



Croatian-Hungarian Declaration 17, September 2009

Mura-Drava-Danube Trans-Boundary Biosphere Reserve

Ecoregion	Danube-Carpathians
Priority Place	Greater Black Sea Basin
Area	Lower sections of the Drava and Mura Rivers incl. related Danube areas
Countries	Austria, Croatia, Hungary, Serbia, Slovenia

Furthermore it will foster regional cooperation, international understanding and peace keeping – 20 years after the fall of the “Iron Curtain” – by implementing a common positive vision across five countries, including current and future EU members.

SUMMARY

On 17 September 2009, in an act of great environmental leadership and trans-boundary cooperation, the Governments of Croatia and Hungary signed a joint declaration to establish a Trans-Boundary Biosphere Reserve along the Mura, Drava and Danube Rivers in 2010, which would be Europe’s largest one.

This represents the essential core of a much larger riverine protected area linking Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, Hungary and Serbia.

Once established the trans-boundary protected area will be worlds’ first Biosphere Reserve, which is commonly shared and managed across five countries.

The agreed Trans-Boundary Biosphere Reserve between Croatia and Hungary will protect a 500 km section of the Mura, Drava and Danube river system in both countries, connecting over 630,000 ha including highly valuable natural and cultural landscape.

The Biosphere Reserve will lead to an improved standard of management in a number of existing protected areas of about 240,000 ha (core and buffer zones) and will establish and support sustainable management of the natural resources in the area of another 390,000 ha (transition zones).

The conservation benefits will include cooperative action on common threats and to protect endangered habitats and species and hundred thousands of migratory waterfowls. It will encourage other countries along the river system - Austria, Serbia and Slovenia - to be part of the trans-boundary protection process.

The governmental agreement between Croatia and Hungary is based on over a decade of work by park authorities, nature conservation institutions and governments with strong promotion of the non-governmental sector including WWF, Euronatur, Drava League, Green Action, Green Osijek, Croatian Society for Bird and Nature Protection, ZEUS, ZEO Nobilis, DOPPS-Birdlife Slovenia and Drava Federation.

Given the global significance of this agreement, WWF has highlighted the leading role of the Governments of Croatia and Hungary with a “Leaders for a Living Planet” award.



Oxbow lakes in the Danube floodplains (Credit: M. Romulic).

BACKGROUND

The trans-boundary river system of the Mura, Drava and Danube Rivers - spanning Austria, Croatia, Hungary, Serbia and Slovenia - is among Europe’s most important and largest.

The area is a hot spot of rare natural habitats in Europe such as large floodplain forests, river islands, gravel and sand banks and oxbows. It is home to the highest density of breeding pairs of the White-tailed Eagles (*Haliaeetus albicilla*) in Europe and hosts endangered species such as Little Tern (*Sterna albifrons*), Black Stork (*Ciconia nigra*), Otter (*Lutra lutra*) and Sturgeons (*Acipenser sp.*) as well as being an important stepping stone for more than 250,000 migratory waterfowls every year.

Moreover, the river ecosystem is vital for the socio-economic well being of the trans-boundary region. It is a major source for good drinking water, for natural flood protection, sustainable forestry and fisheries as well as having an important role in promoting eco-tourism, awareness raising and environmental education in the region.



White-tailed eagle in the Hungarian National Park (Credit: M. Romulic).

EXISTING PROTECTED AREAS

In the last 15 years all five countries involved have taken efforts to protect their portion of the river system in protected areas that include a National Park, Nature and Regional Parks and Natura 2000 sites.

In February 2008 the Croatian Ministry of Culture announced preliminary listing for the entire Danube, Drava and Mura riverine areas with a size of about 145,000 ha under the category of a Regional Park. This step completes a representative protected area system that now includes:

Croatia (ca. 169,000 ha)

- Regional Park "Drava-Mura" (preliminary legal declaration, 145,301 ha)
- Nature Park and Special Zoological Reserve "Kopački Rit" (23,230 ha)

Hungary (ca. 71,000 ha)

- Danube-Drava National Park (49,479 ha)
- Mura Landscape Protected Area (1904 ha)
- Other Natura 2000 sites in relation to the riverine area

All areas are or are planned to be protected as part of the EU wide Natura 2000 network.

