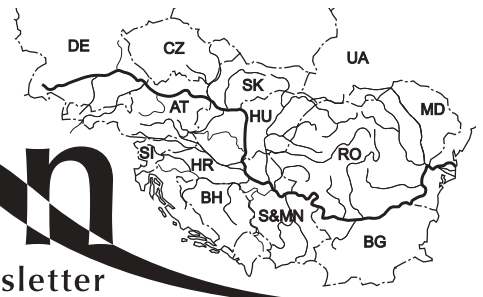




3rd issue
November 2003

Bulletin

The Danube Environmental Forum Newsletter



Dear reader,

The last issue of the DEF Newsletter was devoted to the matter of public participation. We brought you information on successful NGO projects along the Danube River in which public participation plays a crucial role. The third issue, which you have in your hands, is reporting on the current „hot issues“ facing the River Danube at this very moment.

There are a number of new developments to make known: plans for river regulation and dam construction in areas of the Danube River Basin harboring unique ecosystems. In some cases, environmental NGOs throughout the Danube region are actively participating in preventing and combating the negative effects of such activities.

DEF Secretariat is Moving

On December 1st, 2003, DEF Secretariat will move to its new office. It is situated in the small village Devín on the confluence of the Rivers Morava and Danube.

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What is DEF?

Danube Environmental Forum (DEF) was created in 1999 as a Danube River Basin-wide platform of non-governmental, non-profit, politically independent, environmental organisations, in order to establish a common approach for the environmental protection of the Danube river. Since 1999 the DEF has also had observer status with the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR).

Construction of navigation canal through the Bystroe Estuary

Plans for the construction of a Danube-Black Sea navigation canal are underway in Ukraine. The proposed project is causing much controversy because it will cut through the Bystroe Estuary of the Danube Delta, an internationally recognized nature reserve. The Danube Delta is the ecological heart of Europe, and, according to the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), „the most important wetland area in Europe“.* It is also the largest interconnected reed-bed in the world and home to 325 species of birds and 75 species of fish, as well as reptilia and insects, many of which are listed as Red Book species threatened with extinction. The estuary itself serves as spawning grounds for many ecologically and economically valuable marine species, as well as migratory grounds for various birdlife.

The Danube River Delta is, at present, in critical condition. Eighty percent of wetlands and floodplains in the Basin have been destroyed in the last century. So dire is the situation that the Delta has been designated a Wetland of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention in 1995, a Biosphere Reserve under UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme in 1998, as well as a Global 200 Eco region by WWF. The World Bank, in recognition of the urgency, is investing in pilot conservation projects.

Plant and animal species are not the only ones under threat. Local citizens will also be impacted, as livelihoods in the area are based mainly on fishery. The construction of the canal threatens to undermine this branch of trade, will tamper with traditional life in the region. It is hoped the canal will increase trade in the area and therefore serve as an economic boost to the local economy, but if the fishery is destroyed in the process, the whole purpose will be undermined, and social and economic conditions may

actually worsen. An expected decline of 100 tones in annual fish stocks is staggering.

To accommodate large ships, the depth of the canal will be maintained artificially through continuous extraction of sediment from the riverbed. Sediment extracted will be dumped into the Black Sea, resulting in the destruction of soil, fauna, and fish. The banks are to be covered in concrete, destroying a major migratory area for many species of birdlife. Ship fuel will pollute the waterway, thereby endangering the local water supply. The consequences are far-reaching.

Let us consider a parallel project: the Provra channel. In 1997, after a costly dredging operation, the channel filled with silt within three months, making the channel unsuitable for sea transport. A similar difficulty is expected in the Bystroe Estuary resulting in an environmental and economic nightmare.

Appeals, petitions, demonstrations and press conferences have been conducted, but to no avail. The Ukrainian government has been conducting the project for the past two years behind closed doors, and continues to do so. Such behavior is in direct violation of the Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context (Espoo Convention, EIA). Ukraine is legally obliged to ensure public participation and consult affected parties.

