

A grassroots programme for change in the Drava River Basin

An initiative from a local project proves that great ideas can be contagious and that change can come from the bottom up.



The first initiative of the LIFE project was to stop the degradation of the river bed. As a means of stopping this deepening, five to ten kilometres of the river in Carinthia have been widened. This has resulted in an additional success for biodiversity, as the widening of the river has created new habitats. *Credit: LIFE*

When the ‘Life Vein Upper Drau River’ project began, part of the project proposal included cross-border strategies to solve water management and ecological problems. Keeping true to this goal, the local project – one of the European Commission’s LIFE projects – is now at the forefront of an international initiative recently endorsed by ICPDR Heads of Delegation from all Drava River Basin countries. With the Drava River Vision Declaration, the LIFE project is proving that local solutions can have big international effects.

Begun in 2006 and running until 2011, the project aims to continue the measures taken under a previous LIFE project to revitalise part of the 60 kilometres of the Drava River in Carinthia, Austria, and establish it as a ‘life vein’ for the Upper Drava Valley region. The project is tasked with stabilising the river bed and the groundwater level stabilising the river bed and the

groundwater level, and improving the flood protection and enhancement of the ecological condition of the river.

“When we started the second project, we wanted to share our experience in ecological improvement and restoration work from the first LIFE project in Carinthia,” says Norbert Sereinig, Manager of the project with the Government of Carinthia, Department of Water Management, Klagenfurt, Austria. “We have been working on the Drava since 1999, and we have learned a lot. We have learned a lot about communication, working with the communities and the people living there, and we saw these positive effects in Carinthia and we thought these can spread to the whole basin.”

A vision for the Drava River. As part of the project, the Drava River Vision Symposium was held in Mari-

Restoration work can benefit many groups at the same time. Widening the Drava in Carinthia created side channels and gravel bars that could be used for recreation, and brought the people in the region back to the area for swimming and relaxation.
Credit: LIFE

bor, Slovenia 23-24 September 2008. The symposium brought together just over 100 representatives from nature protection, water management, hydropower and land use planning professions from all Drava River countries. Participants discussed how to sustainably manage the Drava – one of the most important regional sources for hydropower as well as an area with exceptional biodiversity.



THE DRAVA RIVER IN BRIEF

The Drava River is the fourth largest and fourth longest Danube tributary, and connects the Alps with the Danube and the Black Sea. Rising in Italy, the Drava drains the southern side of the Alps to the Danube and the Black Sea. It is 749 kilometres long and flows through Austria, Slovenia and Croatia – where it forms the border between Croatia and Hungary, before heading back into Croatia again to meet the Danube near Osijek.

The symposium was organised by the Institute for Water of the Republic of Slovenia and the Government of Carinthia, Department of Water Management, with assistance of the Environmental Agency of the Republic of Slovenia, Section Drava River Sub-Basin. The symposium was supported by the Ministry of the Environment and Spatial Planning of the Republic of Slovenia and the Austrian Ministry for Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management.

At the end of the symposium, participants reviewed ten challenges that became points in the 'Drava River

Vision Declaration'. The declaration provides a framework for transboundary cooperation of professional and administrative institutions to solve problems about future development and sustainable Drava River Basin management. The declaration was signed by Richard Stadler, Head of the Austrian delegation to the ICPDR, Željko Ostojić, Head of the Croatian delegation to the ICPDR, Gyula Holló, Head of the Hungarian delegation to the ICPDR, Mitja Bricelj, Head of the Slovene delegation to the ICPDR and Rudolf Pollinger, representative of the Republic of Italy.

Finding balance in the basin. Driving the symposium was the need to find a way to balance all the requirements of the European Union's water-related legislation, particularly the Habitat Directive, Birds Directive, Water Framework Directive, Flood Directive and the Renewable Energy Sources Directive. "This is the challenge, to find a harmonised implementation of these directives, because some of their points seem to be opposed, and some topics within these directives overlap and can benefit from synergies," says Sereinig.

RICH IN NATURAL BEAUTIES

Despite the challenges to the area, the Drava River Basin is rich in natural resources of water and raw materials, and offers huge potential for sustainable development. Along the Drava River there are important and well-preserved ecological core zones, with a huge diversity of animal and plant species. Many of these areas have been placed under protection by the governments concerned, through protection regimes such as National Parks and Nature Parks, and they form part of the Natura 2000 European protected areas network.

