

BBC Radio 4: From Our Own Correspondent

By Alex Kirby, broadcast on 27 Oct 2011 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/podcasts/series/fooc>

Water does not only cause the social problems the people of Thailand are having to cope with. The scarcity of it in particular causes strife among nations all around the world: mainly in Africa, but there are problems elsewhere too. The Tigris and Euphrates rivers cause frictions between Turkey, Syria and Iraq. Israel, Lebanon, Jordan and the Palestinian territories quibble over water from the Jordan river. And the Aral Sea in Central Asia causes ill will among a whole string of states whose names all end in "stan". Alex Kirby who has been training regional journalists in Ukraine says that when something as finite and as crucial as water has to be shared, there are always losers.

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Probably the catering on the outward journey to Kiev should have warned me that this might be an unusual trip. Ukraine Airlines provided a lunch which they claimed was a sandwich. The blurb on the envelope which enclosed it said: "...thanks to the perfect recipe our sandwiches will have no negative effects on your body." That's a proud boast, I thought, as I took a bite. The texture was like deep-fried cardboard, but the taste was literally indescribable, because there wasn't any - not the merest trace of a discernible flavour of anything at all. So the advertising was probably right, and we did escape unscathed.

The training week involved our group travelling down the river Dniester on inflatables, and camping out at night, to see at first hand the problems which can be encountered when different countries with different needs have to share a river. The Dniester rises in western Ukraine and flows down, close to the Carpathians and the Romanian border, to empty into the Black Sea. This part of Ukraine is a bucolic contrast to the heavy industry and coal-mining of the east. Instead of slag-heaps there is the open grassy plain, broken up by immense fields of sunflowers stretching almost to the horizon, with small, neat villages and orchards laden with apples and apricots. On its way south the Dniester traverses Moldova - so deciding its fate involves both Kiev and Chisinau. But politics apart, the river itself is captivating - long sylvan reaches between forests and meadows where horse-drawn carts bring in the hay harvest, grandmothers on the banks keeping a close eye on flocks of ducks and geese, and a profusion of wild birds, including white storks quartering the ground in search of food, and several sorts of heron. We even glimpsed a rare solitary black stork patrolling the shoreline.

If the wildlife is memorable, that goes for many of the people as well. Two amiable Ukrainians appeared one day on an elderly motorbike and sidecar that freewheeled silently downhill to our camp. One sat down and rapidly downed several very large vodkas. Then came the question I'd been dreading: "Would you like a ride in my sidecar?" Half an hour later we returned, me bleeding liberally from a flesh wound sustained when we plunged off the road and through a bramble thicket. One of the journalists was keen that my colleague, a Swiss editor, should return for a holiday. "We can go wherever you like", he said. "I can show you absolutely anything. I used to be a press officer for the KGB." One evening I was talking to the team who looked after the boats, cooked the meals and did everything else that was beyond the ability of the journalists. One said he'd spent six months in London, studying veterinary science. What did you manage to pick up in that time, I asked. His companion replied gravely: "He learnt castration."

We ended the river trip at a hydro-electric plant which Ukraine is busily expanding, close to the Moldovan border. Ukraine badly needs the extra power the station will produce: most of its thermal plants are already at the end of their useful lives, and nuclear power is designed to last another twenty years at the most. But if Ukraine dams more of the water in the Dniester's upper reaches, there will be less for downstream Moldova, which depends largely on agriculture and wants every drop it can get. In 2007 its obsolete irrigation system collapsed and it lost at least 60% of its harvest - 90%, some say. As one Ukrainian put it: "To the Moldovans, the Dniester compels co-operation - it's crucial. To us it's just another big river."

And at the point where the Dniester trickles through the delta into the Black Sea there is an important wildlife area. It's a staging post for migrant birds flying between Siberia and Africa - like the glossy ibis and the spoonbill. One naturalist told me how before the building of the hydro plant's dam he used to see fifteen-hundred pairs of ibis at a time. This year he saw none. If you have to keep the lights on and the hospitals running, then nature will lose every time. And if you're a Ukrainian policy maker, then Moldova's needs are likely always to come a poor second. Yet hydro-power sounds so wonderfully green and clean, the perfect answer to a carbon-guilty world. I think it probably proves Kirby's First Law of the Environment - each time you find a solution, you've created another problem. Go and see the storks while you can.