The Heart of Warsaw - The Vistula River
By Dominika P. Brodowicz

Warsaw has eighteen official administrative districts and one unofficial, but commonly recognized, nineteenth district – the Vistula River. It is uncommon to find a river like the Vistula flowing through a European city anymore. It is unique because of its wilderness, limited regulation, and rich biodiversity, which includes: otters, beavers, white-tailed eagles and black storks. This situation is not the result of an urban master plan or green strategy implemented by the city decades ago. It is rather a combination of tragic history and the forces of nature.

Before WWII, the area along the riverbanks was planned for development including paved boulevards. The war stopped the entire process. The riverbanks were undeveloped and natural settlements of birds and unique flora remained. This was a bittersweet triumph of nature because the war destroyed sixty-five percent of the city. During the 1950s and 1960s, decisions to modify the Vistula, which included narrowing the riverbed and moving the current towards the left bank, caused the river to flow faster. Many sandy beaches and islands in the city limits were lost to erosion, and banks were overgrown with trees and undergrowth. Birds and other species were unable to build nests. In the 1970s and 1980s both banks became places that were, quite frankly, off-limits for visitors due to the lack of walking paths and high level of criminal activities. About the same period, the Vistula’s water and soil became heavily polluted by wastewater runoff.

Czajka Wastewater Treatment Plant (WWTP) was redeveloped and extended between 2010-2013 to comply with EU standards for effluent discharge. Prior to the redevelopment, as much as seventy percent of the city’s municipal wastewater ended up in the Vistula untreated. This created health hazards both for households (the Vistula is used for city water) and wildlife. Warsaw was on EU’s list of most heavily polluted cities. Today the Czajka, which is one of the largest WWTPs in Europe, complies with all EU standards and the water quality has improved significantly.

A project to protect key bird species’ habitats in the Middle Vistula River Valley against the intensive pressure of the Warsaw metropolitan area was implemented within the framework of the LIFE+ program co-financed by the EU. The main goal was to restore breeding areas on the river for birds seeking refuge not only from civilization but also from fast-spreading plants, chiefly: ash, maples, and acacias taking over nesting locations. The project included cleaning up green areas and uncovering the rotting stubs with insects that birds feed on.

Another important initiative that helps to protect the biodiversity of the Vistula is Natura 2000. It is the largest coordinated network focused on “the long-term survival of Europe's most valuable and threatened species and habitats.” Two locations, the Zawady Islands and the Kleipien Sandbanks, which include sand islands on the river and areas along the banks, are now protected under Natura 2000 and species like black storks, white-tailed eagles, terns and plovers can find a safe haven there.

Improvements to infrastructure, water quality and access to wildlife have encouraged Varsovians to return to the river. The Guardian and National Geographic have recognized Warsaw’s riverbanks as one of the world’s most beautiful city beaches. Today there are more than 50 km of biking routes along the banks of the river and over 2 km of boulevards.

So far, the coexistence between the wildlife and social life has worked well. Yet, given the growing popularity of commercial activities on the riverbanks it will be important to protect the wildlife even more diligently in the near future.

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