




ANNUAL OF SOFIA UNIVERSITY
“ST. KLIMENT OHRIDSKI”
FACULTY OF HISTORY
VOLUME 108, 2025

ECOLOGICAL ENVIRONMENT AND LIFESTYLE
TRADITIONS ALONG THE UPPER REACHES
OF THE BULGARIAN SECTION OF THE DANUBE:
ETHNOLOGICAL STUDY ON EXAMPLES FROM LOM
AND THE VILLAGES OF ARCHAR AND DOLNI TSIBAR

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 <https://doi.org/10.60053/GSU.IF.1.108.303-346>


 [Revised manuscript] Received 2025-08-30; reviewed 2025-09-29; accepted 2025-09-30; published online 2025-11-25.


 CRediT | Contributor Role Taxonomy

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 The study was carried out within the framework of the research project DS-FR-22-0018 “Identity Dynamics in the Danube Region (based on the Example of Vidin, Lom and Kozloduy)” – Multilateral Competition for Scientific and Technological Cooperation in the Danube Region (Project No. 8X23006 | BG-175467353-2022-07-0010-C01).

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Abstract. The article is an ethnographic study of three settlements in Northwestern Bulgaria, located along the Danube River. By applying a qualitative ethnographic methodology and using techniques from related sciences such as history, the study traces the change in the human-environment relationship in the town of Lom, the village of Archar and the village of Dolni Tsibar. Theoretically, the study adheres to the direction of the so-called cultural ecology, which emphasizes precisely the process of simultaneous influences between man and nature. The influence of the geographical factor in modern times on cultural patterns, livelihood structure and identity of the local population is analyzed. The emphasis is on the formation of cultural landscapes as a result of human activity and their subsequent impact on the daily lives of people living along the river.

Keywords: Danube River (Bulgarian section/upper stretches), Northwestern Bulgaria, Cultural landscapes, everyday life.

* * *

The proposed study aims to present the results of several field studies conducted in a specific, strictly limited region, along the upper reaches of the Bulgarian section of the Danube River; the field studies themselves were aimed at how today's life near a large river, such as the Danube, affects local communities, how their knowledge of the natural environment changes and what cultural reactions this change gives rise to. In this context, emphasis is placed on tracking the mutual effects of the change in the ecological niche in a specific region and its impact on the livelihood and cultural characteristics of the population. The main research questions are related to both the specific manifestations of this influence in different spheres of culture, and to the question of how much this affects the identity of the local population, whether the river is a prominent influence in the awareness and self-perception of local people as a specific group, united around life and knowledge of existence and shared everyday life along the Danube River.

The study was carried out with the classical tools of ethnology and cultural anthropology. Within the framework of three field studies conducted in 2024 and 2025, each lasting between a week and ten days, over 20 structured interviews were conducted, with the number of free conversations exceeding this number many times. The team spent several times in the field, where they visited the selected settlements, with the focus falling on three of them – the village of Archar, municipality of Dimovo, the town of Lom and the village of Dolni Tsibar, municipality of Valchedrum. The selection of respondents was both random and through the so-called agents in the field – local leaders, teachers, representatives of institutional authorities and the non-governmental sector. With the help of the influence and authority they have among the local population, we reached respondents whose main livelihood is the river or those who simply shared their experience of life near the Danube.

The research region was deliberately chosen for several reasons. First of all, as already pointed out, these are not settlements where our team is entering for the first time. We have been conducting field research within the framework of various projects there for the past ten years. This significantly facilitated the process of entering the field. Acquaintance with key figures made it possible to significantly (more) easier to establish relationships of trust and overcome the barriers in front of the respondents, which the presence of unknown people inevitably poses.

The regions have a diverse ethnic and confessional composition. This additionally provides an opportunity to trace the dynamics of identity in the context of the specific local ecological niche and to seek an answer to the question of whether the geographical factor creates a level of supra-ethnic identity based on specific knowledge. Although falling within three municipalities – Dimovo, Lom and Vulchedrum and in two regional units – Montana and Vidin, the three settlements are part of the larger Northwestern region, sharing similar economic and demographic trends. Northwestern Bulgaria has remained one of the poorest regions not only in the country, but also within the entire European Union for many years. And although data from 2023 indicate that the region no longer occupies the last position, it continues to struggle with high levels of unemployment and a large demographic outflow.¹ With a large percentage of unemployed, it is expected that natural resources will perhaps be the ones that will fill the missing income. The largest natural resource is the Danube River, which provides opportunities for livelihood through fishing, development of tourism and recreational areas, etc. In this article, we will examine to what extent this is happening in the studied regions and if not, why.

The ethnic composition of the population in the region as of September 7, 2021 indicates that the largest ethnic group is the Bulgarian ethnic group, which constitutes 87,2 and 92,2% respectively for the Montana and Vidin districts, 11,5 and 6,7% for the Roma population and 0,1% for the Turkish ethnic group in both districts.² This study does not take into account the presence of Vlachs, who are registered with varying densities as a result of field surveys in all three settlements, and the question of which group they self-identified with remains open.³ The latter gives some

¹ Bloomberg TV Bulgaria. *Българският Северозапад вече не е най-бедният регион в ЕС, но се бори с безработица*. Онлайн. 13 ноември 2023. Налично на: <https://www.bloombergtv.bg/a/17-v-razvitiie/123827-balgarskiyat-severozapad-veche-ne-e-nay-bedniyat-region-v-es-no-se-bori-s-bezrabotitsa> [Достъпен на 2025-10 -19].

² Национален статистически институт. *Етнокултурни характеристики на населението към 7 септември 2021 г. Окончателни данни*. с. 2–4. София: НСИ, 2023. Онлайн. Налично на: <https://nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/pressreleases/Census2021-ethnos.pdf> [Достъпен на 2025-08-12].

³ This applies to some extent to Roma groups as well, which is why the statistics should be treated critically and are provided here only as a general guide.

uncertainty in the data which in this sense (they) can only be used to outline the general picture, but not as specific precise data. The demographic appearance of the regions is also outlined by the repeatedly highlighted trends of aging with the fastest rates among the Bulgarian ethnic group and, accordingly, the highest percentage of young population among the Roma ethnic group.⁴

The relationship between the natural and geographical environment and specific cultural phenomena, decisions and phenomena have been established for long time in cultural anthropology. The theoretical direction known as cultural ecology attempts to explain the emergence of specific cultural reactions with the conditions set by natural and geographical features. In the text, we understand cultural ecology in the sense of J. Steward. According to him, unlike social ecology, cultural ecology seeks to explain specific cultural features typical of individual regions, without trying to derive generally valid mechanisms characteristic of any cultural and ecological situations.⁵ In terms of its theoretical perspective, this study is similar to studies focused on environmental history. In the text, we adhere accept the understanding about the environmental history as subject, who focuses first and foremost on the river itself, on the changing waters and lands that once together constituted highly dynamic riverine landscapes.⁶ According to Verena Winiwarter, Martin Schmid, Severin Hohensinner, and Gertrud Haidvoogl the environmental history is based on a co-evolutionary concept of relationships between society and nature and has as main object this connection in the past.⁷ In this study, we propose a broadening of this definition with an emphasis on the social aspect of this relationship in the recent past and the present. The use of ethnological methodology makes it possible to focus on the perception and imagination of the environment through the eyes of the people who inhabit it and use its resources.

⁴ Национален статистически институт. *Етнокултурни характеристики на населението към 7 септември 2021 г. Окончателни данни*. с. 4. София: НСИ, 2023. Онлайн. Налично на: <https://nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/pressreleases/Census2021-ethnos.pdf> [Достъпен на 2025-08-12].

⁵ STEWARD, Julian. The Concept and Method of Cultural Anthropology. In: *The Environment in Anthropology. A Reader in Ecology, Culture and Sustainable Living*. New York–London: University Press, 2005, p. 5. ISBN 13: 978-1479876761.

⁶ SCHMID, Mathias; HAIDVOGL, Gertrud; FRIEDRICH, Tobias; FUNK, Alexandra; SCHMALFUSS, Lisa; SCHMIDT-KLOIBER, Astrid; HEIN, Tobias. The Danube: On the Environmental History, Present, and Future of a Great European River. In: *River Culture – Life as a Dance to the Rhythm of the Waters*. K. M. Wantzen (ed.). Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 2023, pp. 638–639. DOI: 10.54677/INTF8577.

⁷ WINIWARTER, Verena; SCHMIDT, Martin; HOHENSINNER, Severin; HAIDVOGL, Gertrud. The Environmental History of the Danube River Basin as an Issue of Long-Term Socio-ecological Research. In: *Long-term socio-ecological research. Studies in society: Nature interactions across spatial and temporal scales*. 2013, Springer, pp. 103. ISBN 978-94-007-1176-1.

It is undeniable that the presence of a large navigable river determines the emergence of specific socio-professional strata (professional fishermen, boatmen, later port workers), is reflected in local folklore, is fertile ground for urban legends, influences local cuisine, shapes the presence of specific trends in culture (fine arts and literature), creates distinct urban/rural spaces, and is part of community life in the studied places. The river defines spaces and landscapes (the port, the river station, the Borun fountain, the beach), forms sensations and ideas. As one respondent shared, for most Lom residents, the river is sacred, the first thing that those who left Lom do when they return is to go to the river. For others, however, it arouses fear with its unknown, creating the feeling that they are losing control.⁸

Due to the volume of this study, we choose to focus on several specific features of life on the banks of the Danube River, which appear common to the population in the studied settlements. The goal is not to present them in full in a historical perspective, but to trace their development and contemporary state. Particular attention in the following lines will be paid to the following micro-themes: the river as a border, connecting and dividing, the river and livelihood, the river and leisure, the river and disasters. An analysis of the collected material about the river and its presence in the art of the local population, as well as the extensive material on the culinary traditions of the region, based on fish and fish products, will remain outside the topic. This is necessary due to the limited volume. The aim is to trace the interaction between man/group and nature in specific regions. In this sense, this is not a study of fishermen as a *community with heritage*⁹, nor is it a study of knowledge about this heritage. This is a study of the relationship between man and nature, as it is viewed as a process influenced by factors on both sides – natural, climatic, social, demographic, economic, cultural. In the part of the study that examines the Danube River as a border that not only divides but also forms new border zones and landscapes, we agree that, borderscape refers to borderscaping or of shaping the border in people's minds. The term borderscaping refers to all practices through which the imagined border is established and experienced.¹⁰

⁸ Respondent, female, Bulgarian ethnic origin, approx. 50 years old, Lom.

⁹ НЕНОВ, Николай. „Разкази за Дунавската цивилизация“. Рибарите като общност с наследство. *Годишник на асоциация „Онгъл“*. Т. 19. Пренасяне на сакралност (локално – регионално – национално). Б. м., 2021, с. 238–260. ISSN 1311-493X.

¹⁰ DELL'AGNESE, Elena. New Geo-graphies of Border(land)-scapes. In: *Borderscaping: Imaginations and Practices of Border Making*. New York: Routledge Teylor&Francis Group, 2015, p. 59. ISBN 9781472451460.