Recent news that the Ukrainian Ministry of Transport will issue a decree signed by the President to withdraw the 5600 hectare Estuary from the Danube Biosphere Reserve is highly worrisome for the local and international community alike. Such a decree is, however, necessary in order to legitimate the environmental feasibility of the project.

*(WWF, „Waterway Transport on Europe's Lifeline, the Danube: Impacts, threats and opportunities.“ Vienna, January 2002)

Scientists and non-governmental organizations alike welcome the prospect of economic rejuvenation in the area, and so suggest alternatives to the proposed waterway. A channel could be constructed outside the Biosphere Reserve area.

It is crucial that all plans for canal development in or near the Danube Delta cease until all requirements of the Espoo Convention, EIA have been met. The transboundary environmental impact of development must be assessed, with local and affected parties in constant consultation.

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Diffuse Source Pollution Control in the Federation of Bosnia & Herzegovina

The issue of diffuse source pollution control is presently being tackled under the LIFE-Third Countries Program, an initiative of the European Commission. The objective of the LIFE-Third Countries Program is to contribute to the establishment of capacities and administrative structures needed in the environmental sector and in the development of environmental policy and action programs in third-world countries bordering the Mediterranean and the Baltic Seas. The objective excludes Central and Eastern European accession candidate countries.

The overall objectives of the project are as follows. First, the project must work to harmonize the current legislation of the Federation of Bosnia & Herzegovina (FB&H) regarding diffuse source pollution (namely, nitrate and phosphate pollution) with that of the EU. Second, improvements in technical knowledge of and approaches to diffuse source pollution must be made in order to enable long-term reduction of nitrate and phosphate pollution in FB&H.

The Project is divided into two components: legal and technical. Within the framework of the technical component, identification and budgeting of diffuse pollution will be carried out at the selected pilot area of Lašva River Watershed. Fieldwork will be conducted over a period of two years. During such time, hydrological parameters, as well as other relevant parameters, and water quality will be monitored at 30 selected sub-catchments. Upon the completion of

fieldwork, a diffuse pollution model will be established for the correlation of input parameters and pollution loads. The model will serve as a tool for the scientific estimate of total pollution loads from diffuse sources in the Federation of Bosnia & Herzegovina. Aimed at improving diffuse pollution control, attention will be paid to optimal management strategies applied in controlling various sources of pollution. The experience garnered through project implementation will be made available to the professional community through a handbook on optimal management methods. In addition, the general public will have access to information on the subject via a web page (yet to be completed), as well as through video and written materials to be disseminated through mass media.

Project completion is slated for July, 2004.

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Addressing water pollution in Bulgaria

The task at hand for non-governmental organizations in Bulgaria is the issue of water pollution in the Danube River Basin (DRB). Various projects are to be undertaken by six NGOs in 2003-2004 under the Small Grants Program of the Danube Regional Project, implemented by the Regional Environmental Centre for Central and Eastern Europe. A brief outline of the NGOs and their activities follows.

- The Nature Conservation Society in Belogradchik will establish a reed bed system for water purification in the Danube River Basin and also implement activities for the improvement of the carrying capacity of Dubravka Dam.
- The International Center for Coordination and Environmental Information about Danube River – Belene will attempt to raise the awareness of locals living on the Bulgarian stretch of the Danube regarding human impact on the river system.
- Danube Environmental Forum member Federation Green Balkans will conduct pilot activities for the restoration of floodplains in order to contribute to nutrient reduction.
- The Black Sea Network of Environmental NGOs will address the problem of pollution caused by intensive agriculture in the region of Dobrudja.

The implementation of conservation initiatives regarding two tributaries of the Danube, Osum and Iantra, will be the focus of two non-governmental organizations.

- DEF member Ekoglasnost – Veliko Turnovo will seek out partners in order to address the issue of nutrient reduction in the Iantra River.
- Ecomission 21 – Lovech will attempt to raise public awareness about pollution in the Osam River.

