Living Rivers Europe

Safeguarding healthy waters for people and nature

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Freshwater, a limited precious natural resource

The availability of a secure supply of plentiful and clean freshwater is one of the most fundamental prerequisites for human existence and sustainable development. But this precious resource is extremely limited on our planet: out of all the world's water resources, freshwater represents approximately 2.6% and is critical to a large part of the Earth's biological diversity. Healthy river ecosystems also play an important role in providing societies with a large number of services such as water purification, food provision, flood protection, shoreline stabilisation, groundwater recharge, carbon sequestration and streamflow maintenance. Moreover, as many human settlements are close to river banks, rivers have an important cultural and recreational value.

However, our water environment is experiencing a crisis

Rivers and wetlands have long been undervalued and degraded, resulting in the loss of 81% of global freshwater wildlife populations[i], higher than in any other ecosystem. The increase in the world population and growing demand for food, fibre and fuel is putting the world's limited freshwater resources under enormous pressure. On top of this, the effects of climate change on water cycles are being increasingly felt, presenting all water users with a major joint climate change adaptation challenge.

Despite some successes, stronger protection is needed in Europe

The implementation of the EU Water Framework Directive (WFD), the EU's main legislation governing the management of its freshwater resources, has led to some dramatic improvements in water status throughout the European Union. In particular, chemical water quality has improved through better management of urban and industrial wastewater. On the back of this, some of Europe's iconic freshwater wildlife species such as the otter, osprey, spoonbill and salmon have been brought back from the brink of extinction.

Yet, there is still a long way to go. The WFD's goal of achieving good status for all Europe's waters by 2015 has been missed by a long shot with only about 50% of Europe's waters estimated to be in good condition at the time[ii]. Water ecosystems in the EU, such as wetlands, lakes and rivers, are still experiencing the most significant degradation and loss of wildlife compared to other ecosystems[iii]. The causes of various pressures on freshwater ecosystems, including widespread pollution and over abstraction of water due to intensive agriculture, changes to water flow and the physical shape of water bodies due to hydropower plants, flood defence and navigation, are not properly and effectively being addressed.

Our vision

We, a coalition of five environmental and fisheries organisations, have joined forces to form *Living Rivers Europe* to put forward a strong vision of healthy river ecosystems flourishing with wildlife to the benefit of society at large, the economy and sustainable development in Europe. To make this vision a reality and give our water ecosystems a real future we stress the importance of maintaining an ambitious EU Water Framework Directive. Together with our members and supporters, representing a dedicated movement of over 40 million people across Europe, we aim to ensure that the loss of aquatic wildlife is halted and reversed and that European waters are managed more sustainably.

Nearly every river in Europe crosses national borders – the Danube for example crosses 10 countries on its way to the Black Sea – and Europe's past has demonstrated that it is only through international cooperation that major water challenges such as pollution and climate change adaptation can be overcome. Such a cooperative approach would strongly contribute to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6[iv] which calls for integrated water resources management at all levels, including through transboundary cooperation. The EU's WFD is the strongest and most effective tool to achieve healthy waters in Europe, and represents a model to be followed by other countries to build sustainable development.

Where properly implemented, the WFD has demonstrated its effectiveness in achieving its goals of good water status and non-deterioration. It is a modern piece of legislation balancing environmental, social and economic requirements while giving Member States the flexibility to almost double the available time for implementation - in exceptional cases and when justified. Its ambitious quality objectives have spurred innovation and economic growth, both at home and abroad. The WFD's cost-recovery principle ensures that water management can be affordable in any Member State which means that it is lack of political will rather than objective difficulties with its legislative basis that is behind failure to implement it properly. The economic potential of full WFD implementation is significant: If Europe had met its 2015 deadline the total yearly benefits could have reached €20 billion per year on average[v].

Living Rivers Europe calls for

1 Improved implementation and enforcement of the WFD, including through:

- more ambitious second (2015-2021) and third (2021-2027) River Basin Management cycles;
- ensuring that all exemptions from WFD objectives are applied restrictively and, in exceptional cases only, in order to uphold the purpose and effect of the WFD;
- increased use of nature-based solutions for tackling the impact of flood and drought such as river restoration measures, and systematic integration of quantitative elements in water use management, including through defining and implementing ecological flows;
- making sure that payment for water used is based on fair pricing, and that those who pollute it are also made to pay;
- ensuring that the remaining free-flowing and unaltered stretches of rivers are effectively protected and their biodiversity and ecological values are not compromised by hydropower and inland navigation development.

2 Effective integration of water management aspects into relevant sectoral policies, particularly agriculture, energy, transport and flood risk management. It is important that the heavy ecological impact that these policies have on the affected water bodies are adequately considered and that potential synergies and co-benefits for all policy areas are fully exploited.

3 WFD's high standards of water resources and ecosystem protection. EU water policy review should be used to strengthen, rather than weaken, the EU legal framework for water protection in order to meet the ultimate 2027 deadline. The WFD was designed on a set of key principles to ensure we keep our rivers systems flowing, clean and healthy, including the following:

- all water bodies, from rivers, lakes, marshes, to coastlines are included;
- a legally binding objective of good status must be achieved for all water bodies within a prescribed deadline;
- no water body can further worsen from its initial status;
- the costs of water management should be recovered from all water users and polluters following the user- and polluter pay principles;
- water bodies can be considered healthy only once the levels of all indicators of ecosystem health[vi] are in good status ('The One-Out, All-Out rule');
- all stakeholders should have the opportunity to actively engage in WFD implementation.

[i] WWF (2016) Living Planet Report 2016. Risk and resilience in a new era, WWF International, Gland, Switzerland.
[ii] EC (2015) Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the Water Framework Directive and the Floods Directive: Actions towards the 'good status' of EU water and to reduce flood risks (COM(2015) 120 final).
[iii] EC (2015) Report from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament: The State of Nature in the European Union, Report on the Status and Trends of Habitat Types and Species covered by the Birds and Habitats Directives for the period 2007-2012 as required under Article 17 of the Habitats Directive and Article 12 of the Birds Directive (COM(2015)219 final).
[iv] Goal 6: 'Ensure access to water and sanitation for all', http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/water-and-sanitation/.
[v] Mattheiß V., De Paoli G. and Strosser P. (ACTeon) (2012) Comparative study of pressures and measures in the major river basin management plans in the EU, Task 4 b: Costs & Benefits of WFD implementation (EU project), p. 35, 46.
[vi] Biological, physical, chemical and hydrological conditions.