DANUBE RIVER – CONNECTING AND DIVIDING

The Danube River is not only the largest river flowing through Bulgarian territory, it is one of the largest rivers in Europe, ranking second in length after the Volga River. The river flows through several countries and crosses several European capitals. The Danube, both in the past and today, plays a significant role in connecting – economically, culturally, ideologically – Central and Southeastern Europe. In parallel with the idea of Europe as a single space, a single concept for internal European waterways is also developing.¹¹ With the construction of Trans-European Transport Corridor 7, the so-called European Canal in 1992 or the Rhine-Main-Danube river connection – a unique project that connects the Atlantic and the Black Sea by water transport, the Danube River becomes an integral part of the European transport and trade arteries.¹²

The Bulgarian section of the river is 471 km long. The (coast) bank is relatively high, unlike the marshy Romanian bank, which makes water overflows less frequent, but nevertheless the floods of the second half of the 20th century are remembered. The last ones were in 2005 and 2006, and this necessitated the strengthening of the bank and the construction of protective dikes along it. The river rarely freezes, which makes it navigable almost all year round, reaching a depth of 30 m in places.¹³

For the Bulgarian lands, it is a natural border, which becomes, after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the state border of the country. More importantly, however, it is not just a political, but also an ethnic border of the Bulgarian lands – beyond it in the principalities of Wallachia and Moldova, there are no longer any Bulgarians.¹⁴ As Gabriela Ioana-Taurimica and Marina Virghileanu rightly point out, although rivers were logically chosen as state borders in the past because of their obvious potential to make crossing difficult, in modern times establishing an exact border is quite difficult. The reason for this is the fact that the river border changes as a result of natural processes – floods, erosion, sediments, etc.¹⁵ Thus, although at first glance

¹¹ СИМЕОНОВА, Сибила. Ролята на р. Дунав в европейската водна транспортна система. *Юридически свят*, 2008, № 2, с. 81–82. ISSN 1311-3488. Онлайн. Налично на: <https://sibi.bg/yuridicheski-svyat/>. [Посетено на 2025-10-06].

¹² ДИМИТРОВ, Димитър. Дунавският воден транспортен и търговски коридор – минало, настояще, бъдеще. *Economics&Law*, 2019, no. 1, pp. 1–2. ISSN 3005-5768.

¹³ ДЕРМЕНДЖИЕВА, Стела; МУТАФОВА, Красимира. Река Дунав – „Наша“ историко-географска културна граница? В: *България, българите и Европа – мит, история, съвремие*. Т. 3, 1. Велико Търново: Университетско издателство ВТУ, 2009, с. 481. ISBN 978-954-524-776-7.

¹⁴ *Пак там*, с. 483.

¹⁵ IOANA-TAURIMAC, Gabriela; VIRGHILEANU, Marina. Evolution of the Danube River's Islands on the Bulgaria-Romania border over the last Century. 2025, p. 2. Online. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0317711>. [viewed 2025-06-08].

the border seems clear and uncommentable – the river divides the land into Romanian and Bulgarian parts, respectively, the delineation of the modern border line turns out to be problematic. One of the reasons for this is rooted in the nature of the river border. It became the subject of disputes and repeated negotiations, initially between the Principality of Bulgaria and the Kingdom of Romania, and after the end of World War II – between the People's Republic of Bulgaria and the People's Republic of Romania (after 1965 the Socialist Republic of Romania). Negotiations continued after the collapse of the communist regimes in 1989. The subject of disagreement is the ownership of some islands, whose ownership is disputed by both countries. The main problem is determining the border along the river's fairway, as where the water flows in one channel, this is without problems, since it takes into account the deepest point of the water. However, where the river divides into branches, the fairway is determined along the deeper branch. The flow of the water can change and, accordingly, the depth can change in the different branches. This also changes the ownership of the islands. Ultimately, despite numerous negotiations, the border was determined according to a convention from 1908 and is still in force today. The problem is related to the use of the islands by the population of both countries for pastures, as well as for timber.¹⁶ In the studied region, border issues are mainly raised by the island of Tsibar (or Ibisha), which is located on the territory of the village of Dolni Tsibar, municipality of Vulchedrum. There are two zones formed on the island – the protected area of Cibar Island and the Ibisha Nature Reserve. The island group also includes two smaller islands along the river, already falling into the territory of the neighboring village of Gorni Cibar, the same municipality.¹⁷ The island is closer to Romanian land, but along the fairway it falls into Bulgarian territory. According to the local population, the reason for the change in the line of the deepest part of the river in recent years is the lack of dredgers to clean the riverbed and regulate it, thus facilitating navigation.¹⁸

During the years of socialism, the border was extremely strictly guarded – on the Romanian and Bulgarian sides. Crossing the border illegally was fraught with risks. According to respondents, it was fascism in Romania that caught them and took them directly to the salt mines. There is mention of an attempt to bribe the border authorities by giving them rose oil and cigarettes and in return they were allowed to go for firewood and fishing. On the other side, the crossing is also no exception, as

¹⁶ МИТЕВ, Владимир. Българо-румънската граница по река Дунав, 2022. Онлайн. Налично на: <https://friendshipbridge.eu/bg/2022/01/23/danube-border-bg/>. [Посетено на 2025-06-08].

¹⁷ Уикипедия. *Остров Цибър (защитена местност)*. Налично на: [https://bg.wikipedia.org/wiki/Остров_Цибър_\(защитена_местност\)](https://bg.wikipedia.org/wiki/Остров_Цибър_(защитена_местност)) [Достъпен на 2025-06-04]

¹⁸ Respondent, male, of Bulgarian ethnic origin, approx. 60 years old, village of Dolni Tsibar, municipality of Vulchedram.

Romanians often reached the island of Ibisha for wood, especially when the river level was low, and they reached the island with carts, which they returned full of wood.¹⁹ The locals are more considerate of the Romanian border authorities, since the Bulgarians are often from the local population and know each other. During this period, the Romanian border was guarded by high-altitude armed posts, from which shooting was often carried out without warning. Boats move on the water, which, upon detecting boatmen and fishermen in their territorial waters, immediately approach. After the changes, trade intensified, albeit smuggled, gasoline and fuels were purchased from Romania because of their lower market price, children's goods were also of commercial interest, etc. Cigarettes were mainly exported from Bulgaria. At that time, smuggling flourished, with stories of weapons purchased for ten stacks of cigarettes sounding almost legendary. After Bulgaria and Romania entered the EU and especially after both countries joined Schengen, communication was much easier. The river is also not a sufficient border to stop cultural influences. On both sides of the border, the population knows a little of the language of their neighbors, enough for everyday communication. Today, they increasingly communicate in English, as a lingua franca.²⁰

Today, the Danube River is more of a connection than a dividing line for the local population. According to one respondent, yes, *patrols pass on both sides, but the locals know where the border is and there are no concerns*.²¹ In this sense, the study focuses more on the idea of the border as creating a specific kind of experience that manifests itself in the peculiarities of everyday culture.²²

The Danube River is also the only navigable river in Bulgaria with a proven role in trade relations in the Bulgarian lands since the period of the Revival. Since the 19th century, the river has been the most important trade artery connecting Western Europe and the farms of the Balkan Peninsula.²³ Although after the Liberation the role of the Danube ports in the Bulgarian section of the river decreased in terms of trade exchange at the expense of the Black Sea import-export trade²⁴, its role as a conductor

¹⁹ Respondent, male, of Bulgarian ethnic origin, approx. 60 years old, village of Dolni Tsibar, municipality of Valchedram.

²⁰ Respondent, male, of Roma origin, approx. 40 years old, village of Dolni Tsibar.

²¹ Respondent, male, approx. 35 years old, Bulgarian ethnic origin, Lom.

²² WILLE, Christian; NIENBER, Birte. *Borders and border experiences*. 2023, p. 7. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783845295671-7>. [Accessed: 11.02.2023-02-11]. Available from: <http://www.nomos-elibrary.de/agb>. [viewed 2025-10-08].

²³ ДЕРМЕНДЖИЕВА, Стела; МУТАФОВА, Красимира. *Цит. съч.*, с. 484.

²⁴ МАРИНОВА, Маргарита. Към въпроса за промяната ролята на р. Дунав и крайдунавските български градове във външната търговия на България (1878–1912). *Известия на Центъра за стопанско-исторически изследвания*. Т. 1. Градското стопанство в българските земи през вековете. Варна, 2016, с. 366. ISSN 2603-3526.

of both goods and cultural influences is undoubted. The role of the Danube ports decreased with the construction of the railway line, which for the most part runs parallel to the river, and the commissioning in 1888 of the Tsaribrod – Vakarel – Sofia line had a negative impact on imports through the Lom port. According to the government program for the construction of quays at the ports on the Danube, a possible increase in trade through the Lom port is envisaged, but only after the construction of the Mezdra – Lom – Vidin railway line. Despite these trends, the Danube ports do not completely lose their importance both for economic and trade relations and for the import of cultural influences. In this sense, the Danube River appears in the double symbolic meaning on the one hand as a state border, and on the other as a conductor of cultural and economic influences.²⁵ This is precisely what gives grounds to St. Dermendzhieva and Kr. Mutafova to claim that *as a result, a Danube supranational community appears in the Danube settlements*, which shares common cultural traits and characteristics.²⁶ Although the authors speak of the period from the end of the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries, field ethnographic studies show the presence of a shared memory related to *European influences* in the past of the settlements. This is also one of the clearly perceptible markers of local identity in the field, which manage to unite ethnicities and confessions in the studied regions. The feeling of life on the border, the patterns of separation and communication that it creates, is also clearly distinguished. This feeling is today subject to significant change, which is due to the entry of the two countries Bulgaria and Romania into the EU, and now into Schengen. This circumstance for the local population reduces the psychological burden of the border barrier. As one respondent to the question of what it is like to know that on the other side of the river is something else, answered, *the feeling is that you hear jackals on the other side and if you get closer by boat, you hear Romanians fighting*.²⁷

The development of the studied settlements, and especially the town of Lom and the village of Dolni Tsibar²⁸, is undoubtedly due to their location near the river. With the opening in 1938 of an agency in the town of Lom of the Austro-Hungarian “Imperial and Royal Privileged Danube Steamship Company”, established in 1930, the region’s rapid economic prosperity began. The port and the pier – *scaffolding* – undoubtedly influenced the progressive thinking of the Lom citizens. After the

²⁵ ДЕРМЕНДЖИЕВА, Стела; МУТАФОВА, Красимира. *Цит. съч.*, с. 479.

²⁶ *Пак там*, с. 845.

²⁷ Respondent, male, approx. 35 years old, Bulgarian ethnic origin, Lom.

²⁸ In some studies, the area around Lom is understood to be the section of the Danube River from the village of Dobri Dol to the village of Dolni Tsibar, which includes the villages of Orsoya, Slivata, Dolno Linevo, Stanevo, as well as the town of Lom itself (Zamfirov 2018: 32). The area around Lom is also considered to be the territory of the municipality of Lom, which includes the villages of Orsoya, Slivata, Dolno Linevo, Stanevo, and the town of Lom itself (Zamfirov 2018: 32).

Liberation, the town became the closest connection to the new capital Sofia. Thus, Lom became the Bulgarian trade and cultural connection with the lands of Central Europe, a place through which Western influences entered the field of culture and education. Proof of the economic prosperity of the town because of its favorable location is the opening of one of the first telegraph and post offices in 1878, the commissioning in 1911 of one of the first branches of the Sofia – Varna railway line from Lom to Mezdra. Lom was one of the first cities in the country to start using electricity for lighting in 1913, using two diesel engines supplied by Swiss companies.²⁹ It is important to note that in 1857, the first women's society in the Bulgarian lands was established in Lom under the name "Virtuous Women's Society", which aimed to support the education of girls.³⁰ All This testifies to the influence that the opening of the city through the port has on the life of the local population.

