

PROJECT ID:

TITLE:

KEYWORDS:

AGE OF STUDENT(S):

The essay that I have written is very personal to me. I am showcasing the danger my homeland's national treasure – Lake Ohrid is put in. Lake Ohrid is not only my nation's biggest pride, but also a symbol of this world's commercialization and greed. Explaining the importance it holds to me by playing a tremendous role in my childhood, while being Europe's oldest and deepest lake, is what I hope will attract the readers' interests. Unfortunately, although an UNESCO World Heritage site and a crucial element of the Balkan Peninsula's cultural identity, Lake Ohrid's destruction is being widely ignored, albeit threatened to be removed from UNESCO's list.

Lake Ohrid is not the first natural beauty to be destroyed and endangered by the modern human's delusion of unlimited power, nor will it be the last. I presented all of the ways it is being polluted, with citations and research, as well as my views on it, all while urging the reader to take action. I would like this essay to not be viewed as only a factual piece of writing that presents the alarming reality of our world, but also as a cry for help.

My writing process was deeply honest yet easy, with me researching, putting my heart and soul into my words so they can be understood even by people who live the furthest from Macedonia and raising awareness on how lack of environmental sentiment and education affects nature's most beautiful assets as well as the natural treasure closest to you.

Lake Ohrid – where we went wrong

Lake Ohrid is Europe's oldest, deepest and most biologically diverse natural lake. What used to be a brilliant UNESCO world heritage site and the natural treasure and hidden gem of two small Balkan countries, has latterly become alarmingly endangered. One might not be aware of its importance, but to me, this lake represents my culture, my identity and most astonishingly of all – my childhood. Although I am not from its stunning coast, my family owns a house on the lake shore, in a small, warm, village called Ljubanishte. This place is where I first learned to swim with my father and received my first sunburn at the beach, where by accident I first tried my huge gulps of incredibly clean lake water, where I held my first watersnake which I was terrified of, where I caught my first little fish using a bag – a five year old girl fighting tears of empathy for a finger-sized fish whose fate was obvious – we were going to let it go. This golden home of the first Slavic monastery and illustrative Byzantine icons holds deep importance not only for me, but also for millions of Macedonian and Albanian families and generations. However, due to human greed, intervention, exploitation and mass tourism, this lake is currently in the worst state that mankind has ever seen in the millions of years of its existence. Through urban development, industrial fishing, greed-induced economic agriculture and insufficient sewage, Lake Ohrid has suffered serious consequences, such as eutrophication, severe endangerment of endemic species, phosphorus pollution, fecal pollution and much more.

With the rise of tourism, the town's citizens have begun to strive for more, thus making illegal construction projects a huge challenge for this natural beauty. Likewise, Ohrid leaders and mayors have controversially begun "playing god" as the rare endemic

algae, planktons, fish, crustaceans, plants and other innocent organisms suffer. While in office, former mayor Nikola Bacracheski announced plans to drain the 75-hectare marsh that cleans the lake from pollution, with intent to replace it with luxury housing and a marina. Many were repulsed, yet no action was taken. To my mind, this is sickening, as the whole ecosystem and food-chain is being brutally destroyed all for the sake of bettering the economy. As a less financially stable country, we might need to improve our economy, but at what price? Are we willing to risk our gorgeous and diverse natural life, which might be the only thing that still connects us with our ancestors and roots and hasn't been corrupted by today's low-moral consumerist norms, just for floating restaurants and hotels? What if one day, decorated with fame, success and wealth, we start to regret sacrificing our sacred body of water that once was considered a stronger currency than money? After many warnings, in 2021 UNESCO gave North Macedonia two years to either appropriately protect Lake Ohrid or to surrender it to the list of World Heritage Sites in Danger. As proven by Sarah Farmer from the USDA - United States Department of Agriculture, urbanization lowers water quality with many pollutants used in the construction process and watersheds lose the ability to hold and retain water because of the increase in impervious surfaces. The surrounding region's drinking water originates from this lake. Therefore, those who put the ecosystem at risk might not be aware of the danger they are putting themselves and their loved ones in. Speaking of drinking water, there is an additional inhumane risk-factor alongside urban development, that is endangering the water quality and consecutively polluting mankind.

