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Changing Economic Strategies in the Ecsed Marsh

An Example of Renewal in Nagyecsed

Abstract

The Ecsed Swamp was formed in the New Holocene Era in the lowest areas of Nyírség and Szatmár Plains. Besides the protective nature of the swamp, it was a significant source of livelihood for the local population – loach fish collecting (*csikász*), bird hunting and egg collecting (*pákász*) were the main occupations of the “swamp people”. The Ecsed Swamp, which once covered almost 432 km² was drained at the end of the 19th century that caused significant changes in everyday life and farming. The inhabitants of the so-called “Loach land” (*Csikország*) tried to dig up and cultivate marshy areas even before the drainage. Burning, cutting and cleaning were already known among the swamp people, since this was the only way to carry out farming activities in this area. In their frustration the swamp people effected by the drainage tried to obtain land for cultivation. They worked on the lands purchased by the Károlyi noble family. More prosperous ones also built farms on the border of the neighbouring villages, thus the process of homesteading began. In the 21st century, the cultivation of agricultural land in the area of former swamps is causing significant problems since water shortage is now characteristic towhole Europe. Reedfires in the former swamp areas a phenomenon that exists to this day. With the transformation of landscape and ways of farming and living, the need to apply different economic strategies arose, which I will discuss t in my research study with case studies from the 19th and 21st centuries.

Keywords: Ecsed Swamp, Nagyecsed, Ecsed folk spirit, local identity, economic strategies, swamp rehabilitation





Pic. Nr. 1: The Ecsed marsh in 1780.

Based on the drawing of land-surveyor Pál Borsitzky.

Éble 1898: 38–39.

The Ecsed Marsh, which was drained more than 100 years ago, was situated at the border of the *Nyírség* and *Szatmár* flatland. *Nagyecséd*, a settlement with currently six thousand mixed Gypsy and Hungarian inhabitants, used to play a central role in this area. The inhabitants were engaged in fishing, fowling and husbandry. However, today only some signs of cultural imprints remind of their characteristic lifestyle. Since the marsh isolated the inhabitants from other communities, archaisms and cultural elements were preserved in the collective memory and are still present in the local culture, even though the marsh was drained and the Ecsed Castle no longer exists. These historic and folk elements have shaped the local identity to a great extent. Therefore, we can

distinguish a particular local mentality and unique characteristics which are inseparably linked to *Nagyecséd* and are in striking contrast to other settlements along the Ecsed Marsh. (Picture 1)



Pic. Nr. 2: *The inauguration of the renewed museum building
József Berey Regional History Collection and Galery, Nagyecséd 2013.*

Photo: Róbert Szücs

Due to the seclusion of the settlement and thanks to the efforts of the community, some characteristic dance and song elements, unique cultural patterns and rituals related to the local dances are still observable. For example, the Hungarian and Gipsy folk dance heritage of *Nagyecséd* was put on the National Register of Intellectual Cultural Heritage (*Szellemi Kulturális Örökség Nemzeti Jegyzéke*) in 2017. Furthermore, the local museum (*Berey József Helytörténeti Gyűjtemény*) showcases the local archaeological heritage and the remaining parts and folk materials of the Ecsed Castle. In close cooperation with the community, the museum workers and the local elite make considerable efforts to preserve these specific cultural elements. My research project focuses on the characteristic features which determine this unique local identity, the so-called

“Ecsed-ness”. In this paper, a separate section is dedicated to how the local economy reacted to the draining of the marsh. Following the argumentation of Töhötöm Szabó Á.,¹ my argument is that the Ecsed Marsh and the farming strategies of the inhabitants are present both from an economic and a cultural perspective. (Picture 2)

The Ecsed Marsh came into existence in the New Holocene on the lowest area of the *Nyírség* and the *Szatmár* flatland.² The marsh had a protective function and provided a considerable source of living for its inhabitants. Fishing was an important occupation; people were especially specialized in weather-fish. The 432 km² area³ had been drained by the end of the 19th century, which brought about radical changes both in the everyday life and in the economy.

