



POSITION PAPER: DRAVA GRAVEL EXTRACTION

What is the Issue?

WWF, in support of its local partner the Drava League, has requested the Croatian Waters Company and its governing body the State Water Authority, to halt immediately the river regulation works, and the combined large scale extraction of river gravels directly from the riverbed, being carried out on the Stara Drava ('Old Drava') upstream of the city of Varazdin. This 20km stretch, which extends to the border with Slovenia, has some 30 river-branches and channels, and on its recent floodplain supports many wetlands and 20 oxbow lakes; it is rich in biodiversity and its habitats are home to over 50 Red List species.

Croatian Waters plans to turn this whole stretch of free-flowing, braided river into a series of pools separated by transverse stone barriers across the river channel. This is devastating ever larger areas of the beautiful landscapes and rich natural habitats of the Drava, as has already occurred on the 10km length of the Stara Drava downstream of Varazdin, between the retention-lakes of HEP Varazdin and HEP Dubrava, where the same combination of river regulation and gravel-extraction has been applied.

The new gravel works began in the summer of 2002, in contradiction to the negative conclusion of the Environmental Impact Study on the project, and thus in direct violation of Croatia's environmental law. It also contravenes several Croatian national laws and the Physical Plans of the counties of Varazdin and Medimurje, whose territories are being affected. From the beginning, the Drava League, a coalition of Croatian NGOs, has appealed to the Croatian Waters Company to obey the legal constraints and stop the project, but the response has been far from helpful. The authorities claim that the works are essential for flood control, but this has been refuted by the Experts' Committee of the Drava League, a group of scientists from Croatia and other European countries. However, Croatian Waters continues to allow the workings and its pace has even accelerated. Downstream in Virovitica County, gravel is being extracted from the bed and banks of the river in smaller workings, even from areas enjoying a degree of nature protection. Valuable wetlands and habitats are being lost and degraded. In this county the official rationale is not flood-control but improvements for shipping - ironically the only shipping here is used for the transportation of the gravel.

Our investigations in the area show that the extraction of the high-quality Drava gravels is very lucrative, as this material is much in demand for the infrastructural development of the country. The market price of a cubic meter of gravel is 50 kunas (about 4 Euro), and 100 kunas if it is graded by size. Despite the profitability of the enterprise, the local communities receive very little: the companies pay the local authorities 1 kuna (13 cents) per cubic metre of gravel, yet it is the local communities that will bear the socio-economic costs of the environmental destruction inflicted by the gravel extraction.

Why Care About the Drava Environment?

The sections of the Drava being mined possess globally-valued environmental richness and a range of beautiful natural habitats now sadly so rare in Western Europe. This river is a unique corridor of nature through Central Europe - a remarkably well-preserved 'lifeline' for endangered species: key species include rare white-tailed eagles and black storks, beavers, otters and turtles.

The long-term survival of the river's natural heritage is crucial. Sustainable economic development can achieve this, for example through promoting a range of ecotourism activities, the sale of local products and recognising the value of wetlands in purifying water and acting as storage for floodwaters. A healthy environment, and a progressive attitude towards its sustainable use, also attracts funding from international donors.

What Are the Environmental Impacts of River Regulation/Gravel Extraction?

Unnecessary river regulation work includes bank reinforcement leading to the loss of habitats dependent on dynamic river activity; it also includes the closing off of old river-branches, which are valuable breeding-grounds for fish. Gravel extraction from the river and its banks is very destructive, causing direct loss of gravel banks and gravel islands, which are themselves valuable and dynamic habitats. There are also profound indirect effects: the lowering of the river and the groundwater level associated with it, which leads to the drying-out of valuable wetlands, with subsequent significant losses of habitats and bird and fish populations.

“Every day the river is being severely damaged,” says WWF International Drava Co-ordinator David Reeder. “This outstanding natural area could soon be lost if the Croatian authorities do not take a more responsible attitude to managing their natural resources.”

How Are Local People Affected?

The situation is of grave concern to local citizens and communities near the extraction sites. Already the stone barriers across the river have resulted in the deaths of many fish which failed to cross them. The benefits from the activities are not being equally shared: the profits are taken by companies from outside the area, while the long-term costs are being borne by local communities. For example the destruction of roads near the extraction sites costs far more than the fees paid by the companies for the extraction rights.

Is This an International Problem?

Besides contravening county and national legislation, the works violate international conventions to which Croatia is a signatory, principally:

- The Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Habitats, Bern 1979,
- The Convention on Cooperation for the Protection and Sustainable Use of the Danube River (Sofia, 1994)
- The Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context, Espoo 1991
- The Convention on Biological Diversity (Rio de Janeiro, 1992)
- The Ramsar Convention
- The Bonn Convention
- The Helsinki Convention

Of particular concern is the fact that these regulation/extraction workings are planned to encroach upon Slovenian territory. Preparatory works - clearing of vegetation and marking of the new regulated Drava River being also the planned new border between Croatia and Slovenia (new “Schengen border”) - have already been carried out on Slovenian territory. Such transboundary impacts require an EIS under the Espoo convention. Particular as the Slovenian border Drava is a proposed Natura 2000 site according to the FFH and Birds Directives these regulation/extraction workings violate EU legislation. However the Slovenian authorities are officially unaware of this territorial encroachment though they were informed by DOPPS-BirdLife Slovenia.

Also, Croatia will have to adopt the principles of the EU Water Framework Directive (WFD) in line with its recent application for EU membership; however the regulation/extraction

contravenes many aspects of the WFD. For example, these management works do not reflect environmental concerns; do not act to prevent further deterioration of the riverine environment; do not embody the principles of Integrated River Basin Management; and do not involve public participation in any meaningful way. In the long run, the present destruction will result in considerable costs for Croatia for the restoration of the river to a “good ecological status”, which is a strict requirement under the EU Water Framework Directive.

We all want Croatia to become part of the European and global community, and to take pride in its natural heritage, unique and outstanding in the entire Europe; but to enable this to happen, Croatia needs to take action now to honour its international commitments and preserve its globally valuable natural areas.

Is There a Solution?

There are more ecologically acceptable, alternative, methods of extracting gravel rather than taking it directly from the bed and banks of the river. Such solutions can ensure the supply of the essential raw material without destroying natural habitats and upsetting the balance of underground water which keeps the forests and wetlands alive. The best alternative is to dig away from the river, outside the recent floodplain area, where there are substantial gravel deposits, but with no destruction of valuable river and floodplain habitats. In that case developers should aim to leave behind a mosaic of woods, waters, meadows and wetlands - a rich diversity of habitats. A full environmental assessment and landscaping plan should precede any such works, taking account of the knowledge of independent biological experts and the wishes of local citizens.

Using such approaches, compliance with national laws and international conventions can be ensured; also, such alternatives are both economically and environmentally beneficial.

So Why Is There Still a Problem?

Unfortunately, WWF and its partners sees no sign that the Croatian Waters Company is willing to halt its activities, to stop breaking the laws and conventions, to consider alternatives or to work more co-operatively with local and international conservation organizations, despite repeated requests. If this trend continues, WWF will have no choice but to take further actions.

Accordingly WWF, Euronatur, the Drava League, Green Action and DOPPS-Birdlife Slovenia now ask support from local and international organisations to:

- Pressure the Croatian government to stop the destructive gravel extraction works of the Croatian Waters Company, consider alternative solutions and honour its commitments to local, national and international laws and conventions;
- Raise local and international awareness of the issue, the value of the natural and cultural resources associated with the river, and citizens' rights; and
- Increase co-operation with partner organizations in the countries of the Drava Basin.