

Address by
His Excellency Mr Costas Simitis,
Prime Minister of Greece

On the occasion of the establishment of Prespa Park
February 2, 2000, Aghios Germanos, Greece

Prime Minister Mr. Georgievski, Prime Minister Mr. Meta, Ladies and Gentlemen,
Greece is today in a privileged position as far as her development and her position in the broader economic and political map of the Balkans are concerned

The positive course of the Greek economy, just a few months before Greece's accession to the EMU, constitutes a guarantee for her stable and continuing development. At the same time, Greece's presence as a member state of the European Union in the Southern Balkans, is a point of reference to the stability and cooperation, aiming at the peaceful coexistence and reconstruction of the region.

With the firm conviction that the development of my country as well as that of the broader region must be compatible with the need for improvement of the real standard of living and the quality of life, Greece is planning her course based on the principles of sustainable development. These principles provide for the parallel and equal fulfillment of requirements in the spheres of economic progress, of the protection of environment, of natural processes, of ecosystems, as well as that of social justice. In any case, the observance of these principles constitutes the fundamental duty of all member states of the Union, after the signing of the Treaty of Amsterdam.

The exceptional importance of the region for the environment is well known and acknowledged globally in the framework of international treaties. Yet, beyond its pure environmental importance, Prespa is a meeting point between three countries and a crossroads of cultural exchanges.

Thanks to the love of its inhabitants for the region and their dedication to the preservation of their unique cultural and environmental characteristics, Prespa constitutes today an example of a protected environment and cultural heritage that is worthy of imitation. I would like to underline the consistent and constant cooperation between the Non-Governmental Environmental Organizations involved, and in particular, the Society for the Protection of Prespa, with the inhabitants of the region throughout the years, that resulted in Prespa being honored with the Ramsar award of 1999 as a distinct example of the protection of a wetland through cooperation at local, national and international level.

In recognition of these particular characteristics and of the opportunity that is given to us to set into action a sustainable development, Greece, in a joint effort with Albania and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, decided to establish the

First Transborder Protected Region in the Balkans under the name of "the Prespa Park".

Today's Declaration foresees the close cooperation between our three countries as well as the careful management and the protection of the natural resources of the region, in such a way as to secure its unique environmental and cultural characteristics.

In this framework a provision for a concrete Programme of Action that can be materialized immediately has been made and officials from our three countries will closely cooperate in this respect

In the framework of the activities for the operation of the Balkan Park of Prespa, I would like today to announce the establishment of a Multinational Educational and Research Centre for the study and observation of the ecosystem and other environmental parameters. This center is created due to a Greek initiative in the framework of the application of the provisions for the environment as foreseen by the Third Community Support Framework, and it is expected to form a focus of gathering and diffusing of scientific knowledge and information for the region, thus presenting also opportunities for employment for young people.

The Multinational Educational and Research Centre of the Balkan Park of Prespa will be created in the location of the old fish-farming station of Prespa, which is no longer in operation, and will absorb allocations in the amount of 500 million drachmas.

Finally, I would like to underline the symbolic gesture that will accompany today's Declaration of our three countries for the creation of the Prespa Park:

In the framework of the "Living Planet" campaign, which is promoted by a reliable and internationally acclaimed Non-Governmental Environmental Organization, the World Wide Fund for Nature, we are offering, in a joint effort, this initiative as a "Gift to the Earth". These "gifts" constitute concrete obligations by governments, other organizations and individuals, who contribute to the protection of our planet, and, to date, they amount to 48. The creation of this first transborder protected region in the Balkans, which we are establishing today, is of a profoundly symbolic nature and emphasizes the dedication of our three countries to the principle of peaceful coexistence, aiming at a development that respects the human being and the environment. It is a gesture which expresses, in practice, our decision to secure a better future for the generations to come.♦