Several monographic studies have been written about the local fishermen, the everyday life of the people living in the marshland, their belongings, and about their intellectual culture. However, the studies about the draining⁴ rarely mention how the transformation of the landscape affected these communities, i.e., how local communities experienced the change of their living space, and what kind of new farming solutions they found to make a living. How did this process take place and how did the people “reinvent themselves”, as an elderly informant from *Nagyecsed* described this transformation?⁵

People attempted to drain the marsh for the first time in the 18th century. Count Ferenc Károlyi built a 6 km channel between 1749 and 1751. However, the construction stopped due to the lack of financing.⁶ The leaders of Szatmár County turned to Parliament for financial support but they did not succeed.⁷ The Count’s son, Antal Károlyi continued the construction between 1778–1784 as Lord Commissioner, since he was in charge of cleaning and making the Szamos River navigable.⁸ These efforts turned out to be unsuccessful, as after a couple of rainy years, the marsh reclaimed its original form. A hundred years later, due to the great floods of the late 19th century, the initiatives to drain the marsh emerged again.⁹ On 9th August 1894 the Company

¹ Szabó 2013: 14.

² Beke 1978: 1.

³ Regrading surveys of the area of the Marsh, see: Vályi 1796: 542; Szirmay 1809: 21; Fényes 1839: 260; Czirbusz 1899: 109; Berey 1908: 26; Karácsonyi–Ardelean 2003: 13.

⁴ Czirbusz 1899; Takáts 1899; Lovassy 1931; Péchy 1939; Beke 1978.

⁵ Farkas 1982: 86.

⁶ Takáts 1899: 7–9; Lovassy 1931: 82; Péchy 1939: 189; Luby 1971: 4.

⁷ Takáts 1899: 8; Berey 1908: 29; Péchy 1939: 189.

⁸ Takáts 1899: 12–33; Péchy 1939: 190–192.

⁹ Czirbusz 1899: 109; Lovassy 1931: 83.

for Draining the Ecsed Marsh and Controlling the Inland Waters and Flooded Areas of the Left Bank of the Szamos River (*Ecsedi-láp Lecsapoló és Szamos balparti Ármentesítő és Belvízszabályozó Társulat*) was established in Nagykároly.¹⁰ The company was managed by Count Tibor Károlyi and Chief Engineer László Péchy.¹¹ The aim was to exclude water from the flood plain and to drain inland water. This is why the main channel (*Lápi-főcsatorna*) was built between 1895 and 1898.¹² Due to the drainage, the landscape changed completely, and the reed beds disappeared in a couple of years. Consequently, the wetland, formerly abundant with weather-fish (*“Csíkország”*) became fertile land. (Picture 3)



Pic. Nr. 3: *László Péchy Flood Gate and Pump Station, Nagyecséd. 2022.*

Photo: Szücs Róbert

The former “water world”¹³ was often remembered with romantic nostalgia in the decades after the draining of the marsh. István Bársony remembers the former marsh in his monography as follows: *“My heart is still in anguish when I remember this unique fairyland, sentenced to death by civilization and human progress*

¹⁰ Czirbusz 1899: 97; Lovassy 1931: 83; Péchy 1939: 194; Szilágyi 2020: 80.

¹¹ Péchy 1939: 194.

¹² Lovassy 1931: 83–85; Péchy 1939: 195–198.

¹³ The pre-polder condition was called “water world”. See Farkas 1982: 11.

[...] *The marsh was an Eldorado for the local people, the fishermen; it fed nearby villages whose people could mostly make a humble living of it.*"¹⁴ Bársony introduces the metaphor of human life and writes about the death of the marshland:

*"You could write fairy tales of it. The bygone life of the great marsh, which has now ended, is gone forever. The Kraszna, which fed it before, runs in its riverbed in vain with its waves afoam, when spring floods arrive, it cannot resurrect the marsh anymore. It has been drained; it has been bled."*¹⁵ (Picture 4)

Many 20th century writers consider the marsh to be an innocent murdered miracle. Sándor Lovassy refers to it as „*primeval nature awaiting death*"¹⁶. József Berey, the first researcher to write about the history and folklore of *Nagyecsed*, sadly comments on the marsh in his monography as follows:



Pic. Nr. 4: *A forager in the Ecsed Marsh*. Berey 1908: 32.

