

Statement of scientists

on the cancellation of plans of new hydropower plants on the Mura River by the
Ministry of Environment of Slovenia

February 27th, 2019



Natural Mura River in Slovenia

We, the undersigned scientists from Slovenia, Austria, Germany, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Spain, Portugal and Switzerland highly welcome the position of the Slovenian Minister of Environment Jure Leben not to build new hydropower plants on the Mura River in Slovenia and at the border river section with Austria.

Hence, we very much appreciate the recently issued [draft decree](#) of the Ministry of Environment of Slovenia to withdraw the concession decree for the planning and construction of eight hydropower plants along the Mura River in Slovenia between Sladki Vrh to Veržej, and encourage the government of Slovenia to confirm it rapidly.

The decree would additionally bring the planned first power plant "Hrastje-Mota" to a final close, due to the expected negative impacts to the environment and the drinking water supply for 46.000 inhabitants.

In our point of view, the decree is very wise and foresighted. It is in line with the [coalition agreement](#) of the Slovenian government from September 2018, which has decided not to build hydropower plants on Mura but to protect this valuable river ecosystem. And it is also in accordance with the findings of two [international expert studies](#) from 2017 on the environmental impacts of the planned power plant "Hrastje-Mota" on the Mura in Slovenia and the neighbouring countries Austria, Croatia and Hungary.

This move of the Ministry of Environment is a major and necessary step in achieving the protection and sustainable development of the region within the just solemnly opened UNESCO Biosphere Reserve Mura in Slovenia. It forms a solid foundation for achieving the larger initiative of the planned [Five-country Biosphere Reserve](#) "Mura-Drava-Danube", which is planned by Slovenia together with Austria, Croatia, Hungary and Serbia.

Over the past two decades, the value of river systems and their floodplains for human well-being has clearly been identified: natural rivers provide a wide array of ecosystem services, such as natural purification of water, vast groundwater aquifers for drinking water supply and agriculture, flood mitigation, maintenance of natural biodiversity, and unique opportunities for recreation and tourism development.

Ecosystem services have been widely recognized as a useful tool for a holistic approach to solve multiple ecological and socio-economic challenges. The significance of these ecosystem services is recognized by EU policy (e.g. EU strategy to halt biodiversity loss by 2020, EU COM Green Infrastructure Initiative) and is fostered by environmental regulations such as the European Water Framework Directive, EU Birds and Habitats Directive and EU Flood Risk Directive.

Moreover, studies and experiences from numerous examples have shown that hydropower plants lead to fundamental changes of river ecosystems, with negative consequences on the natural habitats and species as well as ecosystem services. New hydropower plants are one of the main causes of freshwater biodiversity loss including fish species on a global level.

This is in particular true for the planned hydropower plants on the Mura River, as they threaten one of Europe's last remaining free-flowing rivers and large scale river ecosystems, which is of national and international conservation importance. This is supported by following facts:

The Mura

- is part of the **largest, natural free-flowing river system in Central Europe** comprising the dam free Mura, Drava and Danube Rivers; a **unique fish migration corridor in Europe** of about 1000 km from Spielfeld (Austria) to Iron Gate at the Romanian-Serbian border.
- is the **last large free-flowing river in Slovenia** without any dams, with a high restoration potential.
- hosts the **largest floodplain forests of Slovenia** (Fauna-Flora Habitats Directive priority habitat type 91EO* (softwood alluvial forest) and Fauna-Flora Habitats Directive habitat type 91FO (hardwood alluvial forest).
- hosts the **richest diversity of native fish in Slovenia**. A total of 51 fish species (67 % of all Slovenian fish species) occur: 13 qualifying under Natura 2000, 36 species or 70% are on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species of Fish.
- is the **richest biodiversity area in Slovenia**. Several endangered species live only along or in the Slovenian Mura, for example *Salvinia natans*, *Stratiotes aloides*, *Aeshna viridis*, *Abramis sapa*, *Pelecus cultratus*, *Umbra krameri*, and *Triturus dobrogicus*. It is the area with the best preserved oxbow lakes in Slovenia.
- is a **Natura 2000 site** (SI3000215; SI5000010) **with the highest number of qualification species in Slovenia** (66 species in total: 36 species reg. FFHD, 30 species reg. BD) including white-tailed eagle, black stork, kingfisher, beaver and otter and 8 habitat types (FFHD and BD).
- is a central part of the **planned 5-country Biosphere Reserve “Mura-Drava-Danube”** between Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, Hungary and Serbia. This is currently the **largest river protection initiative in Europe**, aiming at the protection and sustainable development of the transboundary region for nature and the local population.
- serves **local communities** as the most important drinking water source, natural flood protection and a valuable recreational area.

The Mura River in Slovenia, as part of the larger Mura-Drava-Danube area has a unique potential for maintaining and restoring unique and highly threatened biodiversity and ecosystem functions in Europe.

We, the undersigned scientists offer our assistance, support, and experience to the Ministry of Environment and Government of Slovenia in preserving and realizing those benefits in the future.

Yours sincerely,

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