Changes to the river. Many of the river's problems today stem from conflicting needs in the past. Like most lowland rivers in Europe, the lower Drava has been considerably regulated, especially downstream of Barcs, with embankments and channels to direct its flow. While these structures have reduced natural hazards in some places, they have generally prevented fish migration in the area.

Along the upper reaches, the Drava River is heavily utilised for hydropower. On the Austrian stretch of the river there are eleven hydropower stations, with a further eight in Slovenia and three in Croatia.

Transboundary cooperation among the countries is an important part of ensuring sustainability in the field of river basin management. "On the one hand, we want to protect the riverine environment, on the other hand

we want to utilise hydropower and protect cities from floods. That means that we have got to come together, sit together and work together to find a positive vision for the Drava River”, says Aleš Bizjak, Symposium Project Committee Coordinator, Institute for Water of the Republic of Slovenia. “Otherwise, all of the separate sectors will pull the train in their own direction and at the end of the day the victim will be the water, of course.”



Natural habitats along the middle and lower reaches of the Drava River host unique flora and fauna – many species found nowhere else. Credit: LIFE



Taking practical steps locally and internationally. The first steps following the declaration will be to create a network for information and public relations among the Danube countries and to identify retention areas along the river corridor. “Re-establishing or establishing these retention areas, besides meeting the demands of the water related EU directives, we could get possibilities for taking adaptation measures for the climate change problem”, says Bizjak. “So with one hit we get more rabbits – the Natura 2000, the Water

Framework Directive, the Flood Directive, and the climate and energy package with the proposed Renewable Energy Sources Directive”.

What started at the local level is ready to move to the broader international level. The declaration is to be presented at the Ordinary Meeting of the ICPDR in December. “Having the initiative taken up at the ministry level is important to finding the right partners in the countries – the players who can support our ideas,” says Sereinig.

Perhaps the most important step will be to continue the momentum of involvement and participation – the qualities that have driven the declaration from the beginning. “I believe this is the unique story in Europe,” says Bizjak, “a story about how a group of professionals who are also enthusiasts in their work come together under the umbrella of the LIFE project to promote the idea of the vision of one river.”

THE DRAVA RIVER VISION DECLARATION

The Drava River Vision Declaration identified ten objectives for the future:

1. To promote the Drava River as a model for integrated implementation of EU policies on water and nature protection
2. To enhance flood protection through the improvement of flood warning systems and through increased information exchange
3. To enhance flood protection through protection and restoration of water retention areas along the Drava River
4. To continue and further develop restoration of the Drava River and its floodplains
5. To maintain and further develop the Drava River as an ‘ecological backbone’
6. To re-establish the ecological connectivity of the Drava River for migratory fish
7. To establish the Drava River as a cross-border recreation area
8. To use opportunities for the Drava River to be a connecting lifeline for different nations
9. To undertake integrated river basin management rather than fragmented sectoral measures
10. To undertake further development of the Drava River area in partnership with its resident human populations.

Kirstie Shepherd is a freelance journalist living in Vienna and has called the Danube River Basin home since 2000.

The Drava River Vision Declaration identifies ten points for the river – the fourth largest and fourth longest tributary to the Danube River. Fold out to see the Drava River Basin map.

ICPDR MEETINGS

For final dates, please consult the ICPDR calendar, available at www.icpdr.org.

22-23/1/2009**VIENNA, AUSTRIA****TASK GROUP ON HYDROMORPHOLOGY****29-30/1/2009****BUDAPEST, HUNGARY****JOINT STATEMENT FOLLOW UP MEETING****9-10/2/2009****BRATISLAVA, SLOVAKIA****RIVER BASIN MANAGEMENT EXPERT GROUP****17-19/2/2009****SLOVENIA****PRESSURES & MEASURES EXPERT GROUP****10-13/3/2009****BELGRADE, SERBIA****TASK GROUP ON NUTRIENTS****12-13/3/2009****ZAGREB, CROATIA****MONITORING & ASSESSMENT EXPERT GROUP****19-20/3/2009****ZAGREB, CROATIA****TASK GROUP ON GROUNDWATER****25-26/3/2009****ZAGREB, CROATIA****FLOOD PROTECTION EXPERT GROUP****6-7/4/2009****BUDAPEST, HUNGARY****RIVER BASIN MANAGEMENT EXPERT GROUP****DW 01/09****UPCOMING ISSUE****Cooperation spreads for Business Friends of the Danube****PLATINA project supports inland navigation****Large river basins working together: the Danube and the Mississippi**

DRAVA RIVER BASIN

Nature protection areas, hydropower plants and floodplain