*"The enormous colossus, which for years had lain on the body of the County, the Marsh of Ecsed is now dead, inanimate. While it was alive, we knew so little about it, and that too was coloured by our imagination, and now when it is dead, we know more about it than when it was alive."*¹⁷

The geographer Géza Czirbusz wrote an obituary-like text about the marsh in 1899: "*Fenny romance ceases to exist and the prosaic matter of utilizing the marsh takes*

¹⁴ Bársony 1908: X.

¹⁵ Bársony 1908. XII.

¹⁶ Lovassy 1931: 3.

¹⁷ Berey 1908: 26.

its place [...]Therefore it is the right time to write a memoir on the death of the Marsh, to retrospect its past...”.¹⁸ (Picture 5) Besides these romantic descriptions, the image of the local people also occurs – an image of those who lived in the area and benefited from the goods of the marsh but also had other farming strategies.



Pic. Nr. 5: Foragers with their cabin.
Herman 1887. board nr. IV.

In his study on farming József Farkas found that even in this “water world” agriculture was the basic strategy to make a living,¹⁹ complemented to a great extent with animal husbandry.²⁰ According to Farkas, agricultural activities already emerged sporadically on the tiny islands in the marsh.²¹ Since agriculture greatly depended on the movement of water, arable land did not last long, several plots were used and cultivated depending on which was suitable²². Therefore, the people of *Nagyecséd* used the neighbouring fields for farming (close to the villages *Nyírcsaboly*, *Fábiánbáza* and *Mérk*). As it was stated in the annual stocklist of 1669 of the Ecsed Castle, they also cultivated the land in the vegetable garden outside the gate on *Sziget utca*.²³ In this completely closed, inaccessible area farming could go on undisturbed even in case of hardship, or during wartime.²⁴

¹⁸ Czírbusz 1899: 97.

¹⁹ Farkas 1982: 34–35.

²⁰ József Berey already stated this in his study on the marsh dated 1908. Berey 1908: 29.

²¹ “*Goronc*” was the name of the little hill, island rising from the marsh. See Farkas–Gaál 1981: 30.

²² Farkas 1982: 69.

²³ Németh–Zoltán–Borzován 2021: 282.

²⁴ Farkas 1988: 45.

The inhabitants of the former marshland had several strategies to increase the areas of arable land. They had made efforts to use the marshy areas and cultivate them even before the draining began. Burning, clearing, and cleaning areas were well-known before the drainage, as this was the only way people could carry out agricultural activities in this area.²⁵ The most widespread way of breaking the land was „clumping”²⁶. József Farkas gives a general description of this method, quoting Imre Bernáth, an informant from *Nagyecsed*:

*“The bog was all turfy, pigs and sheep from the manor browsed on it. Great soil was hidden underneath [...] The turf trod by livestock was broken approximately one and a half span deep, and the bog was removed and piled in the borderland [...] When the area was ready, the bog was removed, it was dug up nicely [...] and raked neatly. Then with their bare beels, farmers made holes and threw 3-4 pieces of dent corn in them, then with their other foot they covered the hole and went on. This is how they cropped the „de-clumped” soil, and then sowed pumpkin seeds 4-5 feet apart in each row. They also sew beans in-between the rows, this was the ever so popular yellow bean of Ecsed.”*²⁷

People who lived in the marshland, including the inhabitants of *Nagyecsed*, managed to get plots suitable for living by literally treading out some pieces of land. They stepped barefoot “backwards”, often missing the right track, which is why there are so many “*curved plots*”.²⁸ The land belonged to whoever cleared it.²⁹

Data from the pre-drainage era serve as reference points for the future development of farming. The survey which was prepared in 1895 in *Nagyecsed* reports about a total of 456 farming units with agricultural activities on a total of 7,535 cadastral acres. People owned and cultivated 3,770 cadastral acres and leased 3,765 acres. The farm areas were divided as follows: 2,126 acres of arable land, 139 acres of garden, 2,420 acres of grassland, 2,110 acres of grazing-land, 2 acres of forest, 101 acres of reed and 637 acres of infertile land. The survey included another interesting fact: in the *Mátészalka* region, the *Nagyecsed* farm buildings had the highest degree of fire protection.³⁰ Since most plots were created as described above, the buildings were close to each

²⁵ Farkas 1982: 78.

²⁶ Farkas 1982: 80. Bog was the name of the pile of soil clumped together with sedge root and turf. Farkas–Gaál 1981: 31.

