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On the Banks of Lake Lubana

This April, I had a chance to visit Latvia, one of the three Baltic States, as part of a JICA Project Formulation Study team. Latvia is located on the eastern side of the Baltic Sea and it enjoys a relatively mild marine climate despite its high latitude. The old part of Riga, the capital, which is designated as a UNESCO World Heritage site, retains those attractive features which earned the city the title 'Paris of the Baltic'.



Old town of Riga

Latvia's largest lake, Lubana, lies in land 170km east of Riga. When we were there in early April the lake was still covered with ice. Surrounding the lake is a mosaic of various biotopes - forests, marshlands, farm lands and fish-farming ponds all combining to form a complex ecosystem. For this reason the area is very rich in biodiversity, with a number of precious species of fauna and flora occurring around the lake. In particular, here one can find the largest number of bird species in Latvia. In the early spring some 2,000 swans were resting on the lake, and in the seasonal marshland flooded with water from the lake we could see white-tailed sea eagles and greater spotted eagles. Also, willows were vigorously thrusting out their buds among the dominant red pine and white birch. Bunches of young shooting willow branches were being sold in the town market. It seemed they were used as a kind of offering. The most magnificent views were afforded by the huge European oaks, the characteristic features of which could be seen everywhere like a landmark of the area. As soon as the long dark winter is gone and the sun starts shining brightly, children would go and play in the river, hand in hand. Then, you would hear, though from where you couldn't tell, their mother calling them back: "My dears, the water is too cold still! Wait until the oaks turn green!"

Although this wetland area seems very peaceful, I learned that during the former period of Soviet rule the environment was badly polluted due to agricultural activities that used a great amount of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Intensive fish farming operations were also contributing to the pollution. However, after Latvia achieved independence from the Soviet Union, and following the increasing cooperation among the countries around the Baltic Sea as well as the further integration of the European Union, there have been a number of anti-pollution environmental projects taking place in Latvia. The Scandinavian countries are assisting. Also nowadays NGOs are actively taking part in nature conservation, in order to reflect upon and not to repeat the environmental tragedy of the Soviet era. I hope that the nature of Latvia, which beautifully marks the passing and coming of seasons as exemplified by the mother's warning for her impatient children, can be preserved for ever.

(By Onuma in Latvia)



Swans resting on the lake



Willow shoots of early spring



Oak and storks