What seems a host of unrelated projects, is, in fact, a joint effort in nutrient reduction. It is widely understood that a range of different focuses and approaches, from the restoration of wetlands to the establishment of sustainable agriculture and wastewater treatment plants, is essential in the overall task of nutrient reduction. Likewise, all non-governmentals involved recognize the value of cooperation with various stakeholders at the local level – municipal authorities, NGOs and farmers, in tackling such an ambitious project.

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Land Restoration and Flood Prevention Programme in Hungary

Named after Pál Vásárhelyi, the main leader of the programme, the Vásárhelyi Plan (VTT) was implemented in Hungary during the the second part of the 19th century in efforts to regulate the River Tisza. Prior to river regulations, the Tisza had flooded 38 000 km² (25 000 km² of which is situated in present-day Hungary). As the demand for suitable arable fields for grain production increased, paralleled by the increasing capability of local engineers, regulation of the Tisza was decided. The two pillars of the Tisza regulation shortcut the river bends, creating dykes along the river.

After 150 years of what seemed a solved problem, flooding returned to the area. Between 1998 and 2002, Hungary witnessed the four highest floods of its history, causing extensive damage to human property along the Tisza. Fortunately, no lives were claimed by the floods. Unusual weather conditions is only one of the causes of extreme flooding. The Hungarian Government thus decided in 2000 that a new plan ought to be devised for the improvement of current river regulations.

The first version of the plan was drafted by the Ministry of Water Management. Two types of actions were outlined. First, changes in the current floodplain to increase the water carriage capacity would have to be made. Second, the creation of emergency reservoirs to supplement the floodplain in the event of further extreme flooding was deemed a necessity. The first version of the plan was solely a flood prevention plan, exclusive to any other possible factors.

Nature conservationists called attention to the potential damages the implementation of the first draft of the VTT could incur. As the draft was based on the same principles of the original Vásárhelyi Plan, it was thought it would only worsen the already existing consequences of the Tisza regulation (deepening river bed, changed hydrology on the entire Great Plain, loss of natural values related to flooded areas). The recommendation posited in place of the draft was that the opportunity be taken to handle the main Tisza-related problems based on a principle of Integrated River Basin Management, with a special focus on nature-friendly methods. Essentially, the targeted problems were: hydrology, land use and socio-economic problems. Conservationists suggested that a well-designed, comprehensive rehabilitation plan could address these issues for the benefit of the entire region.

Lengthy discussions ensued between governmental and non-governmental organizations, involving local stakeholders, and national and international experts. Today, three years after the first VTT meeting, the first phase of design has been completed. After additional discussions whereby criticism and opposition were expressed regarding phase one of the design, land use, nature conservation and socio-economic factors were finally taken into consideration.

A cooperative contract between the Ministry of Water Management and certain civil nature conservation NGOs has since been signed, and work on the project has begun.

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Restoration of Wetlands in the Upper Danube Course through Serbia & Montenegro

Pioneers of the great hydroregulation projects undertaken two centuries ago, with the primary goal being to drain the southern part of the Panonnian plain,

surely could not have predicted the course of today's Danube. One of the most significant and influential projects was the construction of the embankment along the Danube course through Serbia and Montenegro in the mid 1960s, which severely impacted surrounding flora and fauna.

Special nature reserve Gornje Podunavlje remains one of the Danube's last intact wetlands, spanning 20 000 ha along its left bank from the state border with Hungary to Bogojevo village. The region has suffered great changes thanks to the embankment. More than half of the wetland territory lacks fresh water supply, having been severed from the river's main course. Such course diversion has parched typical marshy ecosystems and disrupted natural species succession.

In reaction to the dire ecological situation, a long-term project was kickstarted over a decade ago to restore Monostor marsh, a 10 000 ha area representing the northern part of Gornje Podunavlje Nature Reserve. The second phase of the project, a continuation of works on the so-called 'South branch' is presently underway. By digging through a system of channels and water gates, it will be possible to tap water directly from the Danube to quench 5000 ha of Monostor marsh. This is, of course, only one phase of an ambitious project, which is aimed ultimately at reconnecting the Danube to its alluvial plain.