Sewage can be defined as a type of wastewater that is produced by a community. It usually travels from a building's plumbing to a sewer, which will carry it elsewhere and, in this case, – Lake Ohrid. According to an official UNESCO document, 35% of the

Ohrid-Struga region's wastewater is short of its cleansing process and is instead transported directly to the lake. The outdated collection system and the ancient treatment plant, are currently causing many serious problems, but the most crucial two are the rise of green algae populations and phosphorus and bacterial pollution. As stated by Zlatko Levkov from the Skopje Institute of Biology, the green algae that currently cover every surface in the lake have reached their boom in population these last two decades, due to fecal pollution. The main reason they have become so widespread are the wastewater nutrients, that feed this species of algae to the point where it expands so widely, that it leaves little room for the other endemic organisms that give Lake Ohrid its beauty, uniqueness and charm. Other species put at risk as a result of the green algae issue are the living fossils, which have maintained their exact same shape for millions of years. These microorganisms need a very specific environment to live. Therefore, if their surroundings proceed to change in this fashion, these ancient relics and souvenirs of a different age will go extinct. Furthermore, the phosphorus pollution from the Albanian side of the lake is threatening to us as well. Phosphorus, like with fecal pollution, feeds the lake with unnecessary nutrients that cause a growth in water vegetation which decreases the oxygen levels of the water. The main victim of this oxygen decrease is the Ohrid trout - a fish that is so well known, it is on our country's 2 denar coin. It inhabits only Lake Ohrid and has been a source of pride for my people for centuries. Losing this fish alongside the lake eel, both of which live in highly oxygenated water, directly links to losing a massive portion of our identity and culture. Phosphorus pollution or as I'd state: poisoning, not only kills our most endemic kinds, but also accelerates the lake's aging process, making it more likely for it to die out and in its final stage – turn into a swamp. What is even more tragic is the active denial of the Albanian government, stating there is no phosphorus

pollution, when all this was proven by many scientists and journalists. To lose a culture and to lose an entire lake should not be alarming just to Macedonians and Albanians, but to the whole world. So much struggle denied, so many traditions erased and a whole nation's history discarded.

Lastly, a common factor that has been linking our endemic species to our tradition and national identity are fishing and agriculture of Lake Ohrid. Like all of the greed-induced dangers stated above, modern fishing and agriculture have become more commercialized than ever. The need to make money, attract tourists and sell a "product" which will cost them their countries' natural treasure, seems to be a much larger priority than the possibility of their domestic lake's nature dying out. The demand for the Ohrid trout in tourist spots is bigger than ever. Although there are other trout species, Macedonian tourism workers and fishermen have begun to illegally poach the Ohrid trout which is a proclaimed endangered species protected by the law. The looming extinction of the Ohrid trout and similar organisms directly links to absolute destruction of our lake's entire ecosystem. Similarly, agriculture has turned to unnatural boosters to gain and improve yet again – finances. As found in a study by Gazmend Iseni from the Ecology department of The University of Tetovo, it is proven that the pesticides and supplements used for advantages in agriculture contribute to pollution that leads to eutrophication. As the previously mentioned sewage crisis, these said factors put out amounts of discharge that are tremendously influential over Lake Ohrid's harmful eutrophication process, not only with the green algae, but also with the dangerous parasites and bacteria that are harmful to general aquatic life, but especially fish like the Barbel fish who are very sensitive to changes in their environment. The Barbel fish is currently endangered as its liver is being targeted by these deadly parasites and chemicals. Why must we, as humans make decisions on which species

must get to live on and which can die out by extinction? It appears that in recent times, the human race has started to look upon other organisms as “useful” and “useless”, according to whether or not they contribute to their personal wealth.

Lake Ohrid holds so much meaning to the humble Balkan peninsula, to the science community, to appreciators and enjoyers of nature, to lovers of aquatic life, cosmopolites, but most importantly - to its beautiful and diverse population, with which we have lived in harmony for the last 1.5 million years and have benefited one from another. The beauty of this lake is the community that has existed around it, together with its spirit which will forever be cherished and passed on. I am calling to all humans, not all homo sapiens - but humans. The humans filled with love and understanding for my people's struggle to save the last thing we have left of our past, traditions and ancestors in our already urbanized country. We must stop abusing our manpower and start treating other life on this planet as we wish to be treated, for we are not superior, but only the most dangerous.