THE „AMAZON OF EUROPE” Future Trans-Boundary UNESCO Biosphere Reserve “Mura-Drava-Danube”

The Danube, Drava and Mura Rivers, an area of more than 800,000 ha represent the unique natural and cultural heritage of five countries: Austria, Croatia, Hungary, Serbia and Slovenia. The rivers are rich in biological values and natural resources. In order to preserve this “European Lifeline”, WWF and his partner organisations pushes for a Trans-Boundary UNESCO Biosphere Reserve; this would bring benefit for both, nature and people in the region. Once established it will be Europe’s largest river protected area and world’s first protected area, shared and managed across five countries.

Natural and Cultural Values
Spanning Austria, Croatia, Hungary, Serbia and Slovenia, the lower courses of the Drava and Mura Rivers and related sections of the Danube are among Europe’s ecologically most important riverine areas. Once “protected” under the “Iron Curtain” during the Cold War, this trans-boundary river system now forms a 700 km long “green belt” connecting more than 800,000 ha of highly valuable natural and cultural landscapes. It is highly productive and contains an amazing biological diversity.

The area is a hot spot of best examples of natural habitats rare in Europe such as large floodplain forests, river islands, gravel and sand banks, side branches and oxbows. It is home to the highest density of breeding pairs of White-tailed Eagles in Europe and hosts endangered species such as Little Tern, Black Stork, Beaver, Otter and Sturgeons. It is also an important stepping stone for more than 250,000 migratory waterfowls every year. Moreover, the river ecosystem is the major source for good water quality, for natural flood protection, healthy forests, rich fish grounds as well as an important area for recreation.

A network of about 20 protected areas along the rivers underline their ecological values including the world famous Nature Park “Kopacki Rit” in the Danube-Drava confluence, the Regional Park “Drava-Mura” in Croatia, the Special Nature Reserve “Gornje Podunavlje” in Serbia and the Danube-Drava National Park in Hungary as well as Natura 2000 sites in Slovenia and Austria.
Ecological integrity in danger

However, the river ecosystem is highly threatened. Conflicting management practices such as channelling of the natural river courses, extraction of gravel and sand from the riverbed and hydropower dams are threatening the ecological integrity, biodiversity values and natural resources of the area and impacting on the protected areas network.

In order to better preserve the trans-boundary ecosystem over the long term, innovative conservation and management efforts are needed. An international NGO network – with members including WWF, EuroNatur, Drava League, Green Action, Croatian Society for the Protection of Birds and Nature, Green Osijek, ZEO Nobilis, ZEUS, Drava Federation, Bird Protection and Study Society of Vojvodina and DOPPS-Birdlife Slovenia - has taken up this challenge and is working towards the establishment of a Trans-Boundary UNESCO Reserve “Mura-Drava-Danube”.

A Trans-Boundary UNESCO Biosphere Reserve is recognised on international level by an UN institution. It sets an ideal framework that would combine together the cluster of different protected areas in order to reach effective protection and management of this shared river ecosystem, and forms a catalyst for sustainable development in the region.

Green light for the Trans-Boundary Biosphere Reserve

On 25 March 2011, in an act of great environmental leadership and transboundary cooperation, the Ministers responsible for environment and nature conservation of Austria, Croatia, Hungary, Serbia and Slovenia signed a joint declaration to establish a Trans-Boundary Biosphere Reserve along the Mura, Drava and Danube Rivers.

The signing took place in the frame of the Informal Ministerial Meeting within the Hungarian EU Presidency in the town of Gödöllő near Budapest. This initiative is supported by the EU Commissioner for the Environment, Mr. Janez Potocnik, and has been included in the Action Plan of the EU Danube Regional Strategy.

The Biosphere Reserve shall lead to an improved standard of management of the protected areas network, consisting of about 260,000 hectares of core and buffer zones and of another 540,000 hectares of transition zones. The central management goal of the reserve should be to halt further river regulation and to begin the restoration of degraded river stretches.


The WWF project “Protecting Europe’s Lifeline - the creation of a Trans-Boundary Biosphere Reserve along the Danube, Drava and Mura Rivers” is carried out with the support of the MAVA Foundation, Asamer Holding and The Coca Cola Company.

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