The “Amazon” of Europe

The European “Lifeline Danube-Drava-Mura” shall become “Europe’s Largest River Reserve”!

The Danube, Drava and Mura Rivers, an area of more than 800,000 ha represent the unique natural and cultural heritage of five countries: Austria, Croatia, Hungary, Serbia and Slovenia. The rivers are rich in biological values and natural resources. In order to preserve this “European Lifeline”, WWF and his partners pushes for a Trans-Boundary UNESCO Biosphere Reserve to be announced in 2010; this would bring benefit for both, nature and people in the region. Once established it would be “Europe’s Largest River Protected Area”.

Natural and Cultural Values

Spanning Austria, Croatia, Hungary, Serbia and Slovenia, the lower courses of the Drava and Mura Rivers are among Europe’s most ecologically important riverine areas.

Once “protected” under the “Iron Curtain” during the Cold War, this trans-boundary river system (including related sections of the Danube River) now forms a 600 km long “green belt” connecting more than 800,000 ha of highly valuable natural and cultural landscapes. It is highly productive and contains an amazing biological diversity, which only can be topped by the Amazon.

The area is a hot spot of best examples of natural habitats rare in Europe such as large floodplain forests, river islands, gravel and sand banks, side branches and oxbows. It is home to the highest density of White-tailed Eagles in Europe. The natural Drava is one of the last breeding places for rare species such as the Little Tern and is home to endangered species such as the Otter, Sturgeons and Black Stork.

Moreover, the river ecosystem is the major source for good water quality, for natural flood protection and fishery as well as an important area for recreation.

Over 20 protected areas along the rivers underline their ecological values including the world famous Nature Park “Kopacki Rit”, in the Danube-Drava confluence.

However, the river ecosystem is highly threatened. Channelling of the natural river courses, extraction of gravel and sand from the riverbed are having a major impact on its ecological integrity, biodiversity values and natural resources.

In order to better preserve the trans-boundary ecosystem over the long term, innovative conservation and management efforts are needed.
An international NGO network – with members including WWF, EuroNatur, Drava League, Green Action, Croatian Society for the Protection of Birds and Nature, Green Osijek, ZEO Nobilis, ZEUS, Drava Federation and DOPPS-Birdlife Slovenia - has taken up this challenge and is working towards the establishment of a Trans-boundary UNESCO Biosphere Reserve “Danube-Drava-Mura” to be announced in 2010.

Transboundary Biosphere Reserve

The protection of the area as a TBR is one of Europe’s most ambitious and exciting nature conservation projects, covering an overall area of more than 300,000 ha core- and buffer zones and spanning current and future EU members. The TBR has already been agreed between Croatia and Hungary in September 2009; good progress is underway in Austria, Slovenia and Serbia.

Once established it will be Europe’s largest single river protected area, providing a strong framework for protection and ecological management of the area’s unique natural values and forming a catalyst for sustainable development in the region.

It would form a crucial part of the “European Green Belt” proposed by the World Conservation Union (IUCN), which aims to create an ecological network along the former Iron Curtain from the Barents to the Black Sea.

The central management goal of a TBR should be to halt any further degradation of the riverine landscape and to begin the improvement of the natural river dynamics.

Unique Selling Points

- The TBR “Danube-Drava-Mura” as “Europe’s Largest River Protected Area” with an overall size of more than 800,000 ha (=80 times as large as the Danube national park east of Vienna).
- The world’s first Biosphere Reserve, which is commonly shared and managed across five countries.
- Regional cooperation, international understanding and peace keeping along the former “Iron Curtain” by implementing a common positive vision across five countries, including current and future EU members.

Contact
Arno Mohl, Project Leader Biosphere Reserve “Danube-Drava-Mura”, WWF Austria, ++ 43 67683488 300
www.sterna-albifrons.net

Photo credits: Mario Romulic, www.romulic.com