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Drava River: Destruction of a unique river ecosystem!

Croatian Water Management Authorities are currently carrying out the largest river engineering project in the whole Drava river basin. The Drava's natural river course in the Croatian-Slovenian border area is being turned into an artificial channel, with disastrous effects for this European important river ecosystem and its endangered habitats and species.



Drava and Mura - European natural heritage

Whilst most of Europe's larger rivers were dammed and regulated in the last century, the lower stretches of the Drava and Mura still form an ecologically important river corridor, 380 km long, through Austria, Slovenia, Croatia and Hungary.

The transboundary river system covers over 60,000 ha of floodplain areas and contains an amazing biological diversity: one of Europe's 'conservation hotspots'. It also offers multiple benefits including flood protection, water purification, protection of groundwater and drinking water supplies and socio-economic opportunities such as fisheries and ecotourism.

The planned hydropower dam at Novo Virje would have disastrous ecological affects for the Drava corridor; but ongoing gravel extraction and river canalization schemes in Croatia are diminishing this valuable ecosystem day by day.

Conservation importance

In Slovenia the Drava floodplain is an Important Bird Area (IBA) and a proposed Ramsar site. In Croatia the protection of the Drava is a high priority in the National Biodiversity Strategy of 1999. The Drava would qualify as a Natura 2000 site when the countries join the EU: May 2004 in the case of Slovenia. The entire area is part of the proposed Transboundary Danube-Drava-Mura Biosphere Reserve, accepted by UNESCO in 1998.

Threatened river jewel in the border area

The 20 km natural river stretch of the Drava between Varaždin and Ormož in the Croatian-Slovenian border area is characterised by pristine floodplain forests, river islands, gravel banks, and a network of side branches and oxbows. The river ecosystem of about 3500 ha is home to over 100 species protected under European Union law, such as white-tailed eagles and black storks, beavers, otters and turtles. This stretch is currently being destroyed by the largest river engineering scheme in the entire Drava Basin.

River engineering project

Massive extraction of gravel and river canalization by Croatian Water Management Authorities began here in summer 2002: over 7 Million m³ of gravel is planned to be excavated from the natural riverbed and banks of the Drava. Canalization work is transforming the natural river course into a series of pools separated by transverse stone barriers. The rationale is flood protection but the gravel is being used for a new highway in Croatia.

New borderline: Croatia and Slovenia

The project study published by the Croatian Water Management Authorities in 2001 shows that the new course of the Drava will encroach upon Slovenian territory. This is corroborated by a map from the Slovenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which shows that the new Drava course would become - after an exchange of territories - the new frontier between the two states. This would mean the displacement of the nearly 800 year old border between Slovenia and Croatia.

Major ecological and socio-economic consequences

- deterioration of 3500 ha important floodplain area including large softwood forests
- threats to habitats and species of European importance
- drying out of wetland, forest and agricultural areas
- reduction of fish breeding grounds
- increase of floods downstream
- loss of natural areas for recreation and ecotourism



Sustainable alternatives

There is considerable experience and examples of sustainable gravel extraction in other European countries, in many of which mining directly from riverbeds and recent floodplain areas is banned. This ensures that local communities and the river ecosystems do not suffer the environmental and socio-economic costs. Furthermore, in much of

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Europe, the system of canalising rivers for flood protection is being abandoned in favour of the use of natural floodplain ecosystems for the storage of floods.

For further information please contact: Irma Popovic
(irma@zelena-akcija.hr)