, with pelicans, gorgeous sunsets, wild and free. I still remember the feeling when I got off the ferry that connects the village of Sfântu Gheorghe to the rest of the country. Windy, humid, sunny, sandy, and most of them, out of time. Almost 20 years later, the feeling is nearly the same, although in the meantime, the village has become like my second home. What has changed without a doubt is my knowledge about this place. Long gone are the naïve, stereotypical images of the “untouched paradise”, “unspoiled nature” and “heaven on Earth”, as the everyday experience showed me a different side, with people at the heart of this aquatic eco-system. This book is an account of the cultural changes occurring in the fishing village of Sfântu Gheorghe, it is about the tensions between locals and institutions, about new emerging local patterns of resource use, coping with the environmental changes while catering for

tourists. And about how to make a film about all these, offering the locals a chance to tell their own story.

Famous for its biodiversity, with 75 freshwater and marine fish, 300 species of migratory birds and 1150 plant species, the Danube Delta has been declared in 1991 a UNESCO Natural Heritage Biosphere Reserve. Due to this new designation, the managing institution, the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve Administration and other international ones, have been imposing laws and regulations focused on the conservation of biodiversity. At the same time, after the fall of communism in 1989, with the privatization of the fishing cooperatives in 1999, and with Romania becoming a part of the European Union in 2007, the local economy has been under steady transformation, from communist system to capitalist market, with fishing and tourism at the center of the subsistence strategies. In this context, cultural traits such as patterns of natural resources use, social organization, local knowledge, local and household economy, language, attitudes, norms and values, gender roles, are undergoing a series of changes.

Since the Danube Delta is the largest and best preserved of Europe's deltas, it is a favourite research subject for biologists and botanists, but there is little focus on the human dimension; as one local fisherman put it: "there are hundreds of scientists interested in saving the fish, frogs, and birds, but nobody cares if people live or die here".

After being part of a research team at the University of Wyoming, focused on Native American communities and their relationship with the environment at Devils Tower National Monument (Wyoming, USA), I became interested in

understanding Romanian local communities living inside natural protected areas and how the European context is shaping the human-environment relationship. Therefore, under the co-tutelage of Babes-Bolyai University (Romania) and the University of Kent (U.K.), in 2009 I started my PhD research, focusing on cultural traits such as patterns of natural resources use, traditional ecological knowledge, and household economy of the Danube Delta UNESCO Biosphere Reserve communities.

This book presents some of the findings discussed in my PhD thesis, and it has two parts: The first one presents and discusses from an anthropological perspective the cultural changes occurring in the fishing culture of the people living in the village of Sfântu Gheorghe (Danube Delta). The second part reviews the production and post-production process of my documentary film “Lives among Waters” (ro. Vieti intre ape), also based in part on my PhD thesis, but whose production continued for 3 years after the PhD defence, and turned into a stand-alone documentary.

For a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the transformations occurring, presented both through writing and through film, Chapter 1 offers a succinct description of the ethnographic background of the village Sfântu Gheorghe. Chapter 2 discusses the way I immersed myself in this community, and how preliminary field work helped me tailor the focus of my research while becoming aware of the tension inside this community and raising the issues of the ethical approach to delicate topics. This chapter also presents the main research methods and schedule employed for research and for ethnographic filmmaking.

In Chapter 3, we can read a review of the relevant literature on anthropology of fishing, one of the main topics addressed in this book. In relation to other relevant studies, this chapter presents common issues and particularities of the Sfântu Gheorghe village, while setting the general theoretical frameworks employed in the analysis of the field data.

Fishing strategies employed by the fishermen of Sfântu Gheorghe are described in detail in Chapter 4. Fine-grained ethnography with information on the main tools, seasons, species, grounds, social organization, market, fishing association, and poaching, offers a complex picture of the cultural changes occurring in this fishing village under pressure.

The fifth Chapter analyses these cultural changes through the lens of political ecology while comparing them with other cases world-wide and in relation to the history of these practices. At the same time, it proposes a new framework for analyzing the livelihoods of the communities relying on fishing as main source of income. The findings offer a better understanding of the fishing culture and emphasize the need for enhanced collaboration between locals, institutions, and policymakers.

In Chapter 6, I present ethnographic findings on how locals are engaged in tourism, showing that for the past fifty years men, women, and children of Sfântu Gheorghe have been engaged in this business in various ways. This chapter also discusses the changes occurring throughout the decades in local culture under the pressure of tourism as well as the benefits this economic activity brought to the villagers.

In the second part of the book, in Chapter 7, I analyze the way the research was transformed into a stand-alone documentary. The chapter presents how the main pillars of ethnographic filmmaking (reflexivity, ethics and subjectivity) laid the foundation for producing the film “Lives among Waters”.

Chapter 8 represents a relevant discussion on academic writing and visual storytelling. The need for an accessible language that allows a general audience to access scientific knowledge is ever so present today and, in this context, the last chapter offers sequence by sequence, a brief analysis of the methods employed, in transforming academic research into an ethnographic film available to everyone.

Relying on field research and filming done between 2009 and 2022, I believe that this book is still highly relevant today. First, it is a comprehensive, state-of-the-art analysis of the fishing strategies employed by the locals under the pressure of the market and conservation programs. None of the multiple studies done so far in the Danube Delta rely on detailed ethnographic descriptions and long-term participant observation with the fishermen, as the main research methods. Other studies are decrying the conflict between the locals, institutions, and policymakers but do not offer a comprehensive discussion on how this conflict is shaping the fishing culture, how the local ecological knowledge is lost and how community resilience is falling apart due to the new competition and mistrust, as reflected in the fishing strategies.

Therefore, this book represents a foundation for future studies addressing the same issues. New research on fishing culture in the Danube Delta would be able to compare the

methods described in this book to the current situation and the historical comparison would reveal the changes (if any) and their causes, offering a better understanding of an ever-developing situation.

Secondly, in a world where scientific knowledge seems “locked” within the boundaries of academic journals’ language and access, the importance of wider reachability is ever so growing. In this sense, the present book offers a comprehensive analysis on how the written, coded, and argotic knowledge can become accessible to a general audience through film. Since I was asked many times by anthropology students (and other social scientists) how they could make a film based on their research, I hope this book offers them a practical answer and an encouragement for taking this strenuous but beautiful path called ‘documentary filmmaking’.



"The book looks at the transformations of the "place" where fishermen carry out their work, the fishing practices, relationships with political and economic institutions, tourism, solidarities and intra-community trust. The ethnographic fieldwork on which the text and documentary film are based, was carried out in the village of Sfântu Gheorghe on the branch bearing the same name, at the mouth of the Danube. The author proposes a complex critical framework through which fishing culture is better understood and reveals the need for public policy authors and local authorities to listen to and integrate the voices of fishermen, their view of nature, and their intimate knowledge of the system they are part of and which ensures their livelihood. The work is situated in the critical space left uncovered in the literature, between studies of tribal, tropical, non-Western fishing communities and those of North European industrial fishing."

Irina-Lucia Culic, PhD., Professor at Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, Babes-Bolyai University.



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