²⁷ Farkas 1982: 80–82.

²⁸ Farkas 1982: 85.

²⁹ Luby 1971: 19.

³⁰ [*A Magyar Korona...*] 1897 I: 486.

other, which meant fire hazard. Consequently, the village people had to take precautions, and this was the explanation for the high degree of fire protection in the settlement.

Furthermore, *Nagyecsed* had an outstanding number of cattle and carthorses. There were 2,095 cattle, twice as many as in *Kocsord*, the second ranking village in the survey. In addition, 222 double and 37 triple carriages were counted, which is twice as many as in the regional centre *Mátészalka*. As for orchards, however, low values were registered, there were only 377 fruit trees.³¹



Pic. Nr. 6: *Róza Maródi*
and *András Tarcsa*. Happy descendants
of quarrelsome forefathers.
Éble 1912: n. p.

Only the Nagyecsed Reformed Church owned more than 100 acres at this time.³² The Károlyi family, which later played a significant role in the drainage, had a smaller plot in the *Mátészalka* region, but István and Tibor Károlyi owned a total of 6,570 acres in the *Nagykároly* region.³³

The disappearance of the Ecsed Marsh caused considerable changes in everyday life and in the economy. Zsigmond Móricz visited *Nagyecsed* in 1905

³¹ [*A Magyar Korona...*] 1897 I: 487.

³² [*A Magyar Korona...*] 1897 II: 392.

³³ [*A Magyar Korona...*] 1897 II: 392, 403.

during his field research. In his recollection not only does he mention the fairy-land, but also the anger of the ousted country folk:

“...the great marsh was already gone by then. [...] And country-men were gloomily scolding and discussing in a temper of bloody rage, how they were fooled by the lords [...] now that there was soil left behind, soil that grew great fields of corn, it should have been theirs. Then came the lords, when this world was still under water and bought the marsh fee of the folk for three Forint or five, traded them old, exhausted arable land instead near the village, and how happy the peasant was to get one or two acres of land for twenty acres of water, cause who would have thought that time would come when the marsh would be in need of buckets of water!”³⁴

Margit Luby documented these negative recollections in her studies from the 1950s. Even after decades, the local community remembered the way the Károlyi, Domahidy, and Tisza families had bought the marshland for *palinka*, ham or wheat bread.³⁵ (Picture 6) After the drainage, the ousted people of *Nagyecséd*³⁶ tried every possible way to gain arable soil. After the regulation of the waterways, they occupied uninhabited territories which constituted a smaller part of the countryside. The larger part remained uncultivated land and had been purchased by the lords earlier which was made fertile in two ways. The lords had the easily accessible areas broken up by steam ploughs, however, the harder „low land” work was done manually by the people from the villages.³⁷ Farmers left without land could use their previous techniques to get arable land. In the first year, workers cleaned and cultivated the area and they either owned the whole area they farmed (*“mindibe”*)³⁸ or only half of the area (*“felesbe”*). In the following year, the lords took over and managed the work on their own.³⁹ Clearing the land was hard work, so people tried to make it easier by putting the bog on fire. After long dry periods, the dried peat also caught fire, and the flames spread invisibly underground, which could cause great damages. The greatest marsh fire of the century was in October 1903 near the villages Kaplony and Börvely, when a 1,300-acre area caught fire due to the great winds.⁴⁰ Furthermore, some fires were caused by the

³⁴ Móricz 1910: 510–511.

³⁵ Luby 1971: 24, 26–27, 128; Pap 1934: 9.

³⁶ See Konczné Nagy 2001: 19 regarding selling below price and cheating.

³⁷ Farkas 1982: 85.

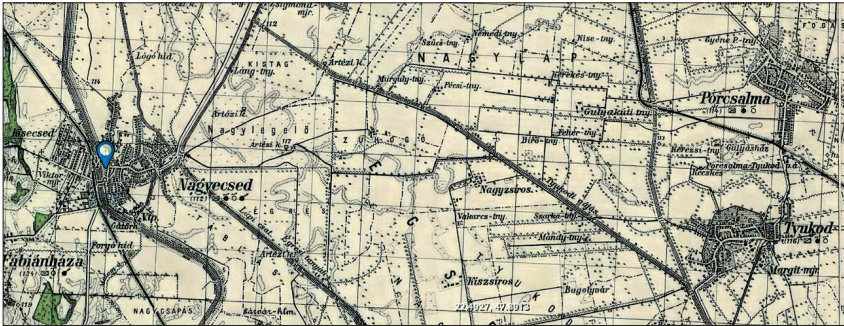
³⁸ The meaning of the word: in whole, i.e., they owned the whole area they broke. As opposed to “in halves”, which referred to the usage of only half of the area they broke.