PLANNED TRANS-BOUNDARY BIOSPHERE RESERVE

All conservation areas are or are planned to be managed by local management authorities. However, conservation of the natural values and resources of this international area cannot be tackled without effective collaboration across borders.

Therefore, the establishment of a common protection and management regime under a Trans-Boundary Biosphere Reserve is one of WWF's major conservation objectives within the Danube-Carpathian region.

Once established the Biosphere Reserve would be Europe's largest single river protected area, spanning current and future EU members and the world's first Biosphere Reserve, which is commonly shared and managed across five countries.

On 17 September 2009 in a major first act the Ministers of Croatia and Hungary H.E. Božo Biškupić (Minister of Culture) and H.E. Imre Szabó (Minister for Environment and Water) in the presence of the Prime Ministers of Croatia and Hungary, H.E. Jadranka Kosor and H.E. Gordon Bajnai have agreed to establish the Biosphere Reserve in 2010. This would greatly lift initial efforts by the Hungarian Danube-Drava National Park and Croatian Nature Park "Kopački Rit" authorities of the past years, which have already led to a more coordinated approach in the conservation of the area including more harmonised management planning.

Given the global significance of this agreement, WWF has highlighted the leading role of both Governments with a "Leaders for a Living Planet" award, handed over by Lifeng Li, Director of the Global Freshwater Programme of WWF International during the signing ceremony.

The joint reserve will consist of three zones as defined by the Biosphere Reserve concept. The core & buffer zones (legally protected areas) include an area of about 240,000 ha, the transition zone (area of sustainable resource management) and area of about 390,000 ha, totalling about 630,000 ha.

The joint governmental declaration is a major step towards the establishment of the Mura-Drava-Danube Trans-Boundary Biosphere Reserve between both countries. It is of huge significance for conservation in the region and an example of transfrontier cooperation to jointly manage precious freshwater resources. Moreover it is an important signal to the other countries Austria, Serbia and Slovenia to join the trans-boundary protection process.

The joining together of the existing protected areas in both countries across international boundaries that once were guarded by the Iron Curtain is a powerful symbol as Croatia moves to join the European Union.

CONSERVATION BENEFITS

A Mura-Drava-Danube Trans-Boundary Biosphere Reserve will provide a strong international framework for developing common protection and management of the area's unique natural values and forming a catalyst for sustainable development in the region. The reserve will consist of a common zonation plan (one core, - buffer, - and transition zone) as well as a joint structure devoted to its co-ordination. It will facilitate the sharing of information, skills and staff between both countries and the development of collaborative protection, management, research and sustainable development projects. The degradation of the natural values of the area due to river regulation, gravel and sand extraction and existing hydropower dams needs to be tackled jointly, including the restoration of the vital conditions of the river ecosystem.

The protection and management of the area within a Biosphere Reserve will be beneficial for achieving compliance with the requirements of the EU Water Framework Directives, Flood Directives and Habitats and Birds Directives. It will likely foster and attract major funding of international donors such as the EU.



Nature: Intact river landscape of the Mura in Croatia (Credit: A. Mohl/WWF).



Culture: Traditional livelihood in Croatia (Credit: M. Romulic).

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contacts:

Arno Mohl, WWF Austria: +43 676 83488 300,

arno.mohl@wwf.at

Gábor Magyar, WWF Hungary: +36 30 3513368,

gabor.magyar@wwf.hu

Andreas Beckmann, WWF Danube-Carpathian Programme

Office: +43 676 842728216: abeckmann@wwfcdp.org

Websites & Others:

WWF Austria: www.wwf.at

WWF Hungary: www.wwf.hu

WWF Danube-Carpathian Programme Office: www.panda.org

www.sterna-albifrons.net

WWF's "Leaders for a Living Planet" certificate is an international honour to recognise individuals in key positions who have played a significant role in conserving biodiversity and promoting sustainable development, and whose example is an inspiration to others.

Contacts:

WWF International:

Rob Soutter, +41 22 364 9290, rsoutter@wwfint.org