



# The Vistula River

## An aging queen



WWF/Ireneusz Chojnacki

nature

source



WWF—Canon/Fred F. Haze/Hoff

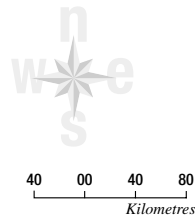
*...Feeling the death coming, Borana held the children to her breast for the last time and, bidding them farewell, she gave her daughters a command to spread waters all over the earth and her son to set up meadows and fields, all for humans to benefit...Czarnocha, black-eyed and dark-haired, cried over parting with her sister before she went on. She chose the mildly slanting southern slope to descend sorrowfully into a valley. Light-haired and blue-eyed Bialka soon forgot about her sadness and vigorously rushed north. Careless and playful, she came down jumping and singing joyfully, regardless of dangerous rocks and precipices. Soon Bialka found herself in a wide valley where, much to her delight, she saw Czarnocha again. The sisters greeted each other affectionately and decided never to part anymore.*

From The Tale of the Origins of the Vistula by Bogumil Hoff

# Living Waters

Conserving the source of life

## Vistula River basin



### IGBP landcover

- Forest
- Savannas
- Permanent wetlands and waterbodies
- Natural/human vegetation mosaic
- Croplands
- Urban and built-up

Geographic information based on 1-km AVHRR-Satellite data spanning April 1992 through March 1993

*The 1064 km Vistula River is the only remaining large intact river in Central Europe. Known by many as the “Queen of Polish rivers”, it has provided an important trade route from the east and south to northern and western Europe.*

# The Vistula River

## An aging queen

The Vistula River provides a corridor through which Poland’s fascinating natural and human history can be recounted. The river is born from pristine springs, but quickly loses its innocence as it passes through the industrial landscape of central Europe,



past Poland’s former capital of Krakow and present capital of Warsaw and through Gdansk, where a shipworker ushered in the present era of democracy.

## Natural Capital

The middle and lower sections of the Vistula River are considered among Europe's most exceptional areas of natural value. The river's meanders, oxbows, steep banks and islands – both sandy and covered by riparian forest – provide habitat for 76 per cent of the breeding bird species of Poland, including many that are threatened in Europe.

Portions of the basin, including the Biebrza River valley and Luknajno and Karas Lakes, harbour rare species of plants and animals and provide opportunities for agriculture, fishing, and tourism.



WWF/Klein & Hubert

## In Need of a Renaissance

Like many of Poland's water bodies, the Vistula River has been severely polluted by discharges of sewage and industrial effluent from major cities over the past few decades.

Chemical fertilisers and pesticides are also discharged in considerable amounts by farming operations in the river valley. These pollutants

contaminate ground and surface waters in the basin. Nearly the entire length of the river fails to meet any water quality standards. The Wloclawek Dam, constructed 30 years ago, has become a toxic trap for much of the waste discharged into the river. Several species of commercially important fish, including sturgeon and salmon, have disappeared from the river as a result of pollution and habitat alteration.

The deterioration of the Vistula's ecology is further threatened by a plan to build new dams on the lower river. In addition to altering the physical and hydrological characteristics of the natural river, the building of new dams is not likely to solve problems such as accumulation of sediments, nutrients, and toxic chemicals nor avert the threat of floods.

**Nearly the entire length of the river fails to meet any water quality standards.**



Przemysław Szymonki



Przemysław Szymofiski

## The Road to Recovery

**Rather than risking further deterioration of this vibrant river system**, a strategy for the system's recovery would emphasise pollution reduction and prevention and an investment in economic opportunities that are compatible with the health of the Vistula River. Such a strategy would include the following components:

**Political decisions** on the development of the Vistula River that conserve and restore the natural values of the valley.

**Heightened public awareness** of the natural values of the Vistula River and increased public participation in the development of alternative management solutions.

**Investment in environmentally sustainable development** in the Vistula Valley that conserves freshwater resources, supports the protection of the natural values of the area and provides benefits to local people.

**Establishment of an "ecological corridor"** of protection and pollution reduction measures as part of the sustainable development of the valley.

**Facilitation of integrated water management** throughout the Vistula's catchment to address both water quality and flooding problems.



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# Living Waters

Conserving the source of life



WWF's mission is to stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature, by:

- conserving the world's biological diversity
- ensuring that the use of renewable natural resources is sustainable
- promoting the reduction of pollution and wasteful consumption.

**Conserving the source of life**

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