³⁹ Farkas 1982: 85.

⁴⁰ Széll 1904b: 13.

“revenge of angry people”.⁴¹ However, in some cases people deliberately set certain areas on fire, as the soil fertility considerably improved afterwards.⁴²

The Ecsed Marsh turned fertile from the 1910s. This was the time when the peasants started repurchasing the broken lands.⁴³ In the 1930s, the Károlyi family owned more than 2,034 acres of arable land, 202 acres of grassland, almost 79 acres of grazing-land, 2 acres garden, and 75 acres of area was exempt from land tax in *Nagyecsed*. The village people still owned only 531 acres of arable land, more than 2 acres of grassland, 220 square fathom of garden and 23 acres were exempt from land tax⁴⁴.



Pic. Nr. 7: *The military survey of Hungary, 1941.*

<https://maps.arcanum.com/hu/map/hungary1941/?layers=29&bbox=2108754.290960131%2C6018766.232661184%2C2137781.2524514273%2C6029008.794451397>

Because of the changing conditions, the people of *Nagyecsed* had to develop new economic strategies. They worked hard and bought the fields of the neighbouring settlements. In one of the works by József Farkas, Imre Bernáth claims:

“The lord liked the people of Ecsed ’cause they muzzled the earth with every means possible if there was a reason to do so. [...] The ‘halves’ turned out so well, that the people of Ecsed started to buy the areas around the neighbouring settlements [...] There were many in Porcsalma with land as big as 60 acres. When their daughter got married, they sold some of it. We got news of it beforehand, and could hardly wait to have weddings in Porcsalma. ’Cause you must love your land! [...] This is how the people of Ecsed reinvented themselves after digging the Kraszna.

⁴¹ Farkas 1978: 77.

⁴² Széll 1904a: 6.

⁴³ Farkas 1988: 47.

⁴⁴ Numbers about the grazing-land are not included in the collection. [*Nagyecsed adó...*] 1930: 30.

They bought the land of nine settlements, a total of 7,000 acres. Certain farmers had their land 26 kms away from their home.”⁴⁵ (Picture 7)



Pic. Nr. 8: Harvest in the early years of the 1950s.
Photo: Katalin Nyíriné Bakos (private collection)

Because of the great distances, better-to-do farmers built farms in the neighbouring settlements – this is how farms started to develop. Losses following the Second World War, labour migration to towns, farm-reallocations and collective farms put an end to the development of the rural world.⁴⁶ Farms slowly became unpopulated or in some cases they were united into a village.⁴⁷

Farmers had to face new difficulties between the two world wars. After the Treaty of Trianon (1920) the region lost its natural markets,⁴⁸ the former cultural and economic relations ceased to exist. Following the initial high yield of the marsh, organic reserves of the soil significantly decreased; the rate of the non-arable saline soil drastically increased.⁴⁹ To solve the problem and to discuss agricultural issues of the former marshland areas, the Eastern Hungarian Agricultural Chamber (*Tiszántúli Mezőgazdasági Kamara*) summoned a meeting in 1927 in *Mátészalka*. The economic crisis and WW2 delayed the implemen-

⁴⁵ Farkas 1982: 86.

⁴⁶ Dankó 1994: 208–209.

⁴⁷ A good example of this is the settlement of *Tiborszállás*, situated close to *Nagyecsed*, which was organized into one village by uniting three farms – *Tiborszállás*, *Vadaskert* and *Halmosfarm* – in 1955. *Helységnevtár* n.d. https://www.ksh.hu/apps/hntr.telepules?p_lang=HU&p_id=08952

⁴⁸ Konczné Nagy 2001: 32.

