

## The saltpans of Sečovlje in Slovenia as landscape heritage

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"Heritage is not a passive process of simply preserving things from the past that remain, but an active process of assembling a series of objects, places and practices that we choose to hold up as a mirror to the present, associated with a particular set of values that we wish to take with us into the future" (Harrison 2012: 4).

The saltpans of Sečovlje are the largest on the Slovenian coast with the surface of 593 hectares. In the era of the Republic of Venice, they provided the majority of the salt of The Piran Salinas which ensured one third of salt production of east Adriatic coast - alongside the saltworks in Triest, Muggia (Italy), Koper (Slovenia), Rab, Pag, Ston (Croatia) and Ulcinj (Montenegro). Due to a special grounding (petola) this salt was known for its purity and mineral quality.

The northern half of the saltpans *Lera* is still in operation. Here the salt was harvested by medieval method until 1904, when all smaller family production units were transformed into the one single large salt production unit managed by a company. Since 1999 the commercial salt production in *Lera* is carried out by the "**Soline pridelava soli d. o. o.**" [Saltworks Salt Production Co. Ltd.] owned by a Slovenian national telecommunications operator Telekom Slovenia. In 2003 the company acquired

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20year concession for the managing of the Sečovlje Salina Nature Park.

At *Fontaniggie*, the southern half of the saltpans, the salt was harvested by medieval method until abandonment in 1967. In each salt field one salters' family was responsible for the salt production. During the fourmonth-long salt season the Piran salters' families lived in the houses at the salt fields in the middle of the saltpans by the navigable canals and developed a special way of life. The ruins of some salters' houses are a unique heritage among any saltworks in the Mediterranean. In 1990, the Municipality of Piran declared the Sečovlje Salina Nature Park in the area of the saltpans of Sečovlje. The medieval method of salt production was revived at *Fontaniggie*, where the "Sergej Mašera" Maritime Museum of Piran established Museum of Salt-making in 1991. In 2001 the Slovenian government declared The Museum of Salt-making for a cultural monument of national importance and upgraded The Sečovlje Salina Nature Park from municipal to national level.

The heritization of the saltpans also took place through voluntary work. In 1999–2013, summer volunteer work camps were held at Museum of Salt-making. These were instrumental in the Museum of Salt-making being awarded the European Union Prize for Cultural Heritage - Europa Nostra Award (for the first time in Slovenia) for 2003 in the Cultural Landscape category with the justification: "For the exemplary and sensitive revitalization of a cultural landscape, including the restitution of facilities for traditional salt production technology, architectural restoration and educational activities, all in close harmony with the natural environment".

Heritization of the saltpans takes place also through architectural remains. In the middle of the 19th century there were 493 houses on the saltpans of Sečovlje, in 1984 there were still 118 and in 2019 only 70 former saltpans houses, most of them in ruins. In 2019, Outsider magazine announced a

competition to design a temporary spatial installation in a selected ruin to protect one of the former saltpans houses from further decay. 252 teams submitted their proposals – 80% of the participants were international, outside Slovenia.

One of the ways of heritization of the saltpans of Sečovelje is to use salt mud to treat skin diseases. Thalassotherapy is a centuries-old method introduced by monks from the monastery of St. Onofrio above Sečovelje. Today its tradition is continued by Thalasso Spa "Lepa Vida", which is managed by the company "**Soline pridelava soli d. o. o.**". It operates at *Lera* saltworks, outdoors, seasonally between May and September, exploiting the natural environment. Thalassotherapy is also offered by many nearby hotels from Piran and Portorož. The beginnings of the modern tourist development of the Piran area at the start of 20th century are based on this activity. Today the municipality of Piran ranks first in the Slovenian tourist economy in terms of the number of overnight stays.

Portorož Airport in Sečovelje also participates in the heritization competition of the saltpans of Sečovelje. Its beginnings dates back to 1921, when tourist panoramic flights by seaplane were introduced in Portorož. In 1926 the first scheduled Italian airline was introduced between Portorož and Turin operated by Societa Italiana Servizi Aerei. In 1962, an airport runway was built in Sečovelje. The airport received the status of an international airport in 1980 and has been constantly modernized and expanded at the expense of the saltpans.

The stakeholders in heritization of the saltpans landscape continue to multiply. In the direction of related adventure tourism, the newly planned resort right next to the saltpans, on the site of the disused Sečovelje coal mine, and the new Sečovelje golf course – both want to develop presumably offering "scenic view" on saltpans. Today, the history of the saltpans is incorporated into the tourist environment wherever possible – in hotels, restaurants and shops, but also in public spaces.

Saltpans are presented through selected art photographs, reproductions of old photographs and statues. In Sečovlje Salina Nature Park there is an outlet of shop Piranske soline [Piran Salinas], which offer Piran salt in various forms and as an additive to various foods, as cosmetics for body, face and hair care based on salt, as well as various souvenirs on the theme of salt. The shop operated by "**Soline pridelava soli d. o. o.**" has outlets in Slovenian tourist destinations Portorož, Piran, Koper, Ljubljana and Bled.

The Municipality of Piran, together with various co-organizers, has been since 2003 organizing Salt Festival every year around the feast of St. George, on 23 April. This revives the earlier times when the inhabitants of Piran left for Sečovlje and started with the preparation works for salt production season.

The saltpans of Sečovlje began to gain importance in the field of natural heritage with the abandonment of salt production in *Fontanigge* in 1967. Due to the reduced intensity of annual maintenance of the salt works infrastructure, this area began to take on the appearance of a wetland again after several centuries. Instead of economic activity, nature took over. *Fontaniggie* is the largest coastal wetland in Slovenia and the most important area of Slovenian ornithofauna – 291 bird species; more than 80 of them nest here permanently or occasionally. In 1993, part of the *Fontaniggie* was declared the first area in Slovenia protected by the Ramsar Convention on wetlands due to its outstanding landscape and ecological values. While observing and getting acquainted with nature in the entire area of the saltpans of Sečovlje, their condensed presentation can be viewed in the multimedia center or visitor center next to the administrative building of the Sečovlje Salina Nature Park at *Lera*. Next to it is a viewing platform from which one can see the entire area of the salt pans.

If we paraphrase Harrison and Rose (2010: 251 in Harrison 2015), the "natural" and "cultural" heritage of the saltpans is not

separate. This is an artificial separation. The landscape of the salt pans of Sečovlje is appropriated by different actors (Telekom Slovenia, museum, environmentalists/bird conservationists) using different established heritage tools (open-air museum, nature park, conventions and awards) and facing various challenges between conservation, reconstruction, presentation and marketing of salt pans and salt production.

Despite the general strengthening of awareness of the importance and historical value of the salt pans of Sečovlje on the one hand, and the commercial interest of various actors on the other, the heritage is withering before our eyes, not only due to the mismatch of various managers, but also due to natural processes – tectonic subsidence and sea level rise.