While such a project requires the investment of comprehensive human and material resources, the consequences are never entirely foreseeable. Regardless of any uncertainty involved, carrying out this project has vital importance for all countries in the Danube River Basin. Participation of non-governmental organizations is critical in promoting and circulating information and ideas, ensuring feasible conditions; material and otherwise, and involving stakeholders in wetland restoration. NGOs are no doubt an integral part of the restoration and protection of the Danube River Basin. We are each a variable in this experiment in vivo, which ought to prove a worthy experience and trial run for similar projects in the future.

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European Commission Promotes Improvement of Danube's Navigability

On October 1st, 2003, the European Commission issued a proposal for the revision of the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) following the final report of High Level Group chaired by ex-EC Commissioner Karel Van Miert. The proposal includes 29 priority projects at an estimated total cost of 220 billion EUR. Among other priorities, the Commission's proposal includes Project No. 18: „Rhine/Meuse-Main-Danube Inland Waterway“ (identical to Project No. 2: „Eliminating Danube Bottlenecks“ of the Van Miert HLG report). The project should result in improved navigability of the Danube in certain sections. These sections represent partial sub-projects to be completed in different timeframes:

- Bottlenecks in Romania and Bulgaria (2011);
- Vilshofen – Straubing (2013);
- Palkovicovo – Mohacs (2014);
- Wien – Bratislava cross-border section (2015);
- Rhine/Meuse with the lock of Lanaye as a cross-border section (2019).

The proposal of the Commission also states that some of the projects, including project No.18, „should be declared to be of 'European interest' in order to focus on them the resources available from the various Community financial instruments for the networks“.

On November 11th, 2003, the Commission's proposal was confirmed by the final report of the European Growth Initiative, which was prepared and issued in close cooperation with the European Investment Bank. The report should be addressed at the December meeting of the European Council. It confirms the Commission's initial proposals aimed at speeding up investment in the 29 priority Trans-European transport networks and their subsections. The proposal focuses mainly on cross-border sections of the projects and refers to them as a 'Quick-start' program, which should begin immediately. The package of transport projects will cost 38 billion EUR between now and 2010 and also includes two cross-border sections of Project No. 18: the Rhine/Meuse with the lock of Lanaye, and the Wien – Bratislava cross-border section.

From an environmental perspective, the Wien-Bratislava section of the Danube waterway is of particular importance. The project should begin in 2006 at an estimated total cost of 180 million EUR. Existing proposals, however, do not specify any particular measures to be taken. The Van Miert HLG proposal refers to the adaptation of the Danube bottlenecks in order to reach a minimum draught of 2.5 m, 350 days/year. Prior to the latest proposal, two legal provisions, relating to Low Navigation and Regulation Level (LNRL) in this section of the Danube, were in place determining the minimum depth of the navigation channel:

- a) Recommendation of the Danube Commission from 1988: Minimum Total Depth of the Waterway: 25 dm for free-flowing conditions over gravel ground, 350 days per year (94% of the year).
- b) Economic Commission for Europe (ECE): European Agreement on Main Inland Waterways of International Importance (AGN), 1996: Minimum draught of 25 dm, 240 days per year (60% of the year).

The Van Miert HLG proposal is hence a new combination of measurements related to the LNRL, calling for an increase in the draught and total depth of this river section. Deepening the river channel may impact the morphological, hydrological and ecological conditions of the river and adjacent floodplains. This will have particular impact on the Austrian Danube Floodplains National Park located along the entire Wien-Bratislava stretch of the Danube. Adaptation of the Danube sections that are not part of the 'Quick-start' program (but are still part of the initial EC proposal) will very likely follow in order to ensure the overall operability of the Danube waterway.

Environmental organizations from Europe, including major players like Transport & Environment, WWF, Friends of the Earth, BirdLife International and the CEE Bankwatch Network, have expressed interest in being involved in the TEN-T revision process from its very beginning. Despite their interest, there were no opportunities offered by the Commission to voice their views during the TEN-T revision process. The above-mentioned organizations and their partners in several European countries are now deeply concerned about current plans of the



European Commission, given the lack of cross-sectoral consultation and public involvement at the national and EU level. Environmental NGOs therefore ask the Commission for a full environmental assessment and cost-benefit analysis for the entire TEN-T network as well as for all of the projects prior to their inclusion in the TEN-T revision proposal. The environmental assessment conducted should comply with the requirements of community environmental legislation and funding provided by the European Community. Additional consultation with various sectors as well as the general public are also very much needed. NGOs ask not only the European Commission, but also national governments to comply with legislative provisions.