⁴⁹ Lovassy 1931: 86; Farkas 1972: 12; Lácay 2020: 159; Karácsonyi 2002: 12.

tation of the solutions which had been proposed in this meeting.⁵⁰ Still, one of the most significant results was the foundation of the Winter Agricultural School, the predecessor of the present Baross László Agricultural Polytechnic, Trade School and Dormitory (*Baross László Mezőgazdasági Technikum, Szakképző Iskola és Kollégium*) in Mátészalka.⁵¹

The land reform implemented in 1945 brought about several changes in the everyday lives of the local people who tried to manage their lands with the previously successful agricultural strategies.

The people of *Nagyecsed* continued to make efforts to obtain as much arable land as possible. In 1947, for example, smallholders wanted to rent land near the neighbouring village *Tyukod*, and the ministry finally gave them permission to do so. The smallholders of *Nagyecsed* were granted land in *Tyukod* by lease.⁵² In the 1950s, the local people were described as follows: “*They have 3,000 acres of land in the neighbouring eleven villages. The people are active, hard-working. When there’s work – they say – they keep their horses in harness day and night. ‘Their only god is making money’ [...]*”⁵³ The people mainly grew wheat, barley, oat, rye, cabbage, beans, and hemp in the marshland. The most important crops (corn, potato, carrot) became widespread in this area mostly in the 18th century.⁵⁴ People began growing sunflower in *Nagyecsed* at the beginning of the 20th century, and they called it “*the white whirl of Ecsed*”.⁵⁵ As for animal husbandry, the most important animals were cattle, pig and poultry, especially geese.⁵⁶ According to statutory rule No. 3/1949 of the Presidential Council of the Hungarian People’s Republic on the partial consolidation of agricultural and silvicultural estates,⁵⁷ 1949 brought the consolidation of marsh villages as well.⁵⁸ The *Nagyecsed* farmers founded their collective farm named “*Vörös Csillag*” (i.e. Red Star) in 1950.⁵⁹ The majority was reluctant to join, as the daily newspaper of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party *Népszabadság* reported: “*they are not really keen on joining the collective farm yet.*”⁶⁰ (Picture 8) The resistance of families who insisted on their proper-

⁵⁰ Lőrincz 1995: 70.

⁵¹ Csomár 1968: 322; Lőrincz 1995: 71.

⁵² N. A. 1947: 2.

⁵³ Székely 1957: 5.

⁵⁴ Farkas 1982: 96–115.

⁵⁵ Selmeczi Kovács 1985: 380.

⁵⁶ Luby 1958. XXXII/31.

⁵⁷ N. A. 1949a: 3–4.

⁵⁸ N. A. 1949b: 7.

⁵⁹ N. A. 1950: 8.

⁶⁰ Gerencsér 1958: 5; Dankó 1994: 211.

ties is demonstrated by the fact that in 1957 only 10% of the population joined the collective farm.⁶¹ Many families even migrated to different areas of the country, “you could find people from Ecsed practically everywhere”.⁶² In 1960, members of the collective farm, then called Rákóczi Mg.Tsz.,⁶³ considered husbandry as the key to survival. After individual husbandry was made impossible, in the 1960s more and more people joined the collective farm. According to statistics from that time, agricultural areas were distributed as follows: 4,951 acres of arable land, 907 acres of grazing-land, more than 292 acres of forest, 62 acres of grassland, 32 acres of orchard, 19 acres of vine-culture and 309 acres were out of cultivation.⁶⁴ The initially successful and thriving collective farm started to produce less and less in the 1980s, and it finally needed subsidising.⁶⁵ The lack of industry and the low turnover caused serious employment issues.⁶⁶ A temporary solution was the establishment of the MEDICOR Medical Equipment Manufacturer (*MEDICOR Orvosi Műszergyár*). Subsequently, employment improved considerably, and the number of commuters decreased in the 1980s.⁶⁷

During the years of the political turn, Nagyecsed underwent the same changes as did other parts of the county. With collective farms falling apart and through privatization “a structural change began in ownership”⁶⁸, farmers with smaller areas of land “sold or assigned their lands or the right of entry thereof (compensation voucher)”⁶⁹. All this was in favour of the establishment of large estates. As a newspaper article from 1994 pointed out, there were often rows at land auctions because there was a larger number of claimants compared to the land assigned for compensation. Further conflicts were generated by the location of the assigned land which was especially significant in the case of former marsh territories.⁷⁰ The village people still remembered their struggles and unfair treatment in the past centuries. Consequently, the land reform and the compensation after the political turn of 1989 generated a high degree of tension among the descendant.

