



CASE STUDY

# Estonia and Russia: Managing transboundary waters in the Lake Peipsi/Chudskoe basin



## Summary

Lake Peipsi/Chudskoe is the largest transboundary lake in Europe. Action has been taken by riparian governments of Russia and Estonia to develop and sign an Agreement on the Protection and Sustainable Use of Transboundary Water Bodies. An intergovernmental commission was established to co-ordinate the implementation of this agreement. Co-operation over Lake Peipsi demonstrates how integrated water resource management tools can be applied to transboundary waters shared by countries in transition.

## Background

Lake Peipsi/Chudskoe is situated on the border between Estonia and Russia and is the fourth largest lake and the biggest transboundary lake in Europe. It forms part of the basin of the Gulf of Finland and is connected with the latter via the River Narva (77km long). The lake basin covers an area of 47,800 km<sup>2</sup> and is shared by Russia, Estonia and Latvia.

There are about 240 inlets around the lake. Lake Peipsi is unique in its natural characteristics – it is shallow, eutrophic and biologically productive, with substantial fish resources and wetlands of international importance (Ramsar sites). About 1 million people live in the catchment.

The environmental quality of Lake Peipsi has been deteriorating for fifty years. The break-up of the Soviet Union caused problems, as there was no international mechanism for sharing the management of what became a transboundary state. But political changes (e.g. Estonia is an Accession country to the EU) and the need for economic co-operation of the lake, a shared resource (for fishing, transport, etc), has stimulated transboundary co-operation following IWRM principles.

In 1997, five years after the border between Estonia and Russia was re-established, the riparian governments signed an Agreement on the Protection and Sustainable Use of Transboundary Water Bodies. An intergovernmental commission was established to co-ordinate the implementation of this agreement.

## **Actions taken**

1. Re-establishing co-operative links in an international context: Shortly after the re-establishment of the border on Lake Peipsi, local stakeholders in the lake area, including fishermen, municipalities and researchers, tried to re-establish their co-operative links. However, co-operation at an international level required a formal framework. Therefore, in 1993, the Estonian Republic and the Russian Federation signed their first agreement on border crossing points, several intergovernmental agreements followed. In 1998, an Estonian-Russian Intergovernmental Commission on Trade, Economy, Scientific, Technical, Social, Humanitarian

and Cultural Co-operation was created to address problems in all fields of bilateral relations.

2. Joint commission on transboundary waters: A Joint Commission on Transboundary Waters was established to implement the 1997 agreement, creating a good basis for legal and political co-operation. Other initiatives have been developed. Local and regional authorities and businesses in the Lake Peipsi region are promoting their agenda for transboundary economic co-operation.
3. Engaging civil society: Regional NGOs, such as the Peipsi Centre for Transboundary Co-operation (Peipsi CTC) and the Council for Co-operation of Border Regions, co-operate with the local authorities and stakeholders in the Lake Peipsi Area on local and regional development, social, educational and research projects. Peipsi CTC now acts as a project implementation unit for transboundary environmental and regional development projects. Where Estonian and Russian officials operate on different levels, businesses, schools and NGOs participate.
4. Development of water basin management plan: At its Second Meeting in 1999, the Commission adopted a decision to start preparing a comprehensive basin management programme based on principles outlined in the draft EU Water Framework Directive. The two governments will implement the Programme. The Joint Commission will co-ordinate the implementation of national activities. Close co-operation will be developed at a regional level between national governments, regional and local authorities, NGOs, businesses, universities and schools.
5. Institutional strengthening and knowledge sharing Estonian and Russian environmental research institutes resumed their research co-operation in the mid 1990s. An Environmental Education Centre was established in Estonia, and similar arrangements exist in Russia. An international environmental research project develops tailor-made approaches to the utilisation of research results by governments and local stakeholders. The Transboundary Water Commission has been instrumental in developing procedures for data exchange and joint databases. The Joint Water Commission co-ordinates information on research projects supporting the preparation and implementation of catchment management plans.
6. Communication and shared vision planning: Annual conferences and events bring together state, regional and local authorities, NGOs, and business representatives. They allow the region's future development prospects to be discussed. Ongoing region-wide sociological and environmental research projects allow regional problems (and their causes) to be re-evaluated. Communication with stakeholders and awareness raising are also central to the programme.

## **Outcomes**

Co-operation over Lake Peipsi demonstrates how integrated water resource management tools can be applied to transboundary waters shared by countries in transition. While the countries are still only at the beginning of a long-term co-operative programme, this initial phase can definitely be considered successful. The aim of promoting the sustainable use of natural resources in the region has been supported at international and national levels according to Integrated Water Resource Management principles. In practice, the transboundary co-operation in the Lake Peipsi Area has developed gradually due to limited resources. However, this may have been preferable to receiving mega-projects implemented by external consultancies when there was no sound institutional framework for co-operation at an intergovernmental level. The most important outcomes of this 10-year period of co-operation in the Lake Peipsi Basin Development have been the establishment of legal aspects and institutionalisation of transboundary co-operation at intergovernmental, regional and subregional levels. Other major expected outcomes of the co-operation were:

1. Increased ability of regional authorities, NGOs, universities and schools and environmental experts to communicate across the border.

2. Establishment of procedures for environmental data and information exchange between national environmental authorities in the region.

Major challenges to preparing the Basin Management Plan are differences in the Estonian and Russian legislation, disparities in procedures, monitoring strategies, environmental data, information gathering and institutional organisation. There is a need to develop step-by-step guidelines in order to implement integrated water resource management principles. Most of the international assistance projects have been implemented in close co-operation with local experts, which has proved efficient and beneficial to all concerned. It demonstrates that developing co-operative approaches to water management enables the ecologically sustainable use of natural resources while improving the social and economic conditions and quality of life of people in the region. The greatest winners are the environment of the Lake Peipsi/Chudskoe Basin and future generations of people in the area. A network of regional and local authorities, universities, NGOs and businesses is emerging that is a good basis for implementing integrated water resource management principles in the lake basin.

## **Lessons Learned**

The importance of riparian countries sharing transboundary waters having the political will to implement changes and develop formal frameworks for co-operation to successfully implement policies relating to water resources.

The importance of international financial and technical assistance to implement national policies dealing with water resources as well as intergovernmental transboundary water agreements.

Research and educational projects play an increasingly important role in generating a water knowledge base about the region as well as in developing the capacity of water and development experts in the region.

Practical issues, such as different working languages, different statistical and data collection norms can hinder co-operative activities.

Ensuring effective involvement of civil society is difficult. Although formal mechanisms for developing co-operation were set up, only few regional NGOs are involved in the work of the Transboundary Water Commission. Capacity is low and external financial support is necessary.

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**Supporting Materials**

GWP Central and Eastern Europe

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**Related IWRM Tools**

Basin Management Plans, Transboundary Organisations, Civil Society Organisations , Impact Investment Market Maps, The Rights of Rivers

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