

Travel report in Europe.

In Finland, gentle therapy of lakes

The European Union, guarantor of peace on its soil, is gradually trying to translate the "well-being of its peoples", which it also promises in its treaties. In Finland, the happiest country in the world for the second year in a row, according to the UN, the "Freshabit" program takes care of the Lakes and all those around them.

Perched on her watchtower, her eyes locked in her telephoto lens, Tena holds two old acquaintances in the line of fire. Click click, the shutter has just immortalized the moment: it is about a couple of cranes returned to nest in Finland in the spring. They have just landed in the peat bogs of Lake Hattelmajarvi, an hour's drive north of Helsinki.

"I've known them for 10 years, one has orange eyes, and the other one has red eyes. They spent the winter in Portugal or Spain. They too are European," exclaims this 54-year-old amateur ornithologist, who, like many Finns, devotes himself to his hobby on leaving work.

A nest for Europe

Finland, enamelled with 188 000 lakes, is a true nursery for the birds of the continent. In the spring, it's time for big maneuvers. Becassine reappear after wintering in France or Spain. The Tundra geese emerge from Holland. Swans come from everywhere, especially alpine and Croatian lakes.

These species are generally facing the decline of their population, but not here. "We are creating a real paradise for nature conservation," says Sanni Minninen Johansen, director of the Vanajavesi Center, in charge of the lake system of the same name, which includes 300 lakes, including the Hattelmajarvi.

This is largely thanks to the Freshabit program, a huge national project for the preservation of fresh water and biodiversity, but whose goal is also to develop tourism and quality of life. The operation targets a dozen sites across the country, and also has the largest EU funding in Finland.

European funds provide 12 of the 20 million euros programmed for 2016-2022 to prune wetlands, build fish passes on dams, limit the impact of humans on nature through prevention. The goal is to approach the purity of the northern lakes, which can be drunk directly without any health risk. "There was a European program to clean up the Baltic Sea, but there was still nothing for freshwater inside the country," says program expert Jari Ilmomen.

In the Vanajavesi Lake basin, as in the rest of the country, the law has forced the industry - particularly wood - to set up closed circuits, to prevent discharges of polluted water into the natural environment. The challenge now is to convince farmers to change their practices. Intensive cultivation leads to concentrations of nitrogen and phosphorus in the water (this is the phenomenon of eutrophication), with the consequence of exploding the plant presence, which pumps an oxygen that is necessary for aquatic life. EU at the heart of Finnish identity Around Hattelmajarvi Lake, a floating crawler excavator is working under the supervision of archaeologist Juuso Koskinen. The program plans to dig water into peat bogs to encourage the installation of wildlife. "We can find old fishing equipment, or waste that tells us about the economic activity of the place," notes the expert.

The old link between the Finns and their lakes is obvious. It is found on the national flag, a cross shifted to the left on a white background. "The blue of our lakes (or the sky) and the pristine white snow of our winters," wrote the Finnish poet Zacharias Topelius in 1870. Same thing for the national anthem. The famous musician who composed it, Johan Sibelius, himself acknowledged in his memoirs that he was inspired by the fluidity of the water of Lake Vanajavesi. The melody evokes the view of the lake from the Aulanko watchtower.

To get there, you must walk a small hill overlooking the plain. The place is always busy. Aada and Lida, who have just finished high school, came to photograph in the setting sun. They learned about the Freshabit program during their learning module on European citizenship. "These lakes, at the heart of our identity as Finns, I find it very good that the EU has integrated this by preserving it. This shows that one can be Finnish and European without any opposition between the two," says Aada.

The lakes targeted by the Freshabit program are often close to residential areas. In the lacustrine system of Vanajavesi, Lake Ahtialanjärvi is attached to a school with its own observation tower. Rainer Mäkelä, president of the environmental association Lokkisaari, is used to accompanying classes of pupils. He explains to them for example the importance of this lake, in particular for the conservation of the Common Tern, protected under the EU Birds Directive (2009).

In 2001, more than three couples came to breed there. At present, there are more than 140 to benefit from artificial reefs funded by the EU. For the activist, the lesson to be learned is clear enough. "If you want to change things on a large scale, the EU is the only option. Young people are usually very interested in nature conservation. Too bad there is not enough Finnish content about what Europe does, almost everything is in English. "

At the source of well-being

There are few who oppose nature protection and protection of men in Finland, the first country in the world to have introduced the carbon tax. "The lake experience is beneficial to humans, it has been scientifically proven. This is probably very instinctive for the man, who sees many chances of survival: these places significantly reduce the level of stress, more than any other test group who was asked to read a magazine ", explains the Director of the Vanajavesi Center, Sanni Minninen Johansen.

The result is not anecdotal in Finland, a veritable laboratory of social innovation in Europe. The list of areas in which this Nordic country was pioneering, focusing on indicators of well-being, is long. Of course, one can cite the effectiveness of its educational system, champion of international studies, which is based on the personal growth of students. But also the drastic reduction of the prison population, thanks to the use of works of general interest.

The number of poorly housed people has been divided by three thanks to the "housing first" program, which many European countries have inspired, and which unconditionally provides long-term housing for the homeless. The latest example is the test of 2,000 unemployed people, between 2017 and 2019, of a universal income accumulated with a salary and social benefits. For lack of obvious effect on employment, the latter has shown a real effectiveness against anxiety.

Sanni Minninen Johansen believes in lake therapy. "I like to think that this contact with nature acts as a kind of prevention of health risks, which alleviates the use of social security," she says, in a context where Finland is trying to reduce the cost of its Welfare state. Finland also relies on its quality of life to develop its attractiveness. Nearly 200,000 tourists visited the Vanajavesi basin last year.

Its proximity to Helsinki makes us hope for half more in the years to come. The Finnish Tourist Board, which has just launched the "Rent a Finn" offer, has understood this well. He promises to live with "guides specializing in happiness", inviting them to connect with nature and sharing the Finnish art of relaxation.

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