Unlike most settlements in Bulgarian lands, Lom owes its development precisely to trade, for the service of which local crafts began to develop.³¹ In an attempt to revive the past greatness of the city, the construction of another bridge near the city was discussed, which would connect it with the Romanian side. The studies were carried out in 1994 by the English company "Sir Alexander Gibb". The obstacle turned out to be the fact that the Bulgarian coast near the city is prone to landslides, and this forced the attention of investors to be directed in another direction.³² However, the idea focused the attention of the local public and was received with mixed feelings. Some saw in this an opportunity to revive the region and attract investments, respectively creating jobs and limit migration from the city and the surrounding villages. In parallel, there are concerns that the increase in trafficking will also increase criminal activities, including drug dealing and use.³³

From the presented data, life, development, cultural borders and influences in the settlements along the Danube River are leading in forming a sense of the presence of such a significant natural and geographical factor. It influences the formation of a

²⁹ 170 години пристанищен комплекс Лом – ЕАД. Монтана: Полимона – ООД, б. г., с. 13–15.

³⁰ АНДРЕЕВА, Юлия. Ролята на женските дружества в област Монтана и тяхната просветна и благотворителна дейност. В: *Дунав – път през времето, мост между световите. Четирнадесета регионална краеведска конференция, Враца, 15 ноември 2017. Сборник материали*. Калина ТОДОРОВА (състав.). Враца, 2018, с. 38.

³¹ ЕМИЛЮВА, Ангелина. Ролята на пристанището в гр. Лом за икономическото израстване на града от края на XIX до 40-те години на XX в. В: *Дунав – път през времето, мост между световите. Четирнадесета регионална краеведска конференция, Враца, 15 ноември 2017. Сборник материали*. Калина ТОДОРОВА (състав.). Враца, 2018, с. 27–28.

³² Северозапазена БГ. *Дунав мост 2 – Нашият мост*. Online. 2025-06-14. Налично на: <https://severozapazenabg.com/дунав-мост-2-нашият-мост/> [Достъпен на 2025-06 -06]

³³ Respondent, female, Bulgarian ethnic origin, approx. 50 years old, Lom.

local culture based on the specifics that it provides. At the same time, human intervention changes the landscape, and this in turn causes new cultural reactions. This can be traced most strongly through the daily life of the locals and the reflections of these changes in the livelihood structure of the population.

THE RIVER AND THE LIVELIHOOD

Fishing on the Danube River, and especially in the studied settlements, has deep traditions. Evidence of mastered fishing techniques dates back to the Paleolithic era, and this knowledge has not lost its importance in subsequent periods of history.³⁴ According to the stories of respondents, the local memory of the founding of the village of Dolni Tsibar is also connected with fishing. Local memory testifies that the village was founded in the 17th century by Turks who fled after the defeat of the Ottoman troops in the war with Austria-Hungary and who, in non-war times, had fishing as their main livelihood.³⁵ Of course, this story can be subjected to serious criticism by historians, given the professionalization of military affairs in the Ottoman Empire, but it is indicative of the importance that this livelihood has had over the years for the population of the village of Dolni Tsibar. During the Renaissance, it is known that the swampy areas on the Bulgarian bank of the river offered convenient fishing opportunities for the local population. A significant part of the export of products obtained from the river is the catch of leeches, which the local population catches in large quantities and exports for medical purposes, mainly to Austria.³⁶ Carp, catfish, and bream are primarily caught, and in 1846 fishing was noted as one of the most important livelihoods of the Danube population.³⁷ The swampy areas are mainly from the mouth of the river to Silistra, but it offers opportunities in other parts as well.

Political and economic factors also have an impact on this sector. For example, for the period from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, when the country was involved in several wars in a row, the then fisheries inspector at the Ministry of Agriculture and State Property, Grozy Grozev, reported that the price of fish had increased and only the wealthier could afford it.³⁸ In the period 1940–44, the Danube fishery was served by 1250 boats and 3450 registered fishermen,

³⁴ БОЯДЖИЕВ, Николай. Българското рибарство – минало, настояще, бъдеще. *Управление и устойчиво развитие*, 2002, № 2, с. 170. ISSN 1311 4506.

³⁵ Respondent, male, approx. 65 years old, of Turkish ethnic origin, village of Dolni Tsibar.

³⁶ ДАМЯНОВ, Симеон. *Ломският край през Възраждането*. София: Отечествон фронт, 1967. с. 79.

³⁷ *Пак там*, с. 79.

³⁸ БОЯДЖИЕВ, Николай. *Цит. съч.*, с. 170.

mainly catching carp, catfish, whitefish, bream, barbel, sturgeon, crucian carp, pike, etc.³⁹

Traditional fishing is part of the daily subsistence culture of the population along the large rivers and on the coasts of the Black and White Seas. In her comparative study of the Black Sea and Danube fisheries, Bl. Filevska defines it as a kind of cultural phenomenon, which has its material dimensions, regulates socio-normative relations and is a source of specific worldviews.⁴⁰ Fishing is also a specific livelihood, which is very much dependent on the biological rhythm of fish populations, and this requires the local population to have significant knowledge in the field of aquatic inhabitants and their specificities. The cycle of reproduction and development of fish is decisive for the quantity of the catch. Thus, for fishing on the Danube River, the most intense season is spring, and fish are generally caught in the months from March to mid-December. At the beginning of the 20th century, the main fishing on the Danube River was for carp, catfish, common rudd, mackerel and sturgeon entering from the Black Sea. The peculiarities of the behavior of individual fish species determine the amount of catch and it is important for fishermen to know it. For example, the bream is known to move in pairs and along the same route. Therefore, it is not uncommon for both the male and female to be caught at the same time.⁴¹

The first state regulation of fishing in Bulgarian lands after the Liberation dates back to 1883, when the Law on Fishing in the Bulgarian Principality was passed. According to the law, fishing for personal needs was permitted year-round, while those practicing commercial fishing had to pay a fee of two leva and have a one-year fishing license. Until the end of the 19th century, however, fishing retained its character as a livelihood for personal use and very little of the catch was offered on the market.⁴² In order to enhance the value of fishing for the country's industry, the First Fisherman's Fair was held in the town of Svishtov in 1910. It was stated that the Bulgarian riverbank of the Danube River could be conditionally divided into three sections in terms of fishing – Vidin, Nikopol and Ruse (Ruschuk). It was stated that the best for fishing was the Nikopol section, which was limited between the Lom and

³⁹ *Пак там*, с. 170.

⁴⁰ ФИЛЕВСКА, Благородна. Традиционно рибарство по днешните български крайбрежия на Дунав и Черно море в първите десетилетия на XX в. Етнографски и културни паралели. *Българска етнология*, 1997, № 3–4, с. 116. ISSN 1310–5213.

⁴¹ *Пак там*, с. 114.

⁴² ЗАМФИРОВ, Мариан. Риболовът като поминък в Ломския край през първата половина на XX в. В: *Дунав – път през времето, мост между светове. Четиринадесета регионална краеведска конференция, Враца, 15 ноември 2017. Сборник материали*. Калина ТОДОРОВА (състав.). Враца, 2018, с. 33–34.

Yantra rivers. The main reason for this was that in this section the bank was heavily swamped, and a lot of fish were caught there.⁴³

In 1920, the first Lom district fishing cooperative “Esetra” was established, which included fishermen from both the town of Lom and the villages of Dolno Linevo and Dolni Tsibar.⁴⁴ The cooperative is well organized and generates income by selling its main production on the relatively nearby market in Sofia. Before organizing into a cooperative, fishing was done independently, with fishermen often marketing their catch themselves. Stories collected during field research among fishermen from Boruna district, Lom, indicate that fishermen deliver the daily catch to the shops at the fish market in Lom. There are also fishermen who travel around the city on their own with a cart to offer fresh live fish. They carry scales with weights and often cut the fish themselves in front of the buyer's eyes, in order to sell it to him cleaned.⁴⁵ It is noteworthy that professional fishermen are Bulgarians and Turks, while at the beginning of the 20th century there is no mention of Roma among them. From the field reports Roma practice fishing, but only for personal use, without this becoming their main livelihood.

The fishing cooperative “Bratstvo” in the village of Dolni Tsibar was founded in 1943, with 10 fishermen. It existed independently until 1958, when it became part of the State Enterprise “Fish Center” Ruse. A drastic change in the organization of fishing occurred in the 1950s, when the cooperative movement took hold and did not bypass this sector. With its cooperation, the implementation of planned norms for catching fresh fish began. According to annual reports of the Regional Fisheries Inspectorate, the Lom region ranks second after Oryahovo in terms of fish catch for the period 1953–57 and second in the country in 1962 after Ruse. It should be noted that the first place in terms of fish catch in the Lom region for this period has traditionally been held by the village of Dolni Tsibar.⁴⁶ In order to stimulate fishing in 1954, an order of the Council of Ministers stipulated that each member of a fishing brigade that had fulfilled its monthly plan would have the right to receive up to 10 kg of fish from the cooperative store, which they would pay at producer prices.⁴⁷ The same goal was also served by Decree No. 216 of the Council of Ministers of

⁴³ КЪНЧЕВ, Красимир. Русенската търговско индустриална камара и първият събор на Българския рибарски съюз в гр. Свищов през 1910 г. 2023, с. 6. Онлайн. Налично на: https://morskivestnik.com/compass/news/2023/072023/images/Svishtov_09072023.pdf. [Посетено на 2025-06-08].

⁴⁴ *Пак там*, с. 6.

⁴⁵ НЕНОВ, Николай. *Рибарската общност в Лом*, 2020, Сдружение „Европейски пространства 21“. ISBN 978-954-91968-8-7. Онлайн. Налично на: <https://euspaces.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/lom-sbornik.pdf>. [Посетено на 2025-10-06].

⁴⁶ ДА–Монтана, ф. 638, оп. 3, а.е. 5; цит. по: ЗАМФИРОВ, Мариан. *Цит. съч.*, с. 37.

⁴⁷ ДА–Монтана, ф. 638, оп. 1, а.е. 7, л. 1.

March 12, 1957. According to it, each cooperative (TK3C / TKZS) had the right to keep for its own needs or sell on the market for up to 10% of the catch, and for the months of January, February and March – the entire quantity.⁴⁸ In the 1970s and 1980s, there were 4 brigades in the village of Dolni Tsibar – one brigade was one boat with a 4-member crew. The base was at the village port, where the catch was exported and distributed. The lively port ceased to function during the years of democracy, when it stopped and the Bulgarian Fishing Association ended its activities, and most of the ships were handed over for scrapping. All the “Meteors” had an intermediate stop at the Tsibar port, and this earned it the fame of the busiest river village port on the Bulgarian section of the Danube River. Wheat grown in Zlatiyata was also transported through the port. Respondents tell of numerous ox carts waiting to be unloaded, and there were 14 warehouses in the village for storing grain. The trade carried out through the Tsibar port was the main reason for raising the prestige of the village. It has the reputation of a village more open to the outside world, in which external influences are no exception. Locals say that the Vlachs from the surrounding villages, when they came to shop in Dolni Tsibar, would say, *I’m going to the city*.⁴⁹ It was the livelihood provided along the river and the port that saved the village from the tendency of depopulation during the years of socialism. Locals talk nostalgically about the past years, when the best fish was caught here. This is due to the specific natural features – the great depth of the river at the Tsibar port – over 40 m, as well as its great width – over 1 km.

Before the cooperative, the village of Dolni Tsibar had 7–8 brigades of four people and over 30 boats, and not all of them were owned by fishermen or people who make a living by fishing. After the cooperative, the brigades decreased due to the low salaries of the fishermen. They work on a quota, which is 25 tons per season, the more they catch, the better for them, because they sell it privately and earn additional funds on top of their low salaries. As they say with a certain pride, which combines the feeling of knowledge gained through communication with the natural environment, and the pride of overcoming the unknown and doing it not for the purpose of accumulating wealth – *There is no rich fisherman!* During the socialist period, all the equipment was state-owned. When the TKZS were disbanded, the equipment was sold off at a pittance and certain people benefited. The inability of hereditary fishermen to stock up on quality equipment makes them switch to more

⁴⁸ *Пак там*, л. 7.

