

Professionals from around the world traveled to the coast of Croatia to participate in the 6th *GEF Biennial International Waters Conference* held near Dubrovnik from 17-20 October. The conference, organized by the GEF and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in cooperation with the Government of Croatia, brought together 300 project stakeholders and technical experts to share knowledge, best practices and experiences gained over twenty years of project implementation financed by the GEF's International Waters focal area.

The Goal of the GEF International Waters focal area is "the promotion of collective management for transboundary water systems and subsequent implementation of the full range of policy, legal and institutional reforms and investments contributing to sustainable use and maintenance of ecosystem services". The GEF IW strategy has four objectives that target: (a) trans-boundary surface and groundwater basins, (b) large marine ecosystems, (c) capacity building, learning and targeted research to support ecosystems based management of trans-boundary water systems, and (d) marine areas beyond national jurisdiction.

Participants reviewed and evaluated lessons learned from implementing the 71 projects in the GEF's currently active International Waters portfolio. About \$1.8 billion in GEF grant resources have been spent under the IW focal area via all implementing agencies since the inception of GEF twenty years ago. Over this same period, the World Bank delivered about \$470 million of these Grant resources for IW projects worldwide. These grants have leveraged several times this amount in co-financing and, in some cases, considerably more in follow on investments to address environmental priorities identified under the IW project. Most Bank IW operations have been implemented in ECA, EAP and AFR (about \$100 million each), with lesser amounts in MENA and LCR (about \$84 m and \$40 m, respectively). The Bank has already completed implementation of 33 GEF IW projects, is currently implementing 27 GEF IW supported projects, and about 9 are in the pipeline or under consideration.

Site visits to four GEF-funded projects underway in the surrounding region were organized, including two to Bank implemented projects, one of which highlighted the *Neretva and Trebisnjica Management Project*, which supports collaborative management of shared water resources and associated wetland ecosystems in Croatia and Bosnia Hertzegovina, and the *Lake Skadar-Shkodra Integrated Ecosystem Management* project, which supports the Albanian and Montenegro governments to plan and implement environmental management of the lake basin.

Conference participants also visited a UNDP-implemented project, *Protection and Sustainable Use of the Dinaric Karst Transboundary Aquifer System*, whose scope, like the Dinaric Karst region, extends across multiple country borders and has implications for pollution mitigation, water supply and hydroelectric power generation. With a focus on wastewater treatment and marine protected areas, participants also visited a future wastewater collection and treatment project on Mljet Island, a national park and marine protected area off the coast of Croatia that is part of a GEF/UNEP Mediterranean Regional Project.

The conference recognized the significant achievements of the last twenty years of the IW focal area, as well as the challenges and priorities that remain. For further information about the Bank's International Waters portfolio, please contact John Fraser Stewart, Senior Environmental Specialist, ENVGC.