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The River Drava and the Drava League

The River Drava starts its 776 kilometer course in Italy, winding through Austria and Slovenia, Croatia and Hungary, forming a natural border between the latter two countries. Transecting five European countries, it is the lifeline for the rich variety of flora and fauna situated in and near the river. Its floodplain is second in size in the whole Danube River Basin with 41,238 square kilometers of rich vegetation. Local communities have learned to adapt to the river's changes, regulating it in defence of arable land from floods.

From the confluence of the Mura, Drava's biggest tributary, the last 250 km of the river have remained largely untouched for historical and political reasons. This particular region is exceptionally valuable in terms of landscape variety, vast lowland forest stretches and high bio and cultural diversity. The upper region, however, has been subject to much industrial development. As the virtually untainted final stretch of the Drava is located between Croatia and Hungary, socio-economic dynamics within and between the two countries are critical in the future of the Drava. Of note is the development of hydroelectric and gravel extraction industries in the region.

The beginning of the 20th century saw the massive hydroelectric potential of the river being harnessed to produce elec-

tricity via 23 hydroelectric plants in Austria, twelve in Slovenia and three in Croatia. The hydroelectric industry is negatively impacting the region. Of particular note is the latest and largest of Croatia's plants.

Plans for the construction of four hydroelectric plants in a joint Croatian – Hungarian initiative were halted in 1989 upon Hungary's unilateral renunciation of the project as environmentally unsound. Based on a systematic inventory and monitoring of local species on the Hungarian bank of the Drava, the region was deemed especially valuable and worthy of protection. Duna-Drava Nature Park was hence founded in 1992.

The Croatian Electric Authority has nonetheless proceeded with plans for the hydroelectric plant Novo Virje, slated for construction on the river stretch between the villages of Ferdinandovec and Novo Virje. Despite unanimous rejection of its EIS by local communities along the Croatian stretch of the Drava, the project remains a possibility under the spatial planning Program, which was accepted by Croatian Parliament in 1999.

Another economic trend wreaking havoc on the region is the extraction of gravel and sand in the riverbed and banks of the Drava. Under a program of fast-track economic development, Croatia is working to improve infrastructure, particularly in the area of road and motorway construction. Gravel extraction has proven an enormously lucrative business for a handful of entrepreneurs. The negative consequences are, however, much farther reaching. Connected with excessive and often unnecessary river regulation, gravel extraction destroys the priceless riches of the living river. With groundwater levels dropping and valuable stretches of the lowland forests disappearing, it is feared such development will render the river a lifeless canal.

In fervent opposition to such unsustainable development, The Drava League, a Croatian association of conservationist organizations along the Drava, was founded in 2001. The league is determined to investigate and expose all negative impacts of industry on the river, its species and its people. The Drava League is proposing a future of sustainable development in the Drava region.

Experts of the Drava League, in partnership with WWF, Euronatur, Green action and other Croatian and foreign partners,

have suggested alternative methods of water management to Croatian water authorities. Such methods have already been implemented throughout the European Union. The league is all the while interpreting the urgency of the matter through ecological education as well as press releases targeting local authorities, ministries of environment, agriculture and forestry, the Croatian Parliament, and the public at large. In May 2003, the league submitted a proposal to the Croatian branch of the UN's Man and Biosphere Programme (MAB) to establish the Mura-Drava Biosphere Reserve. A draft of the proposal was developed by Euronatur and accepted by UNESCO in 1997.

In cooperation with national and international partners, the league is presently conducting an inventory of the area's endangered species. Additionally, the Drava League is investigating ecotourism as a viable alternative to more destructive industries. The Drava Ecotourism Zone project is one particular initiative, based on a concept of the Prime Ministers of Croatia and Hungary.