⁴⁹ Respondent, male, of Bulgarian ethnic origin, approx. 60 years old, village of Dolni Tsibar, municipality of Valchedram.

budget-friendly fishing gear - *once we used carbon nets, then my father mended them himself, now we use nylon.*⁵⁰

And today, as in the recent past, there is a significant difference between fishermen who enter the river and fish by boat and those who are anglers. The reason is not only in the amount of catch that both types of fishing provide, but also in the investment that needs to be made.⁵¹ Owning and maintaining a boat requires initial capital, as well as skills for its maintenance, as well as knowledge about the maintenance of fishing nets. The latter are a mandatory part of the inventory of boat fishermen. On the other hand, however, there is a certain condescending attitude on the part of anglers, who manage to catch large fish with one rod, and those who catch the same size fish but with a boat. It is believed that the former requires more knowledge and skills and a certain amount of cunning to deceive the fish. The same attitude is observed on the other side, with boaters claiming that they, unlike anglers, are not on safe land, but are fighting the water element in the real river conditions.⁵² All those who practice fishing pay tickets, because otherwise they are subject to sanctions and confiscation of the boat and equipment, which can sometimes result in a loss of a five-figure sum.

Field research in the mentioned settlements shows a decreasing interest in fishing as a main means of livelihood. In Lom, Archar, and the village of Dolni Tsibar, there are only a few fishermen and their families who make their living mainly from this. The emphasis is increasingly shifting towards amateur fishing, as well as spending free time in nature, as an escape from urbanization. Today, for the most part, fishing is also practiced as a hobby. There are several reasons for this and we will try to summarize them in the following pages.

Fishing is perceived as a difficult and hard livelihood for several reasons. First of all, fishermen are directly dependent on fish populations, on changes in the ecological niche, and in modern times also on the legal and normative regulations of fisheries. The role of chance and luck in catching fish is not small, which makes livelihoods uncertain and often not subject to control and predictability. On the other hand, however, fishing, as a profession that is inherently connected with direct communication with nature, also creates a sense of masculine power and authority among those who practice it. The struggle with nature, the ability to overcome crisis situations, to cope with the elements and to survive, gives self-esteem and confidence

⁵⁰ Respondent, male, of Bulgarian ethnic origin, approx. 60 years old, village of Dolni Tsibar, municipality of Valchedram.

⁵¹ НЕНОВ, Николай. *Рибарската общност в Лом*, с. 8.

⁵² Respondent, male, approx. 45 years old, Roma ethnic origin, Lom, born in the village of Kriva Bara.

to the few remaining fishermen. They note with satisfaction that *this is not a job for women*.^{53 54} Part of the difficulties are related to survival in difficult conditions, not only as fishermen, but also in general as living near the river. Summarizing in one sentence the combination of the beauty of nature with the difficulties that the river creates, our respondents ironically share that *life on the river is nice if you have anti-mosquito repellent*. The notorious Danube mosquitoes are one of the things that are a source of local folklore. In the circle of jokes and in the context of the conversation about the many mosquitoes along the reservoirs, one respondent shares that in winter he keeps his face clean-shaven, and in summer he grows a long beard, because it protects him from bites while he is in the village and especially in the river. In this regard, they also tell the following joke that the mosquitoes on the Danube are so big that when they land on the fence, the dog starts barking at them. And the other respondent shares with a smile that their size is so big that when you enter the river with a boat, you have the feeling that a flock will lift the boat and turn it over. However, as confirmation that life with nature tempers, gives male strength and authority, the respondents share that for them this is a natural environment, *just as a fish breathes in water, so it gets used to it*. As N. Nenov points out in his study of Danube fishermen, the relationship between man and nature is natural and from it derives the important knowledge passed down through generations.⁵⁵ However, they share that the sensations are not at all pleasant and those who often enter the river resort to unconventional solutions, such as borrowing protective clothing from beekeepers in the village or even simpler – drinking one or two mastics. They believe that the strong anise smell drives away mosquitoes and thus protects them from unwanted bites. The lack of timely and adequate deworming care is today used as an argument in nostalgic comparisons with the years of socialism, when, according to them, sufficiently high-quality preparations were used, spraying was done on time (it is important to spray during the breeding season, if it is missed, any spraying is ineffective) and this was also done on Romanian territory. Of particular importance is the spraying on the Romanian side, since the Romanian coast is lower, and during high water in spring, swamps form there, which are extremely favorable for the development of malarial plasmodium. The opinion shared by the respondents is that the partial spraying, often late, is simply for the purpose of getting rid of the numbers or, even worse, *money laundering*. According to the respondents, during the years of

⁵³ Respondent, male, of Bulgarian ethnic origin, approx. 60 years old, village of Dolni Tsibar, municipality of Valchedram; male, approx. 65 years old, of Turkish ethnic origin, village of Dolni Tsibar.

⁵⁴ In the next section, the text will follow the accounts of the respondents mentioned, and where opinions from other respondents have been added, these will be duly indicated.

⁵⁵ НЕНОВ, Николай. Проучване на рибарските общности по Долен Дунав. *Известия на РИМ-Русе. Стари места, нови празници*. Т. 22. Б. м., 2020, с. 10–18. ISBN 1313-7336.

socialism, a special repellent used in the Russian taiga was used, which lasted up to 12 hours and was extremely effective. Against this background, they inevitably point out the comparison that with the current ones you have to get wet every 20 minutes, and their cost is extremely high, which makes them undesirable for the local population.

Usually, fishing is a family livelihood that involves the efforts of all men in the household. Women also participate in maintaining the equipment with the specific knowledge they have from making homemade fabrics and materials. For example, in his study of Lom fishermen, N. Nenov cites an interview with fishermen, according to which mothers and grandmothers knitted and mended the nets.⁵⁶ Shared care for the livelihood in the family facilitates the transfer of knowledge related to it from generation to generation. The fathers and grandfathers of the respondents were engaged in fishing as their main livelihood, and this makes fishing not only a family. It is a profession and a way of life, but also an everyday life for the respondents since their childhood. According to a hereditary fisherman from the village of Dolni Tsibar, his training in the fishing industry began when he was barely seven years old – *my grandfather, my great-grandfather, my father, my uncle, all were fishermen, the whole damazlak (relatives)*. The first entries into the river are when they are still young children, but this is a way for them to get used to the specific rhythm of their livelihood and to acquire the knowledge necessary for the occupation. Training is a long process that requires many and diverse skills. Those who choose to engage in fishing know in detail the climatic features of the region, the behavioral characteristics of different fish, some craft skills necessary for maintaining the inventory, knowledge of basic commercial mechanisms necessary for marketing the catch, skills for survival in wild conditions, culinary skills related to the preparation of fish and its caviar, and many others.

Fishermen also manage to orient themselves by permanent or temporary topographic markers. As one respondent shared, *you look at them and make a map in your head, otherwise you cannot practice this craft*. They choose permanent landmarks – a specific tree, shoal, etc., to orient themselves by. This is how they orient themselves for the places where they have come across logs, dragged by the current and stopped somewhere in the river.⁵⁷ This personal topography helps them avoid dangerous areas in order to prevent a net from breaking, the boat from getting stuck, etc. However, due to the specifics of the current, it often happens that they get caught

⁵⁶ НЕНОВ, Николай. *Рибарската общност в Лом*, с. 8.

⁵⁷ Respondent, male, of Bulgarian ethnic origin, approx. 60 years old, village of Dolni Tsibar, municipality of Valchedram.

and then attempts to save the equipment depend on the experience and skill of the particular fisherman – *a skill is needed, by pulling is not possible*.⁵⁸

There are also cases in which the geography is the leading factor in the emergence of interest in fishing in young children, even when there are no people in the family who practice this profession. For example, a respondent who is a professional fisherman in the village of Archar, but originally from the village of Drenovets, Ruzhintsi municipality, said that in his childhood there was no one to teach him the intricacies of fishing. But their house borders the Lom River, a tributary of the Danube, and according to him, *I was born with the river. I must have caught my first fish when I was five years old*. Growing up along the river made him accept it as his own. Despite his long experience as a labor migrant in a number of countries, at the time of the survey he returned precisely because this is what draws him to his birthplace – the desire to invest the money he earned abroad in the realization of the idea of turning his childhood hobby into a business and livelihood with which to feed his family. His story also contains indirect information about the interruption of his livelihood in another family, from which he bought all his equipment. This is a family of hereditary fishermen who have accumulated equipment for decades. Today, the two heirs have no desire to do this and are selling off all their equipment and tools.⁵⁹

For the fishermen from the village of Dolni Tsibar, the fishing grounds stretch along the river from the village of Stanevo to the village of Gorni Tsibar. The memories of the respondents cover the time of cooperative fishing and after the collapse of the cooperatives (TKZS). Then the old cooperative brigades were preserved, continuing to work on a private basis until the new economic conditions and regulations forced them to give up, and because of the advanced age of the old fishermen. A respondent from the village Dolni Tsibar recalls the summers spent with his father and grandfather on the river:

I remember, I went with them. With some big nets – they called them Tiffani – they fenced off Gorni Tsibar to the beach and up above Stanevo. I was 15–16 years old. Like at a camp. They prepared the pot for the soup there, they also took their products. And with a rowboat 17–18 km down the river. Grandfather, as the most experienced, on the stern, and we pulled the boat along the shore. But there were no such forests as now. And we would camp there, under the village of Kovacica. Above the gardens – peaches, below – melons. And then they would throw cigars, only for a few fishing rods, smaller ones. The larger ones - for Sturgeon (, but that was when it was a state fishery. The cigars were checked every day – 50–60–100 kg of cigars. If not on every fishing rod, then there was

⁵⁸ Respondent, male, of Bulgarian ethnic origin, approx. 60 years old, village of Dolni Tsibar, municipality of Valchedram.

⁵⁹ Respondent, male, Bulgarian ethnic origin, approx. 40 years old, village of Archar.

a dynamite per fishing rod. There was a guy Tasko from Kovacica, he would come with the cart, measure on the spot and pay. Grandfather left me one cigar for the soup and three cigars for the skewer. Back then we would make the soup with Danube water, it was very clean. While grandfather was making the soup, my uncle and I would throw a uklenica, we would catch 10 kg of cigar. And we would go to the melon. If the guards are not there, they have left the sweet potatoes and melons in two sacks. We leave the fish; we take the sacks. During this time, grandfather has prepared the food. We stay at such a camp for about a month, a month and a half. In the evening, the nightingales sing, when you have had enough of something, you pick from the garden. And at about four o'clock it starts to dawn and straight into the Danube⁶⁰.

The story of another respondent testifies that two fishing brigades of 4 people each have stretched out 2,000 fishing rods for *Sterlet (Huso ruthenus)*.⁶¹ Although in the past fish soup was understood as a dish for the poor, today it is gradually starting to be perceived as part of the local cultural and culinary heritage.⁶²

There are also certain places for fishing on the Lom section of the river. It is mainly fished near the port, in the so-called Limana area, by the beach in the upper reaches of the river, as well as near the village of Slivata. Some of the fishermen, probably also under the influence of the development of sport fishing during the years of socialism, which will be discussed below in the text, are oriented towards fishing in artificially stocked reservoirs and dams.⁶³

All fishermen, without exception, share that nowadays the fish has decreased drastically. As the main reasons for this, they point out both climate change and human intervention in the regulation of the coastline and the attempt to retain water from other countries in the upper reaches of the river during periods of greater drought.⁶⁴ For example, respondents share that during droughts, Serbia and Hungary close the locks and then the river in its lower reaches becomes very small and this reduces the amount of fish. Another reason is that Romania, due to the threat of floods

⁶⁰ Respondent, male, of Bulgarian ethnic origin, approx. 60 years old, village of Dolni Tsibar, municipality of Valchedram.

