



Hanse- und Universitätsstadt  
**ROSTOCK**

## DER OBERBÜRGERMEISTER

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Sachbearbeitende Stelle:

The UBC Executive Board  
on occasion of its 85th Meeting  
on 17 April 2020

Senator für Bau und Umwelt  
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Datum  
07.04.2020

Proposal from the City of Rostock

**Taking responsible action for climate and environment:  
Support of the founding of a City Association around Lake Atitlán in Guatemala  
and offering expertise for a sustainable cooperation to save the basin ecologically**

The City of Rostock holds a friendship with the City of Panajachel, which is one of the largest of 15 municipalities around Lake Atitlan. During the last specialist's visit from Rostock in February 2020, it became clear that the Lake and its population is in imminent danger to collapse if no environmental and sanitation measures are taken in the near future.

### **The Lago Atitlán**

is the largest sweet water reservoir in Central America, holds about 25 km<sup>3</sup> of water coming from rivers, springs and rain. It is located at 1.555 m over sea level, surrounded by mountains including three volcanoes (one of them active). It has a max. depth of 340 m and 240 m in average. In ancient times the lava of a volcano eruption cut the widest overflow of the Lake making the basin to hold more volume, increasing the water level and, from then on, the self-refreshment of the water is more difficult. Thus, according to the changing weather conditions like precipitations and temperature, the water level will slowly raise or fall.

### **The water is needed**

for the daily human use, and, for a healthy flora and fauna. Twelve municipal cities and several small villages depend on the good quality of the water. Furthermore, a high percentage of the urban water supply is taken from the Lake. It is very important to keep the water clean in order to sustain the livelihood of the local population that depends on tourism, fishery, irrigation for agriculture and supply of reliable drinking water.

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#### **Besucherzeiten**

nach Vereinbarung

### **The problem comes mainly from the waste water**

Some of the bigger settlements have their water treatment plants but they do not guarantee a responsible water purification. In other places, the wastewater is conducted directly into the Lake without any treatment. In consequence, the water supplied to the household is not potable. Since the water of the lake is so polluted, makes fishing and swimming a dangerous activity to human health. Furthermore, the constant pollution of the water produces cyanobacteria that increases the contamination of the lake.

### **What will happen if nothing is done?**

We don't have to look so far. The Lake Amatitlán, the fourth largest lake in Guatemala located only 55 km of aerial distance, has 1197 m over sea level, with a water volume of 0,3 km<sup>3</sup> and 33 m depth, is already dying due to irresponsible contamination and lack of governmental response. Its waters are green from a thick layer of algae, it has very limited biodiversity due to the lack of oxygen and the water produces a very strong smell. Even in google earth the problem becomes visible: the Amatitlán lake lost its biological balance, it's almost dead. The Global Nature Fund (GNF), on its 5th World Water Forum 2009 in Istanbul, declared the Lake Atitlán to be the "Threatened Lake of the Year 2009" because its assimilative capacity is already greatly reduced due to a long term excessive pollution.

### **A consequent and common approach by all coastal cities is needed!**

The problem is identified. All data are on the table. And it is clear that the problem of the sewage water treatment and the solid waste disposal could only be tackled together and has to be systematic for the whole basin. The cities have to unite in order to speak with one voice. Then they could act on behalf and in favour of about 300,000 people. They all live on their extraordinary and magical landscape which gives life, health, beauty, spirituality, identity – that must last for future generations.

### **The municipalities need to bundle their forces**

The Lake is surrounded by many municipalities, all belonging to the Departament de Sololá. The biggest of them is Panajachel (11,200 inhabitants). Others are: Santa Catarina Palopó, San Antonio Palopó, San Lucas Tolimán, Santa Cruz La Laguna. San Pablo La Laguna. San Marcos La Laguna, Santiago Atitlán, San Juan La Laguna, San Pedro La Laguna, Solola, Concepcion and San Andres Semetabaj. But, all-in-all, including the rural population as well, there are about 300,000 inhabitants living in that zone and depending on the Lake.

### **UBC can help**

because there is already a valuable experience. In 1999 UBC gave assistance to create LVRLACC, the Lake Victoria Region Local Authorities and Countries Cooperation which today is working over Uganda, Tanzania, Kenia, Rwanda and Burundi. The first common problem to tackle was to save the waters of Lake Victoria and to strengthen the cooperation between the political leaders. Today, LVRLACC is one of the most important political bodies working cross-border around Lake Victoria.

UBC could prove and offer its environmental expertise as well. That could be highly valuable because during the next time there is a technical assistance visit, it will have to be decided how to tackle the problem in a sustainable, economical and effective way.

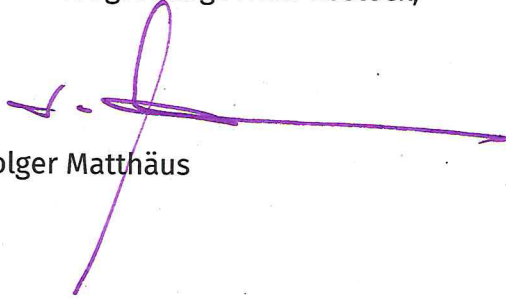
### **The Lake is not only a water reservoir.**

The Maya people who live in that zone consider it a holy place. It keeps secrets in its depths like a recently discovered sunken settlement which once was flooded after the formation of the volcanic barrier.

Dear UBC colleagues and friends,

in 1934 Aldous Huxley wrote that the view of Lake Atitlán and its basin *touches the limit of the permissibly picturesque*. Let's help together as UBC to preserve it as a resource for today's and future generations.

With best greetings from Rostock,

A handwritten signature in purple ink, consisting of a large loop at the top, a vertical line extending downwards, and a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Holger Matthäus