



Water management on the Drava and Mura in Croatia in line with EU environmental legislation

Background

- The lower Drava and Mura Rivers in the border area between Austria, Slovenia, Croatia and Hungary are one of the most valuable river ecosystems in Europe. The 380 km transboundary river corridor highly contributes to the conservation of Europe's biodiversity. It also offers various other environmental services such as flood protection, water purification, groundwater protection, drinking water supplies and opportunities for fisheries and recreation.
- The declaration of the river system as a transb. biosphere reserve, encompassing a protected area system along the entire corridor, including the planned Regional Park by the Ministry of Culture, was supported by UNESCO already in 1997. The resulting area would be more than 250,000 ha, the largest riverine reserve in Europe. This would form a crucial part of the "European Green Belt" prop. by the World Conservation Union (IUCN).
- Recently, the EU has granted entry talks with Croatia. Therefore, Croatia is committed to adopt EU environmental legislation during the pre-accession period, in particular the Water Framework Directive, the Habitats and Birds Directives, the EIA Directive. This would mean to protect and manage both rivers according to international standards and obligations.
- River regulation and gravel/sand extraction is causing considerable degradation of the transboundary river ecosystem. Its continuation is increasing problems in water management (flooding esp. for downstream stretches, river bed deepening, lowering of groundwater tables) and nature conservation (biodiversity loss).
- Further river regulation and gravel/sand extraction are at odds with to date knowledge and best practice, supported by the EU in other European countries such as on the upper Drava in Austria or Loire/Allier in France. Modern river management promotes natural flood protection and natural processes as a basis for sustainable water management and nature conservation.
- Further river regulation and gravel/sand extraction highlight the risk that Croatia in taking in failing to align with EU environmental policy objectives as it is not in line with current EU environmental legislation.

NGO Position

- Any further removal of sediments from the riverbed and banks and therefore from the river system e.g. as indicated in the activity plan of HV or other plans and as observed by the NGOs should be banned.
- If sediment is being removed from one place it should at least stay in the river system and be returned in another river section again and definitely not used for other purposes (commercial, building etc.).
- The free flowing of the Drava and Mura and bank erosion should be allowed where no infrastructure is endangered.
- If further river training structures have to be established to protect infrastructure (bridges, houses, dikes etc.) and if this cannot be achieved by other means, compensation measures should be implemented in other sections of the river in order to lead the management from "river bed maintenance" to "ecological river restoration". At least the same extension of river training structure should be removed on a place where no infrastructure is endangered.
- Furthermore, a clear cost-benefit analysis should be carried out to show if environmentally friendly, socio-economic beneficially and sustainable methods could be applied instead of technical maintenance (purchase of land, substitute of oil wells, removal of dikes etc.).

In order to guarantee sustainable management of both rivers in the long term NGOs recommend followings:

- A long-term strategy for ecological river management and a restoration program should be developed for the Drava and Mura rivers by following EU environmental standards and European examples of best practice in sustainable water management and nature protection. This should be done jointly together with Hungary, Slovenia and Austria in cooperation with international institutions and experts.
- As a first step, model restoration projects should be developed and implemented in order to promote the implementation of EU standards in the region.

¹ WWF, Euronatur, Drava League, Zelena Akcija, Drava Federation, DOPPS-Birdlife Slovenia, October 2005