⁶¹ Respondent, male, of Turkish ethnic origin, approx. 65 years old, village of Dolni Tsibar, municipality of Valchedram.

⁶² НЕНОВ, Николай. Дунавската рибена чорба – нематериални измерения на културното наследство. *Годишник на асоциация „Онгъл“*. Етнос и култура. Между локуса и универсума. Т. 22. Б. м., 2023, с. 405–420, с. 406. ISSN 1311-493X.

⁶³ Respondent, male, approx. 45 years old, Roma ethnic origin, Lom, born in the village of Kriva Bara.

⁶⁴ The relationship between human activity, changes in the cultural landscape of the river, and changes in the ecological niche is the subject of analysis by SCHNEIDER, Erika. The Danube Delta: Lessons Learned from Nature Restoration Projects. In: *The Biopolitics of the Danube Delta. Nature, History, Policies*. London: LEXINGTON BOOKS, 2015, pp. 87–114. ISBN 978-0-7391-9514-7.

and overflowing of the river, is building dams. They drain the swamps along the Romanian coast. According to the respondents, these swamps were full of fish, which at high water spilled into the entire river. The construction of dams on the Bulgarian side in the 1950s cut off the access of fish to their natural breeding grounds, as is the case with the Orsoia swamp near the town of Lom.⁶⁵ Even today, the dried-up swamp near the village of Orsoia is considered by the Lom fishermen as the main reason for the reduction of fish wealth in the Danube River.⁶⁶ The village of Orsoia, known in the past for its large fishponds and abundance of fish, is today, according to one respondent, the main victim of pollution from wastewater from a cow farm in the neighboring village of Dobri Dol. According to him, the canals in the village of Orsoia were full of fish and fish diversity – crucian carp, catfish and many others. etc., but today, because of this pollution, there is no trace of this wealth.⁶⁷ After the middle of the 20th century, an intensive campaign was undertaken to drain the swampy areas in order to destroy the natural environment for breeding malaria mosquitoes.⁶⁸ This was reflected in a drastic decline in fish populations. The examples mentioned reaffirm the thesis of the mutual influence between man and the environment with the consequences of cultural decisions and dynamics.

Apart from this, they also take into account the pollution factor, which leads to the disappearance of some species of fish, such as the bream, for example, and generally has as a consequence the reduction of fish populations. Even with the construction of the first factories and enterprises, water pollution is considered and as a consequence a reduction in fish. The gradual attempt to master natural resources and the construction of hydrotechnical facilities along the Danube River, which often interrupt the flow of fish migrations and thus make it difficult for them to spawn and force the fish to head to other destinations.⁶⁹ The decline of sturgeon fish and their inclusion in the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) Red List and the Red Book of Bulgaria is also reported as a consequence of the industrialization of the region. More than ten years after their inclusion in the lists of endangered populations, they cannot recover, the reason for this being their biological characteristics – a long-life cycle, late sexual maturity and specific requirements for breeding sites.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ НЕНОВ, Николай. Проучване на рибарските общности..., с. 12.

⁶⁶ НЕНОВ, Николай. *Рибарската общност в Лом*, с. 3.

⁶⁷ Respondent, male, approx. 45 years old, Roma ethnic origin, Lom, born in the village of Kriva Vara.

⁶⁸ НЕНОВ, Николай. Проучване на рибарската общност в Оряхово. *Годишник на асоциация „Онгъл“*. Т. 18. Б. м., 2019, с. 169. ISSN 1311-493X.

⁶⁹ БОЯДЖИЕВ, Николай. *Цит. съч.*, с. 170.

⁷⁰ МАРГАРИТОВА, Борислава. *Проучване на хабитатите за размножаване и хранене на есетровите риби на българския участък от р. Дунав*. Дисертация за присъждане на образо-

Poaching and illegal fishing of fish has long been a registered problem. For example, according to a report by the Lom Hunting and Fishing Society from 1948, the state of fish populations in the region is not good, with the Lom and Tsibritsa rivers showing a decrease in fish. It is a little more diverse in the Danube River. The main reason for the decline in the fish population is fishing with *illegal fishing gear*.⁷¹ The problem obviously does not find a solution, despite attempts to regulate it. Interesting are the attempts to evade the force of the law by fishermen caught in violation. According to a complaint received in 1954 at the Regional Fisheries Inspectorate, town of Lom by Petar Yonov Balutsov, caught with a net thrown during a time prohibited for fishing, he gives the following explanation of the situation: *in this case, I was called by my fellow villager Stavro Yonov to help him catch a white bream, which had been released by his wife into the Danube River, because it had come to the Danube. I came to his aid and with a rotten net we searched for the bream along the river*.⁷² From another complaint it becomes clear that the fisherman caught fishing illegally was actually there because *I was helping to bathe the sheep of the cooperative (TKZS). After we bathed the sheep, we caught several fish and for that I was issued a report*.⁷³

According to the reports of the Lom Hunting and Fishing Society, in 1972, 16 violations were registered for fishing during a prohibited time, 2 in a prohibited place, 40 fishing with nets. In total, 75 fishing violations were registered, for which the guilty persons were sanctioned. It is worth noting that all these violations were not committed by members of the Lom Hunting and Fishing Society and all of them were discovered by the regular hunter supervisors with the help of public inspectors.⁷⁴

In a report of the Lom Fishing and Hunting Society for the period 1985-6 states that abandoned illegal fishing gear is often confiscated, but the poachers themselves rarely come under the blows of the law. Therefore, the main goal of the warden is to enter close contact with the local population, who will assist him in his fight against illegal hunting and fishing. The poor equipment of the wardens is also reported as a problem – they are not provided with vehicles, long-range vision devices, etc.⁷⁵ The reports of the Lom Fishing and Hunting Society contain information about fishermen

вателна и научна степен „Доктор“, професионално направление 4.3. Биологически науки, специалност „Хидробиология“. Автореферат. 2022, с. 6. Онлайн. Налично на: <https://digital.libsu.uni-sofia.bg/bg/v/36620>. [Посетено на 2025-07-10].

⁷¹ ДА–Монтана, ф. 823, оп. 1, а.е. 6, л. 9.

⁷² *Пак там*, ф. 638, оп. 1, а.е. 13, л. 26.

⁷³ *Пак там*, л. 69.

⁷⁴ *Пак там*, ф. 823, оп. 1, а.е. 8, л. 25.

⁷⁵ *Пак там*, оп. 3, а.е. 4, л. 14.

who deliberately do not renew their fishing licenses and fish illegally. The wardens appointed for this purpose have difficulty dealing with illegal fishing.⁷⁶

And the respondents point out as the main factor for the decrease in fish in the Danube River, illegal fishing – that with electricity and especially with bombs, since they destroy everything – both small and large fish and the population cannot develop. The transition from a state-planned economy to a market economy has an unexpected consequence in terms of fishing and poaching. The closure of some of the enterprises and specifically the stone quarries in the vicinity deprives local poachers of bombs. Thus, this type of poaching gradually decreases, since people cannot obtain explosives. Today, the respondents testify that illegal fishing is mainly carried out with electricity, as well as by hunting during the prohibited periods during the reproductive cycle of various fish. Fishing with electricity is quite difficult to detect, since in case of danger, poachers throw the equipment into the river and are left with only the nets. In addition, poaching with electricity leaves no visible marks on the fish. In contrast, the use of explosives can be detected not only by the noise, but also by the type of fish. Respondents say that the shock wave bursts the fish's bladder and its eyes turn white, and this can be recognized by specialists. When poaching with electricity, a small battery with two cables is used. Respondents say that on the Romanian side it is allowed, but only with one cable that runs along the bottom. The main problem with our poachers, according to them, is precisely the use of two cables – one runs along the bottom, and the other four to five meters to the surface. In this way, an electric arc is formed and any living creature that falls into it dies. Poachers take the larger fish, while leaving the smaller ones. Stories everywhere testify that all fishermen have resorted to electric poaching at certain times. But, as they themselves testify, *it is not a pleasure. It is a pleasure to throw the net and see that the plugs sink*. Everyone testifies that *the pleasure is in the thrill, and after so many years, it is a thrill, a thrill*.

The respondents' stories invariably present the factor of the reduction of the fish wealth of the Danube River. The abundance of fish in the past makes it possible to make a selection, as the better quality and with better taste qualities are left for sale and personal consumption, while the small ones are exchanged. For example, a respondent shared that in the past, Danube bleak was not caught for personal use, it is the lowest quality, has many bones and is the least sought after. It was used as a barter currency, being exchanged for watermelons and melons.⁷⁷ Another respondent recounted what his father shared about the period of the 40s–50s, when they barely

⁷⁶ *Пак мам*, а.е. 24, л. 5.

⁷⁷ Respondent, male, Bulgarian ethnic origin, approx. 60 years old, village of Dolni Tsibar.

managed to collect the boats from the weight of the catch between one and a half tons of fish. And when the fishermen return with the fish, the entire village of Dolni Tsibar begins to smell of fish.⁷⁸

The disappearance of the notorious Danube bream is mentioned with sadness in all interviews. One of the respondents testified that the abundance of fish in his childhood years – around the 1960s and 1970s – also provided a large amount of black caviar, provided by the sturgeon. The catch of sturgeon weighing over 100 kg, according to the stories of local people, was no exception. It is the sturgeon that gives a lot of caviar. Locals speak of it with nostalgia and pride *as a natural Viagra, with vitamins from A to Z. When they catch a sturgeon with caviar, they fill a basin with caviar. I used to eat it straight from the fish. Back then, caviar was taken from the fishermen for 40 leva per kg, and now it is 1000 leva. And when they make a basin with caviar, with onion, salt, vinegar. And when 7–8 people pass by with the chirpak (ladle), it's over. When you eat 100 grams of caviar in the morning and you don't feel hungry all day. That's a big deal. I've also eaten caviar from the chiga (sterlett). We used to leave the chiga for home. And my uncle used to beat the white caviar by hand, he would beat it for 6 hours, just the way he wanted it – lemon juice, bread. We ate fish every day, that was our main thing, you never get tired of it.*⁷⁹

Another respondent shared that she also eats fish every day, she doesn't get tired of it, always fresh and bought from fishermen. She herself, as a teacher of the professional discipline of cooking at the school in the village of Dolni Tsibar, has the idea of organizing an open lesson on Fish dishes from her native region with the participation of parents. This will be her contribution to the the culinary heritage of the region with an emphasis on fish. There is also a personal promise to some of her high school students who practice fishing to have fish for her class for practical classes. She says with a smile that she will have to circumvent some requirements, because *no one will issue her a certificate, from the Danube straight to the kitchen.*⁸⁰

The decrease in fish is considered an obstacle to the passing of the craft into the hands of the next generation. One respondent says that his eldest son wanted to engage in fishing, but no matter how many times he went fishing, he was unable to catch anything. So *there was nothing to ignite him* to take it seriously.⁸¹ He says with sadness that today's generation has no eyes for the beauty of nature, my son enters the Danube and looks at his phone. The interrelationship of the human factor,

⁷⁸ Respondent, male, Turkish ethnic origin, approx. 65 years old, village of Dolni Tsibar.

⁷⁹ Respondent, male, Bulgarian ethnic origin, approx. 60 years old, village of Dolni Tsibar.

⁸⁰ Respondent, female, Roma ethnic origin, approx. 45 years old, Lom.

⁸¹ Respondent, male, Bulgarian ethnic origin, approx. 40 years old, village of Archar.

environmental change and cultural consequences becomes visible within just two generations.