Slovenian hunter associations have also been quite active in fighting for the preservation of the Drava region in and around Slovenia. They are presently battling with local authorities to reserve part of the Drava River around Središče for a landscape park. In attempts to inform the public of regional potential and threats, hunter association Središče, lead by Mr. Boris Kočevar, together with other organizations like the Danish Hunters Association, have published a booklet about the region. Additionally, such associations are very active in the management of land that they purchase from locals.

The vision of the Drava League is one committed to the future. Slated to join the European Union in 2007, Croatia offers the makings of a worthy dowry: a protected River Drava, rich in biodiversity, a huge reservoir of freshwater, and a viable opportunity for ecotourism, given the river's transboundary location. With implementation of the EU Water Framework Directive on the horizon, what a tremendous waste it would be to squander such potential to reckless industry.

Raising awareness of such issues on the local, regional, national and international level has probably been the greatest contribution of the Drava League and

other conservationist organizations. It is hoped that such efforts will help to influence future decision-making throughout the Drava region.

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International Youth camp in Danube River Basin – Slovenia

Danube Environmental Forum (DEF) is dedicated to a number of activities and initiatives aimed at water protection in the Danube River Basin. Although a well-established information exchange exists among NGOs in Danube countries, DEF members have acknowledged a lacking in the exchange of skills and knowledge among NGO representatives. The deficiency has been identified by representatives as one crucial barrier in effective water protection at the local, national and international level.

Likewise, while NGOs have set good examples for effective practices in water protection at the national level, dissemination of such model practices throughout the network remains flawed. It is not always sufficient to deliver successful experiences from one country to another solely through mass media. Personal experience remains the best tool for passing on the skills and knowledge of one NGO to another. DEF therefore invests much effort in assembling people from Danube countries for the purpose of direct knowledge exchange.

Such was the basis of our decision to organize a youth camp for the various NGOs from Danube River Basin countries. The main organizer was DPPVN – Society for Bird Research and Nature Protection (NFP in Slovenia), with help from local NGO, PEC, and, of course, DEF. The first camp – „1st Danube River Basin Ecological Youth Camp ‘Mura 2003’“ – was held in Srednja Bistrica near the River Mura in northeastern Slovenia from August 1st to 10th, 2003.

Participants of the youth camp were arranged into six working groups: botanical, herpetological, odontological, ornithological, water quality, and ecological landscape characteristics. Each group appointed a leader – an expert who

DEF Membership

How to become a Member

Membership is open to all NGOs in Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Ukraine and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

Membership is possible via:

1) Any member of DEF may nominate a candidate for membership through a written notice sent to the Secretariat at

worked with younger participants in the field and laboratory.

Upon the conclusion of basic research, participants completed descriptions of water quality and living conditions for plant and animal species, as well as identified the main threats facing the Mura River floodplain. Based on the experiences shared by different countries, and under the supervision of experts/group leaders, students discussed and suggested possibilities for the improvement of water quality in the Mura River.

The final day of the camp was devoted to presenting our findings and successes to the public. Media were also present, with national television as one of our guests. The camp closed with the development of a „Request for River Mura“, which was translated in Slovene and distributed to media, local stakeholders and national ministries. A summary of outputs from the camp will follow, in both Slovene and English, and will be distributed to local stakeholders and all participating countries.

DEF would like to initiate a tradition of the Danube River Basin Youth Camp. The camp would be organized and held each summer in a different country of the Danube River Basin.

Financial support for the camp was provided by the Slovene Ministry of Education, Sports and Science, as well as by the Slovene Institute for Youth, and, last but not least, local communities.

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least 60 days before the forthcoming General Assembly. The General Assembly shall decide upon admission to the membership.

2) New members can also be accepted by the DEF Board via email conference. A NFP should nominate the potential member. Potential members must complete the appropriate registration forms that are available through the DEF Secretariat. Organisations considering membership should contact the National Focal Point in their respective countries.

Membership to the DEF is free.



Fieldwork during the camp

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