⁶¹ Székely 1957: 5.

⁶² Perl 1983: 5.

⁶³ “Rákóczi” Mg. Tsz. n.d. <https://ceginfo.hu/ceg-adatlap/rakoczi-mezogazdsagi-termelozsovetkezet-nagyecsed-felszamolas-alatt-1502050017.html>

⁶⁴ [Nagyecsed község...] 1960: 22.

⁶⁵ Dankó 1994: 214.

⁶⁶ Dankó 1994: 215.

⁶⁷ [Nagyecsed-i jelentés...] 1984.

⁶⁸ Láczy 2020: 173.

⁶⁹ Láczy 2020: 173.

⁷⁰ Lányi 1994: 13.



Pic. Nr. 9: *A man is presenting the traditional foraging lifestyle during a local festival, Hajdúnánás. 2019.*

Photo: László Füz. Facebook page of Tibor Somlai.

<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2693780487308902&set=a.2693777903975827>

Despite the continuous efforts to improve the soil quality, agriculture on the drained areas started to become more and more uncertain in the 1990s. The fires of the former peat – marsh fires – and too much water caused farmers several problems.⁷¹ The continuous decrease of the productive quality of the peat have caused problems for decades.⁷² Consequently, the local farmers often try to cultivate wet (or periodically dry) areas even in the 21st century. This is extremely harmful from the point of view of nature conservation. Furthermore, heavy precipitation can cause floods which ruin the crops of the local farmers. Both the local community and the water authority have been aware of the necessity to restore the marshland to a certain extent. The primary objective of local governments of the former marshland villages and of the local associations for ecological conservation is to restore the former marsh in areas which are less suitable for cultivation.⁷³ As a first step, the Hortobágy National Park made a reconstruction plan in 1987 and determined three areas

⁷¹ See Gulyás 1942: 4; Orosz 1966: 4; Józsa 1966: 54–57; Lőrincz 1995: 70–73; Dudás–Haraszthy 1999: 180–181; Rác 1996: 7.

⁷² Józsa 1966: 53; Karácsonyi 2002: 12.

⁷³ On the problems of the reconstruction of the marsh see Lőrincz 2003: 51–53.

of rehabilitation.⁷⁴ In 2001, a final research study was prepared⁷⁵ and in 2013, WWF Hungary concluded the technical planning based on the data collected by the local water management society (*Ecsedi-láp Kraszna-balparti Vizgazdálkodási Társulat*). This society, the local government of *Nagyecséd* and the local farmers have been involved in the planning process of the rehabilitation program from the very beginning. The aim is to develop small water habitats which can contain and store water, thus provide irrigation water for the plants in arable areas.⁷⁶ Furthermore, the plan includes the restoration of marsh farming on approximately 200 acres (*Csicsós-láp*).⁷⁷ (Picture 9) The partially restored marsh would not only provide shelter for protected species, but could also provide secure means of living for the inhabitants of the former wetlands through the concept of “gentle ecotourism”⁷⁸ with renewed farming strategies.

The paper explored how the transformation of the ecological environment in the Ecsed Marsh reshaped the local cultural frameworks which dated back to several hundred years. The local people were able to develop new farming techniques, after the marsh had been drained. This case study also showed that due to the specific natural and regional conditions, it was necessary to return to previous techniques and strategies as well. In this respect, the heritage of the Ecsed Marsh provides an excellent example of the reconciliation of community efforts and individual economic objectives. These collective and individual efforts give an insight into the dynamics of the local community and into the transformation of the traditional structures in *Nagyecséd*.⁷⁹

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⁷⁴ Dudás–Haraszthy 1999: 181.

⁷⁵ *Ecological studies on the Ecsed marsh and the remaining marshlands on the borders for setting the grounds of its rehabilitation and registering them as protected area*. See Lőrincz 2003: 53.

⁷⁶ Nagy 2001: 1–4; Dombi 2003: 4; N. A. 2005a; Balogh 2005; N. A. 2005b.

⁷⁷ Dombi 2003: 4.

⁷⁸ Dudás–Haraszthy 1999: 181.

⁷⁹ Cf. Szabó 2013: 5.

BALOGH, Géza

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