Danube fish is also a desired gift when locals visit relatives or friends in the interior of the country. Thus, one respondent shared that during her studies in Sofia, every time she returned from Lom, she brought her roommates catfish *because they loved catfish*.⁸² The locals buy fish from the place in the city where it is traditionally sold fresh from the fishermen – Borunska Cheshma. Fish is also sold at the Saturday market in Lom, but there, unlike Borunska Cheshma, where only local fishermen come out, fishermen from Montana and other places come and offer not only Danube but also dam fish. Relationships with fisherman friends are also essential, as they often order fish, type and quantity.⁸³ Anyone who wants fresh fish should go to the fish market early, when the fishermen take out the fish, because it sells out quickly. This rhythm of placing the catch is well known to the people of Lom, they are used to it and fish is present on their menu every week. However, they always stick to fresh fish. They speak nostalgically about the disappeared sterlett, remembering the last time they prepared it for the family table, the last time in the late 1980s.⁸⁴

In addition to the permanent disappearance of certain fish species, the sporadic decrease in some fish also leads to an outflow of fishermen from this livelihood. For example, locals report that 2023 was a very poor year in terms of catching pike and grass carp, and 2024 – for white fish. They find the reason for this in both climatic factors – serious warming and drought, and in the lack of dredges to maintain the riverbed.⁸⁵

Another reason, albeit temporary, for the withdrawal of fish is construction and repair activities along the coast, which increase sound vibrations and scare the fish. For example, when the coastal park in the town of Lom was renovated, the fish disappeared and only ten years later it can be said that it gradually began to return to its old habitats.⁸⁶

These days in the village of Dolni Tsibar there are only two or three people who are professionally engaged in fishing and the livelihood of their families depends only on this. They have a permanent clientele and established channels through which they sell their catch. The fish is most often bought fresh on the spot, but it can also be

⁸² Respondent, female, approx. 50 years old, Bulgarian ethnic origin, Lom.

⁸³ Respondent, female, approx. 50 years old, Bulgarian ethnic origin, Lom.

⁸⁴ Respondent, female, Roma ethnic origin, approx. 45 years old, Lom.

⁸⁵ Respondent, male, Bulgarian ethnic origin, approx. 60 years old, village of Dolni Tsibar; Respondent, male, Turkish ethnic origin, approx. 65 years old, village of Dolni Tsibar.

⁸⁶ Respondent, male, Bulgarian ethnic origin, approx. 35 years old, Lom.

frozen. There are many who are amateur fishermen, mainly anglers. If the latter catch something, it is for personal consumption and rely on larger fish – catfish and whitefish.⁸⁷ Indicative of the limited catch of fish is the lack of a fish shop in the village. Everything that is caught is sold mainly to people from Sofia and the surrounding larger cities, who come to the village and buy it directly from the fishermen at the time of landing. The old hereditary fishermen, with some sadness and nostalgia, share that the generation that is currently growing up is not only more anglers and no boatmen, but also lacks the thrill. They go fishing simply to avoid doing anything else. The lack of continuity and the fact that there is no interest in this occupation among the young people, led one hereditary fisherman in the village of Dolni Tsibar to sell his boat and go fishing with his fellow villager's boat.⁸⁸ The fate of the other hereditary fisherman is no different. He also points out that in a moment of crisis he thought about leaving the village. He sold all his fishing equipment, including the boat. He also uses one of the few remaining boats in the village to go fishing sometimes.⁸⁹ Old wooden boats also require specific knowledge of maintenance. Currently, in the village of Dolni Tsibar there is only one boy who knows how to make and maintain a boat, but he is in England for most of the year. The situation is similar in the town of Lom. The old wooden boats are disappearing; most fishermen are anglers and only a few rely entirely on fishing as their main livelihood.⁹⁰

A significant difference is observed in the rhythm of fishing between boatmen and anglers. Boatmen go out at night when the fish are calm, while anglers may go out early in the morning or in the evening, but at night they return to their families.⁹¹ Angling is also inherited as a hobby. Most anglers say that their grandfather and father were also anglers. The hobby is also adopted by girls, who told us about cases in which the 7-year-old granddaughters of adult anglers went fishing with them.⁹² In this regard, there are differences in settlements. For example, in the village of Dolni Tsibar, which in the past was entirely Muslim and had a predominantly Turkish population, respondents said that only the boys in the family were attracted to fishing, while the attitude towards girls was more like that of housewives and homemakers, they took care of cleaning and preparing the fish, *a bit like the Turks in Tsibar, it is more special*.⁹³

⁸⁷ Respondent, male, Turkish ethnic origin, approx. 65 years old, village of Dolni Tsibar.

⁸⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁹ Respondent, male, Bulgarian ethnic origin, approx. 60 years old, village of Dolni Tsibar.

⁹⁰ Respondent, male, approx. 35 years old, Bulgarian ethnic origin, Lom.

⁹¹ Respondent, male, approx. 35 years old, Bulgarian ethnic origin, Lom.

⁹² Respondent, female, approx. 50 years old, Bulgarian ethnic origin, Lom.

⁹³ Respondent, female, approx. 45 years old, Roma ethnic origin, Lom.

The economic crisis, felt with full force in Northwestern Bulgaria, also affects the geography of fisheries. If in the past the mentioned villages were able to support themselves and were wealthy precisely thanks to fishing, today this is impossible. With the production from the river it is very difficult to support a family and maintain the inventory. That is why fishermen from the village of Dolni Tsibar say that today there are more of them in the villages of Stanevo, Dolno Linevo, Lom. According to them, most of them work on a permanent employment contract at the Kozloduy NPP, the largest and best-paid employer in the region. Good income gives them the opportunity to buy and maintain boats and equipment. The price of the year-round fishing ticket worth 120 leva is also not a problem for the good income of those working at the nuclear power plant. Thus, the fishing village of Dolni Tsibar in the past turned out to have only two or three boats, while the village of Stanevo had twice as many with a significantly smaller population⁹⁴ and not such good traditions in fishing. That is, there is a trend in which fishing from a main livelihood is gradually turning into an aristocratic hobby for relatively wealthy owners. The reasons for this should also include the fact that during the years of socialism, when fishing was part of the state-regulated industries, fishing was considered work experience. Today, those who are professionally engaged in fishing have to provide for themselves, which brings additional financial burden and makes it difficult to make a profit. The uncertainty regarding the catch and the fact that they often rely on luck also do not direct young people to fishing as a main livelihood. In conclusion, old professional fishermen say that *today there is no chance to support yourself with fish alone. Maybe, as long as a person does not die of hunger, but that's it. When there are two fishermen on a boat, it is difficult to support two families with 50 kg of catch. Once, they caught 100–150 kg, but today they don't. Fishing is a skill, but also luck. There are days, there is no fish for a whole week – how will you feed yourself, you could once rely on it, as it was a state fishery – you have an internship, a secure income, and today what can you rely on?*⁹⁵

In winter, the catch is traditionally the weakest, since the fish are poorly mobile due to the cold weather. Fishermen stretch their nets along the river, and it is not certain whether those who stand downstream will even manage to catch something. Thus, the specifics of the climate, the natural environment and the habits of fish

⁹⁴ Уикипедия. *Остров Цибър (защитена местност)*. Налично на: [https://bg.wikipedia.org/wiki/Остров_Цибър_\(защитена_местност\)](https://bg.wikipedia.org/wiki/Остров_Цибър_(защитена_местност)) [Достъпен на 2025-06 -04] [Достъпен на 2025-06 -04]. According to official data, the village of Dolni Tsibar has a population of just over 1,600 people by 2024; Cf. Уикипедия. *Станево*. Онлайн. Налично на: <https://bg.wikipedia.org/wiki/Станево/> [Достъпен на 2025-06 -04]. Stanevo has a population of approximately 220 people; Respondent, male, Turkish ethnic origin, approx. 65 years old, village of Dolni Tsibar...

⁹⁵ Respondent, male, Turkish ethnic origin, approx. 65 years old, village of Dolni Tsibar.

populations turn fishing into a seasonal livelihood. The latter has an additional impact on the tendency of the ebb and flow of this traditional riverside occupation.

Both in the past and today, fishing is a difficult profession. Respondents tell what their grandfathers shared about catching fish in the cold winters, when the river froze and an ice floe formed. However, experienced fishermen managed to find a gap, often at the risk of their lives, reached the island opposite Oryahovo and bivouacked there. There they built temporary shelters, lit a fire, laid boards on the cold ground so as not to spread their improvised bedding directly on the ground. Their skills were rewarded with catching the most valuable, sought-after and expensive fish – catfish, bream, carp. Working in harsh weather conditions had an adverse effect on their health, with most developing rheumatism and suffering from back pain. Fatalities are also not an exception, especially among less experienced fishermen, and sometimes it takes months for the bodies to be discovered.⁹⁶

In the village of Archar, we come across a fisherman who tries to make a living solely by fishing. His small private initiative is aimed at closing the entire cycle – from catching fish to placing it on the market. There is a small shop, marked with large signs selling fresh and live fish in the village of Archar on the main road to Vidin. The space in front of the shop is decorated with accents on fishing – hanging fishing nets, an old wooden boat, life jackets, etc. His premises are for rent. He had an idea to open a small so-called hot spot shop, next to the store, where he would sell fresh fried fish, French fries and beer, but because of the numerous hygiene and sanitary requirements, he gave up. According to him, at one point he realized that the money he invested would not have a return.

He points out several main difficulties facing his activity, in which the main emphasis is on the fact that the regulations and restrictions on fishing are numerous, and at the same time, there is almost no support from the state. For example, for a person like him, who relies solely on freshly caught fish, the fishing bans during certain periods, without receiving any support from the state during those periods, prove to be disastrous. His business is family-owned, in which his wife also works, and so their entire family of four is left without income during the periods of the fishing ban. At the same time, his wife is considered an employee of the company and as such has the right, under labor law, to work five days a week, eight hours a day. This makes the survival of a small family business very difficult, on the edge of the law. His attempt to sell frozen fish also proves unsuccessful due to the fact that he is not a large fish shop and the expectation of buyers is that in such roadside shops they will find only fresh fish and the frozen ones will be stale and not sold. It can be

⁹⁶ *Ibidem*.

expected that the small businessman will resort to violating or circumventing some of the regulatory rules in order to survive. Significant difficulties are also created for him by some inconsistencies in the regulatory framework. For example, with a fishing ticket, he has the right to sell the fish, but if he wants this to happen in a store, he must have the necessary documents for the fish itself. Thus, he is forced to “sell” the fish he has caught himself to his own company, in order to be able to sell it through his own store. All this is mentioned in the fishing logbook, which must be kept when making each sale.⁹⁷ The fishing logbook, along with the categorization of fishing vessels, which is considered detrimental to small fishermen, as well as the high fees and licenses, are universally accepted by all fishermen (not only along the Danube River, but also along the Black Sea coast) as irrational and unfair and to the detriment of small fishermen. All this complicates the process, creates additional obstacles and difficulties for him. He finds himself in a situation where he has to invent mechanisms to deal with the regulatory framework that makes the process difficult. According to him, it is designed to be detrimental to small businesses.⁹⁸ He shares that the documents he has to prepare to legalize his business are the same as those required by the owners of large retail chains, whose turnover and profits are many times greater. This is also one of the main reasons that prevents local fishermen from devoting themselves entirely to this activity and turning it into their main livelihood and their own business. Added to this is the fact that there is a certain seasonality in the search for fresh fish. As the same respondent shares, people mainly search in the summer, winter and traffic on the road is weaker and the likelihood of someone stopping to fish decreases.

