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## **Summary**

The European rivers Mura, Drava and Danube form a 700 km long “green belt” connecting more than 800,000 ha of highly valuable natural and cultural landscapes in five countries (Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, Hungary and Serbia). This area is a symbol of unity among the countries and is planned to become a protected Transboundary UNESCO Biosphere Reserve “Mura-Drava-Danube” (TBR MDD).

## **Background**

This stunning river landscape hosts a wide range of biological diversity and is a hot spot of rare natural habitats such as large floodplain forests, river islands, gravel and sand banks, side branches and oxbows. The area is also a habitat home to the highest density of breeding pairs of white-tailed eagles in Continental Europe and other endangered species (little tern, black stork, beaver, otter and the nearly extinct ship sturgeon). Every year, more than 250,000 migratory waterfowls use the rivers to rest and feed.

The river and floodplain areas are vital to the people who live there. Local fishermen rely upon the fish populations for their livelihoods. The extensive floodplains lower floods risks, secure favorable groundwater conditions and self-purification of water. However, the distinctive natural values of the Mura, Drava and Danube are at risk. Conflicting management practices such as ongoing and planned channeling of the natural river courses, extraction of gravel and sand from the riverbed and new hydropower dams are threatening the ecological integrity, bio-diversity values and natural resources of the area. While Austria, Slovenia and Hungary are ruled by EU environmental laws and international standards, river management in Croatia and Serbia following traditional sectoral approach. The idea of transforming natural rivers into uniform channels denuded of gravel and sand is an erroneous and antiquated practice. These practices (ostensibly for navigation or flood protection) are threatening the ecological values and natural resources of the protected areas network and the Transboundary Biosphere Reserve. River channeling causes devastating environmental impacts: it leads to deepening of riverbeds, dries out wetlands and floodplain forests, ruins natural river habitats and threatens endangered species.

## **Actions taken**

A project to regulate this unique watershed is currently (year 2013) in the final stage of decision. Milestones/activities achieved by the TBR partners started with concluding the 1993 agreement. Subsequently partners held the international nature conservation conference on the future of the Drava where nature conservation experts from the region agreed on the goal to preserve the Drava, Mura and adjacent Danube areas, that resulted in several other agreements and decisions following.

Since 1993, NGOs have been campaigning to protect the unique landscape of the three rivers in a trans boundary biosphere reserve (TBR), with a slogan “Amazon of Europe”. Stepwise, public administrations and NGOs cooperate to jointly achieve the TBR and this has yielded results. Over the last 15 years, all the five governments have set up 12 protected areas along rivers watershed, thus forming the TBR backbone. In 2009 Croatia and Hungary signed a Joint Declaration to establish the MDD TBR, followed by a 5-country Ministerial Declaration in 2011. On 11 July 2012, the UNESCO MAB Committee in Paris officially approved the Croatian-Hungarian part of the Biosphere Reserve “Mura-Drava-Danube”. This covers 630,000 ha some 80% of the country area. Serbia, Austria and Slovenia also plan to submit their nominations to UNESCO in 2013-2014.

## **Outcomes**

In recent years major milestones have already been achieved. These include the establishment of a coherent protected area network across the five countries, halt of major destructive hydropower dam and regulation projects, the joint agreement on the establishment of the reserve as well as the start of the declaration of the reserve.

A key of success of creating national and international awareness and support for transboundary protection was always the fight by WWF, EuroNatur and local NGOs against nature-destructive projects especially along the Croatian-Hungarian Drava. These included new hydropower dams and outdated water management projects such as river regulation and gravel/sand extraction. Thus, over the last 12 years major deterioration of the river landscape has been prevented and better protection achieved.

However, there is still a lot to do, as the river management has to change and huge impacting projects such as the regulation of the Mura confluence, canalization of different parts of the Drava and Danube inside the core zone of the TBR are still planned.

## **Lessons Learned**

Public information sharing by NGOs and the EU accession requirements motivated all 5 countries to set up protected areas. Commitment to conservation stopped river-deteriorating activities, thus, it is crucial to use communication tools consistently for awareness raising among stakeholders.

Factors of success are the establishment and perseverance of dialogue and mutual respect of interests, the adherence to facts and legal requirements, the involvement of local voices (mayors, business representatives etc.) and some patience for the right timing.

Cross-border cooperation is always a complex challenge – notably in this extreme case of five states – but easier through the active involvement of international stakeholders (governmental organizations

and NGOs).

Favorite aspects are the political and economic reforms since 1989 and the on-going EU accession, triggering certain openness and commitment for change and for more comprehensive views and evaluations than in the past. Lastly, the recent economic crisis favors.

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