In addition to everything else, today fishing for a living has become an expensive pleasure. Anyone who wants to do this as a hobby must accept the lack of certainty in the catch, as well as the investments. A new net, which costs about 500 leva, can break on the first cast. The river often carries logs, branches that change their location, and even those who know the bottom of the river⁹⁹ in detail can be surprised by trees brought by the water that can snag and break the net. In such a situation, while the net is being repaired, the fisherman loses at least two or three days in which he does not go out into the river. The boat's motor also costs over 3,000 leva. The fishing license and new seals on the nets also further increase the costs. Maintaining a wooden boat, in addition to being an expensive undertaking, also requires knowledge.

⁹⁷ Respondent, male, approx. 40 years old, Bulgarian ethnic origin, village of Archar.

⁹⁸ ФАНДЪКОВА, Ивет. Рибарството в община Царево – традиционен поминък и съвременна жизнена стратегия. – В: *Екосреда и жизнени традиции*. София: Университетско издателство „Св. Климент Охридски“, 2017, с. 18–19. ISBN 978-954-07-4386-8.

⁹⁹ Tona is the name given to the place where the net can pass smoothly without snagging, but it changes under the pressure of the water's movement.

According to one respondent, *you need to know how to glue it, how to arrange the boards, how to arrange the ribs, if you don't know this, you can't practice*.¹⁰⁰ The price of a plastic boat is also quite high – approx. 3500–3600 BGN, and again there is no guarantee that when entering the river the hull will not be damaged by a tree carried by the river. Field data shows that the specific fishing livelihood with its accompanying skills, knowledge and practices gradually disappear, change and some of them die out. For a few, they become an economic strategy. The latter can in no way be defined as the livelihood of the population along the Danube River. With the loss of the fishing livelihood, part of the appearance of the settlements as fishing is gradually lost. The community of fishermen shrinks and decreases, it is doomed to extinction. They become carriers of living memory; from a vital strategy they become cultural heritage. Those who try to derive economic benefit from the recognizable appearance of the Danube towns must comply with a number of regulations and state-normative requirements that make their survival difficult. However, the fame of the Danube settlements as fishing villages continues to exist and this is used by the local population – it can be recognized by the menus in restaurants and pubs, which necessarily offer *salamura* (fish soup with whole small fish) and various types of fish. The presence of anglers in Lom is evident from the several fishing tackle shops, as well as the fish bait vending machine in the city center. During our last visits, it already seemed unusable. A part of the urban space that symbolically reminds us of a livelihood that is gradually losing importance.

THE RIVER AS LEISURE

There is no doubt that the proximity to the river offers many opportunities for spending free time, both for adults and for young people and children. The formation of specific riverside spaces for relaxation and walks, beach areas, restaurants. The river is part of the daily life of the population, associated with memory and reminiscences.

The words of one respondent summarize what the great river offers in people's daily lives. When asked what it means to you to live by the river, she answers: *My apartment terrace overlooks the river. In the morning, when you drink your coffee, you look and relax. This is what it means to live by the river*.¹⁰¹ Defining the enormous importance that the river has for the city, another respondent shares that *there is an equal sign between Lom and the Danube. The two go together*.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Respondent, male, Bulgarian ethnic origin, approx. 60 years old, village of Dolni Tsibar.

¹⁰¹ Respondent, female, Roma ethnic origin, approx. 45 years old, Lom.

¹⁰² Respondent, female, Bulgarian ethnic origin, approx. 50 years old, Lom.

During the years of socialism, sport fishing began to develop. This endeavor combines traditions in livelihood with hobbies and leisure. Perhaps this is the reason why sport fishing quickly gained many followers. For example, the reports of the Lom Hunting and Fishing Society for 1975 note an increased interest in sport fishing, as this is now a hobby not only for adult anglers, but also for children and students. During that year, out of 226 anglers, 36 Komsomol members (between 14 and 18 years old) and 50 pioneers were engaged in sport fishing. It is indicated that there would probably be more angler members, but a large part of the enthusiasts practice it without issuing tickets and without registering with the society. Among the registered members there are members not only from Lom, but also from the neighboring villages of Staliyska mahala and Kovachitsa. Sport fishing is practiced not only in the Danube River, but also in the Lom River, as well as in the dams of the villages of Medkovets, Zamfir, Kovachitsa and Vasilovtsi.¹⁰³ The ninth congress of the Bulgarian Fishing Federation, held in 1984, decided to increase the participation of individual fishing clubs in the management of water bodies for sport fishing, each of which should have its own to take care of. Based on this decision, the micro-dam in the Momin Brod district was stocked with fish.¹⁰⁴

In recent years, there has also been an intensification of efforts to develop tourism in the region, based on the natural, geographical and cultural features formed by the presence of the Danube River. Proof of this is the fact that the Bulgarian coast of the Danube River is included as an essential part of the Concept for Tourist Regionalization of Bulgaria (2015). According to it, the Danube Region is the largest and covers 67 municipalities with the city of Ruse as its center. The main marker for regionalization is the presence of specific cultural and natural resources for the development of tourism.¹⁰⁵ Its separation into a tourist region confirms its historical, cultural and natural conditions. At the time of the study, few tourists visit the town of Lom specifically to explore the city. Those who do come usually spend the night in Vidin and visit the city for a few hours. The reason for this is the few places to stay in the city with limited capacity, as well as the limited places to spend free time.¹⁰⁶ A breakthrough in the region's tourism strategy and the construction and promotion of the Danube Ultra cycling route. Its advertising emphasizes the different historical and cultural layers, also distinguished by the presence of the Danube River – a 740 km

¹⁰³ ДА–Монтана, ф. 823, оп. 2, а.е. 7, л. 15–16.

¹⁰⁴ *Пак там*, оп. 3, а.е. 33, л. 8.

¹⁰⁵ ПЕТКОВ, Ивайло. Сравнителен анализ на развитието на туристически региони Дунав и Тракия. *Eastern Academic Journal*. Т. 3, 2017, с. 41. ISSN 2367-7384. Онлайн. Налично на: <https://www.e-acadjournal.org/pdf/article-17-3-4.pdf> [Посетено на 2025-10-06].

¹⁰⁶ Respondent, female, Bulgarian ethnic origin, approx. 50 years old, Lom.

*journey in space and time.*¹⁰⁷ However, locals say that few embark on this adventure. Most of them are avid cyclists who have the necessary preparation to endure the long journey. The majority of them are foreigners. According to the observations of the respondents, about a dozen cyclists visit the city every year and stay to explore it.¹⁰⁸

The change in attitude towards the river can be traced most synthesized in the change in the inventory and vision of the fishing boats. According to the observations of hereditary fishermen from the village of Dolni Tsibar, the old wooden boats with which fishermen go out to catch fish and which require specific knowledge for their maintenance are gradually being replaced by plastic boats with more powerful motors, which are, however, mainly used for tourist walks, sunbathing and spending free time in the coolness of the river. When researching fishermen in Oryahovo, N. Nenov points out the shift from boat fishing to angling. However, professional fishermen point out that angling lacks the thrill of feeling the power of the river, of fighting nature and living in harmony with it, as is the case with those who go out in boats on the river.¹⁰⁹ However, today more and more people prefer to practice angling, because it gives them the opportunity to escape the stress of the workplace and relax in nature.

Beaching in the hot summers along the Danube is a favorite pastime of young and old. The river is defined as the greatest wealth of the town of Lom. The river also offers numerous places for sunbathing. Most of the respondents' stories take them back to their childhood and adolescence, spent on the river – sunbathing, swimming and fishing. In the 60s and 70s of the 20th century, the summer months were spent on the beaches along the Danube, where entire bivouacs, tent camps are built, vacationers prepare themselves with provisions and everything necessary. Today, the perimeter is expanding, and thanks to the motorboats that some of the respondents own, the beaches on the nearby islands are being discovered – the one opposite the town of Lom and Ibiza to the village of Dolni Tsibar. More and more people are buying kayaks and jet skis and often take excursions on the Danube. The river is present in the lives not only of people who have chosen to stay in the town of Lom, but also of those who have left. One respondent shared: *After my family, I miss the Danube the most. The first thing I do when I come is to come to the shore. I breathe, well, it seems to me that I breathe again, standing on the shore. And the funniest thing is that I can't swim, I'm afraid of the water...*¹¹⁰ The words of another respondent are

¹⁰⁷ Дунав Улта. Веломаришут #1 в България. 740 км в пространство и време на велосипед. Онлайн. Налично на: <https://dunavultra.com/dunav-ultra-the-route/> [Достъпен на 2025-06 -06]

¹⁰⁸ Respondent, female, approx. 50 years old, Bulgarian ethnic origin, Lom.

¹⁰⁹ НЕНОВ, Николай. Проучване на рибарската общност в Оряхово, с. 168.

¹¹⁰ Respondent, female, of Bulgarian ethnic origin, approx. 65 years old, lives in Sofia, born in Lom.

also indicative: *I miss Lom, and I miss it today and I will never stop missing it, but not so much because of the city itself, as because of the Danube River. It's just something that... This view... Wherever I've looked at the Danube, in Vienna and Lom and Vidin and Ruse, it always evokes the same feelings in me. Because it is the most dominant natural factor you can encounter.*¹¹¹

During the summer season, accompanied by a decrease in the river level and drought, sandy areas are discovered in the middle of the river. Respondents remember that on such a sandy stretch opposite the village of Stanevo they not only sunbathed, but even played football, appreciating this as part of the local exoticism and beauty.¹¹²

Ibiza Island opposite Dolni Tsibar is a favorite place for sunbathing, and Romanians often come, but they are subject to a fine if caught.

In the recent past, passenger transport along the river was also widespread. The so-called meteors (speed boats) connected the Bulgarian ports along the river, and this experience is often present in people's stories. They share an *unforgettable experience*.¹¹³ River transport stopped in the early 1990s. But this is fast and relatively cheap transport, you arrive much faster at the desired destination along the Danube than by land. Today, buses are also rare, and this makes it difficult to get around. The lack of river transport makes the river isolated in a sense from the life of the cities and villages located along the coast.

The childhood and teenage memories of most respondents relate to games and walks on the river, romantic experiences at sunset over the river, meetings with friends in the Danube-side establishments. The river is present not only as a geographical and border marker, but as a topos that shapes the daily life of the people of Lom, as well as the people in the surrounding villages located along the coast. According to some respondents, *the river purifies, carries away thoughts, despite the fear and respect for it, it gives a feeling of freedom. Whoever grew up along the river has an attitude towards it, it lives in them.*¹¹⁴ Another respondent shares that her entire childhood was spent playing on the sandbanks of the river. And although she is afraid of the water, she still seeks coolness on summer days on the coastal beaches.¹¹⁵

Locals note that Lom has an advantage in the development of eco-tourism over other Danube towns in the wilder nature. Unlike the more cultivated coastal areas

¹¹¹ Respondent, male, of Bulgarian ethnic origin, approx. 40 years old, lives in Sofia, born in Lom.

¹¹² Respondent, male, of Bulgarian ethnic origin, approx. 60 years old, village of Dolni Tsibar, municipality of Valchedram.

¹¹³ Respondent, female, approx. 50 years old, Bulgarian ethnic origin, Lom.

¹¹⁴ Respondent, male, approx. 35 years old, Bulgarian ethnic origin, Lom.

¹¹⁵ Respondent, female, approx. 45 years old, Roma ethnic origin, Lom.

along Ruse and Vidin, Lom still retains the more natural appearance of its coastline. This attracts nature lovers and gradually several places for camping are formed along the river – next to the port in Lom, near the village of Dolno Linevo, etc.¹¹⁶

Traditional swimming on the Danube River also becomes a holiday for the local population and an opportunity to spend free time. Such were organized with a starting point in the village of Dolni Tsibar. During the years of socialism, this initiative attracted guests from all over the country, swimmers from various clubs from the country gathered in the village. The departure is accompanied by music from the brass band and the entire village has the opportunity to have fun. Today, such events are also organized, but they are not as large-scale as in the past, when respondents shared about over 250 participants.¹¹⁷ Fishing competitions are also organized, one of which is in memory of a famous villager from Dolni Tsibar. Over 200 anglers are involved, with a symbolic prize fund.¹¹⁸

In modern times, the leisure opportunities offered by the river are expanding, but they are becoming more inaccessible to people and are more oriented towards attracting foreign tourists. For the locals, what remains is sunbathing and the feeling of infinity and freedom that the great river offers.

THE RIVER AS A DISASTER

In addition to being a wealth for the coastal shores, the river also creates some of the biggest problems. Everyone living in settlements along the Danube remembers at least one flood. This is associated with sleepless nights and an accumulated fear for people not to lose their homes, and even their lives. During the last flood in Lom, a dike with sandbags was built at the highest point, so as not to allow water to spill into the central part of the city. The low-lying part next to the river station is flooded with water, with movement taking place by boats. Civil defense and local volunteers. This happened in 2006, the river overflowed again in 2010, when parts of the Danube Park, river administration, hotels remained under water. At a high level of danger of overflow, the river level began to be monitored in five sections located near the villages of Orsoya, Stanevo, D. Tsibar and Lom. In order to prevent the river from overflowing, in 2008 the construction of a quay wall began, which was completed in 2011. The wall extends in the section from the customs office to the “Maritime Administration”.¹¹⁹ The village of Dolni Tsibar also often suffered from the overflow

¹¹⁶ Respondent, male, approx. 35 years old, Bulgarian ethnic origin, Lom.

¹¹⁷ Respondent, male, Turkish ethnic origin, approx. 65 years old, village of Dolni Tsibar.

¹¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹¹⁹ Българско национално радио. *В Лом обявиха втора степен за опасност от наводнения*. Онлайн. Налично на: <https://bnr.bg/vidin/post/101128797/v-lom-obaviha-vtora-stepen-za-opasnost-ot-navodnenia> [Достъпен на 2025-10 -19]

of the river due to its low bank, and therefore, back in the 1950s, labor troops built the first dike of the village, which was repeatedly rebuilt. The respondents remember the great flood of 1954, when they were evacuated to the neighboring village of Gorni Tsibar.¹²⁰

The cases of drownings, which are remembered in the settlements along the river, are no exception. Part of the family preparation of children for independent life also includes warnings about the dangers of the river. It is emphasized that even if it seems calm, the current is strong, and the bottom, full of underwater pits, is very dangerous. They tell stories of a child who fell into the river on his bicycle, who had come to his grandparents for vacation. Despite the warnings of the parents, the children often ignore them and sometimes it is a matter of lucky chance that they survive. Thus, respondents share how, as children, they used to swim to the barges on the Danube to carry them downstream. From their current position, they consider it very lucky that they were not dragged by the ship's propellers.¹²¹

Attempts by refugees from the Middle East to illegally cross the Bulgarian Romanian border across the river in recent years also sometimes end tragically. One of the respondents says that he helped to remove the bodies of four migrants – two men, a woman and a child.¹²² It often takes time before the bodies are discovered, and sometimes the current carries them downstream, kilometers from the site of the tragic event.

Tragic incidents in the river are also a source of local folklore. In the village of Dolni Tsibar, it is believed that *the Danube cries, moans for victims, demands its own* – it makes a specific sound before a disaster occurs. Respondents claim that they have heard it and always a day or two later, a disaster occurs, and a person dies. The sound is described as a specific ringing and roaring.¹²³ One respondent says that he heard it at night and in the morning, when he was returning by boat from the estuary, the

¹²⁰ Respondent, male, Turkish ethnic origin, approx. 65 years old, village of Dolni Tsibar.

¹²¹ Respondent, male, of Bulgarian ethnic origin, approx. 60 years old, village of Dolni Tsibar, municipality of Valchedram; Respondent, male, approx. 65 years old, of Turkish ethnic origin, village of Dolni Tsibar, municipality of Valchedram.

¹²² Respondent, male, of Bulgarian ethnic origin, approx. 60 years old, village of Dolni Tsibar, municipality of Valchedram.

¹²³ Respondent, male, of Bulgarian ethnic origin, approx. 60 years old, village of Dolni Tsibar, municipality of Valchedram; Respondent, male, approx. 40 years old, village of Dolni Tsibar, municipality of Valchedram; Respondent, male, of Roma ethnic origin, approx. 40 years old, village of Dolni Tsibar, municipality of Valchedram; Respondent, male, approx. 65 years old, of Turkish ethnic origin, village of Dolni Tsibar, municipality of Valchedram.

village was sad because a child had drowned. In order to protect children from drowning, they used to make belts from gourds.¹²⁴

According to the locals, the Danube is much more dangerous than the sea, because of the specifics of the current. *If you get caught by the eddy, there is no distance between the waves. And you die like a dog. There are many whirlpools, the water is spinning. If you go to the port in Cibar, you will see how the water is spinning. In places in the Danube there is a reverse current – the river flows backwards. Here where the boats are at the port it is with a reverse current – how it flows downwards, turns and goes back. Above the first swell it is also the opposite, on the island too. The whirlpools themselves swirl the water like that, and because of the different depth it happens. If you leave the boat there, it will go up, not with the current.*¹²⁵ Storms are also dangerous, which come out of nowhere. *Like you see a small cloud and then the sky suddenly darkens. If you stop the engine, the water will carry you away*¹²⁶.

INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION

The study followed the mutual influences between the natural and ecological environment and man and their manifestations in different spheres. The greatest influences are on the livelihood structure of the population. Field observations show that there is a transition from a traditional, naturally determined livelihood such as fishing to new economic and life solutions. The factors for this are many – a deteriorated ecological niche, a consequent reduction in fish populations and species diversity, government regulations, difficulties in the livelihood itself and the outflow of the younger generation. Ultimately, these changes lead to the transformation of fishing from a livelihood into a cultural heritage. The latter is slowly and gradually being realized as such by the few remaining fishermen. They see themselves with the value of cultural heritage, dressing their livelihood in the prestigious framework of courage, male strength, knowledge and skill. The poor fishermen of the past are disappearing. In their place are appearing wealthy anglers who are secured by another job and have enough income to afford to have free time to spend with a fishing rod in nature.

The presence of the river has another reflection, and it is reflected in the formation of a regional, supra-ethnic and supra-confessional identity, based on the

¹²⁴ Respondent, male, approx. 65 years old, of Turkish ethnic origin, village of Dolni Tsibar, municipality of Valchedram.

¹²⁵ Respondent, male, of Bulgarian ethnic origin, approx. 60 years old, village of Dolni Tsibar, municipality of Valchedram.

¹²⁶ *Ibidem*.

river as the most important natural and geographical marker in the region. The originality of the knowledge about the river, the exoticism of growing up near it, sharing a childhood different from that of other children in the interior, gives the self-confidence of people who have developed stronger and adequate survival skills. This makes them resilient to modern processes. Life along the river is a strong argument in the awareness of people as relatives. The regional marker of identity is strong because it is based on a significant factor that shapes it. In all three settlements, during conversations with respondents, a shared sense of community was felt between people living along the river. According to our observations, this is due to the fact that they have similar knowledge, skills, and are faced with similar disasters and challenges. Even the modern economic crisis and the unprestigious penultimate place in terms of income within the EU are due to the reduction of the role of the river in the local economy as a result of the restructuring of the economy and its placing on a market principle.

The study confirmed the preliminary hypothesis about the reflections of the geographical factor on the cultural reaction. Man changes the environment, it in turn initiates new cultural decisions in him and forces societies to react to the new conditions. In this process of change, we observe the preservation of some of the traditional knowledge as part of a local and community memory, on the one hand, and its transformation according to the new conditions. We are witnesses of how the traditional livelihood, while preserving the knowledge of the pleasure and danger of living on the banks of the great river, becomes a mark of elitism, a shared memory and cultural heritage.

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Respondent, male, of Bulgarian ethnic origin, approx. 60 years old, village of Dolni Tsibar, municipality of Valchedram.

Respondent, male, approx. 65 years old, of Turkish ethnic origin, village of Dolni Tsibar, municipality of Vlchedram.

Respondent, male, of Roma origin, approx. 40 years old, village of Dolni Tsibar, municipality of Vlchedram.

Respondent, female, of Roma ethnic origin, approx. 45 years old, town of Lom.

Respondent, female, of Bulgarian ethnic origin, approx. 50 years old, town of Lom.

Respondent, male, approx. 35 years old, of Bulgarian ethnic origin, town of Lom.

Respondent, male, approx. 40 years old, Bulgarian ethnic origin, village of Archar.

Respondent, male, Roma ethnic origin, approx. 40 years old, village of Dolni Tsibar, municipality of Vlchedram.

Respondent, female, Bulgarian ethnic origin, approx. 65 years old, lives in Sofia, born in Lom.


Respondent, male, Bulgarian ethnic origin, approx. 40 years old, lives in Sofia, born in Lom.




ГОДИШНИК НА СОФИЙСКИЯ УНИВЕРСИТЕТ
„СВ. КЛИМЕНТ ОХРИДСКИ“
ИСТОРИЧЕСКИ ФАКУЛТЕТ
ТОМ 108, 2025

ЕКОСРЕДА И ЖИЗНЕНИ ТРАДИЦИИ ПО ГОРНОТО
ТЕЧЕНИЕ НА БЪЛГАРСКИЯ УЧАСТЪК НА Р. ДУНАВ:
ЕТНОЛОЖКО ИЗСЛЕДВАНЕ ПО ПРИМЕРИ
НА ГР. ЛОМ И СЕЛАТА АРЧАР И ДОЛНИ ЦИБЪР

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 <https://doi.org/10.60053/GSU.IF.1.108.303-346>


 [Ревизиран ръкопис] Получено 2025-08-30; рецензирано 2025-09-29; прието 2025-09-30; публикувано онлайн 2025-11-25.


 CRediT | *Роли на приносителите*

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 Проучването е осъществено в рамките на научноизследователски проект DS-FR-22-0018 „Динамика на идентичностите в Дунавския регион (По примера на Видин, Лом и Козлодуй)“ – [Multilateral Competition for Scientific and Technological Cooperation in the Danube Region](#) (Проект № 8X23006 | BG-175467353-2022-07-0010-C01).

 Авторът(ите), 2025 г. Публикувано от Университетско издателство „Св. Климент Охридски“ от името на Историческия факултет на Софийския университет „Св. Климент Охридски“. Статията се предоставя под отворен достъп и се разпространява съгласно условията на лиценза [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) (CC BY 4.0, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), позволяващ неограничено повторно използване, разпространение и възпроизвеждане, при условие че оригиналната статия е цитирана по подходящ начин.

Резюме. Студията представлява етнологко изследване по примера на три населени места в Северозападна България, разположени по протежението на р. Дунав. С помощта на качествена етнологка методология и при използването на техники от свързани научни полета като история, изследването очертава промяната в отношението между човешка и природна среда по примера на гр. Лом и селата Арчар и Долни Цибър. Теоретично студията се отнася към направлението на културната екология, което теоретизира отношението между човек и природа и взаимните влияния и въздействия. Влиянието на географския фактор върху културните характеристики, поминъчната структура и идентичността на местното население също е обект на анализ. В заключение се обобщава формирането на т.нар. *културни пейзажи* като резултат от човешката дейност и тяхното последващо влияние върху ежедневието на хората, живеещи по поречието на реката.

Ключови думи: река Дунав (Български участък/горно течение), Северозападна България, културни пейзажи, ежедневие.