

WWF BACKGROUNDER

NEW SHIPPING CANALS WILL DESTROY LAST CHANCE FOR BLUE DANUBE

WWF strongly advises an immediate halt to economically and ecologically unsound shipping development plans for the Danube River.

Various proposed development plans for shipping and navigation along the Danube River are a direct threat to the last remaining natural areas of the Danube as well as to the region's freshwater, states the report launched on 31st January, 2002 entitled "*Waterway Transport on Europe's Lifeline, the Danube*" by WWF, the conservation organization. The plans are also economically unsound, failing to respect current economic trends related to transport within Europe. In response, WWF calls for an immediate halt to the implementation of the development plans, followed by their comprehensive review and alteration.

Globally, freshwater ecosystems are in a worse condition than any other type of ecosystem. Available data shows that freshwater wildlife declined by about 50% in the last 30 years and over half the world's wetlands were destroyed in the past 100 years alone. In response, WWF's "Living Waters Programme" takes action to protect freshwater systems worldwide, including stopping damaging development schemes such as those proposed for the Danube.

Background to the Report: Shipping and the Danube

The plans, developed by bodies including the European Commission, national governments bordering the Danube, and the Budapest-based inter-governmental Danube Commission, are geared to re-launch and further expand navigation and shipping along the Danube. Danube shipping was abruptly stopped during the 78-day war in Yugoslavia that began in 1999 when bombed bridges fell into the river and blocked traffic. In November of last year, a channel of debris was cleared, marking the first step in a larger effort, overseen by the Danube Commission, to completely clear the channel of debris by this year – with total costs estimated at 26 million EURO.

Europe's second longest river after the Volga, the 2,780 km Danube is navigable from Ulm, Germany for 2,588 km down to the Black Sea. The Danube stretch of 2,414 km between Kelheim, Germany and Sulina, Romania is part of the Rhine-Main-Danube link between the North Sea and the Black Sea and serves as an important international waterway route (Pan-European Transport Corridor VII). Other navigable routes include the Tisza and Sava rivers and artificial navigable canals, the largest being the Rhine-Main-Danube and the Danube-Black Sea canals.

The Danube River Basin is the most international river basin in the world: it drains the lands of 17 countries and is home to 80 million people. Some 20 million people depend directly on the basin as a source of clean drinking water. The European Commission recognizes the Danube as "the single most important non-oceanic body of water in Europe" and this importance is increasing in the context of an enlarging European Union.

"The Danube is one of the Continent's great arteries," EU external affairs commissioner Chris Patten said in a statement late last year. "The restoration of navigation is of economic and commercial, environmental, cultural and political importance."

According to the WWF report, the current shipping development plans for the Danube are based on outdated logic and technical arguments that no longer apply to current economic and environmental realities. The underlying foundation to the plans is that navigational improvements on the Danube depend on increasing the draught (the channel depth of water needed for a ship to float) of loaded shipping vessels. In turn, increasing draught requires deepening of the river, the engineered regulation of waterways and new canals.

Ecological damage

The Danube and its tributaries host a diverse system of habitats with highly rich and unique biological diversity. However, since the 19th century, drastic interventions to the Danube natural system and surrounding lands to improve flood protection, agriculture, power production and waterway transport have destroyed over 80% of its environmentally vital and economically valuable wetlands and floodplains. Such developments have devastated the health of the river, affecting wildlife and the food, water and raw materials needed by all. Many local residents and workers strongly oppose further local environmental damage.

The first 1,000 km of the Danube have already been developed into an almost uninterrupted artificial waterway by a chain of 59 hydropower dams. Downstream from the Gabčíkovo hydro dam system in Slovakia, the more than 1,800 kilometre long free-flowing section of the middle and lower Danube up to the Black Sea is interrupted only by the large impounded section of the two hydro dams at the Iron Gate.

The current shipping development plans would continue historic negative trends, entailing a massive disruption and degradation to the last natural freshwater ecosystems along the Danube, especially those downstream of Gabčíkovo.

The report highlights 11 hot spots along the Danube where significant ecological damage, and potential conflicts (some already in progress for years) with local stakeholders, could develop (*see map*). “These plans would mean impounding the last free-flowing sections of the upper Danube and re-constructing river sections of highest ecological value in the middle and lower Danube and on some tributaries.”

If plans go through, projected environmental threats include the cutting off of large natural areas from the river leading to a direct loss of diverse habitats and species, many of which are seriously threatened. Species such as sturgeon and beavers are already significantly threatened. Groundwater levels will decrease, threatening human drinking water supplies and the health of millions that depend on the river for clean water. This will be exacerbated by deterioration in the river’s natural capacity for self-purification and curbing pollution.

New dams will result in deeper riverbeds downstream, increased erosion, the dissection and separation of natural habitats and disruptions to natural water exchanges. Many unique habitats and their species that depend on fluctuating hydrological conditions in floodplains and wetlands will be lost and freshwater fish will be prevented from migrating upstream, leading to their continued decline. Upstream from dams, dredging will be required which will entail high economic costs and further riverbed destruction.

Additional shipping threats relate to increased volumes of chemicals entering the waters, including spilled mineral oil, deliberately dumped bilge water (dirty water that collects in the bottom of ships, often containing oil and other toxins), ‘tensides’ used for cleaning ships and toxic ship paints. Navigational accidents and associated spills of oils and chemical goods will continue to pose risks. Environmental damage also results from ship wave action, the re-suspension of sediment caused by whirling ship engines and the transport of alien species.

These new environmental threats will further compound recent and current environmental problems and disasters from other sources. During the 1999 war in Yugoslavia, the bombings of chemical factories and other targets resulted in widespread toxic contamination of the river. Two years ago almost to this day (Jan.30 2000), some 100 tons of highly toxic cyanide spilled into the Danube from the Tisza River in Romania. The Danube is also a major dump for untreated urban sewage and the biggest contributor of nutrients to the Black Sea which has resulted in radical changes and losses to its ecosystem and biological diversity since the 1960s.

Economic and technical problems

The report finds that deepening navigation channels is now unnecessary because of current economic and technical trends. Deep draught is only necessary for shipping bulk goods such as solid fuels and fertilizers – traditional cargo for river-bound ships in the past. In the 1960s, the objective was the development of waterways for larger vessels with higher loaded draughts carrying few bulk goods. However, given that the consumption of these bulk goods is now in decline, ships will need to compete with other transport markets to survive.

Furthermore, the current plans are also based on the 1959 Belgrade Danube Convention and subsequent resolutions passed by the Danube Commission which proposed the construction of a continuous hydropower plant chain for the Danube waterway and increasing river depths. However, the project became politically non-feasible and was cancelled.

The report finds that, economically and ecologically, the only option for water transport is to compete with trucking in the transport of processed parceled goods, namely in the form of containers or ‘roll-on/roll-off’ parcels. The establishment of an ‘intelligent’ waterway, fleet and logistics management system is the prerequisite for competition for goods that are presently carried by truck – and this competition is ecologically welcome. Ecologically, road transport remains highly destructive, especially in terms of inputs to air pollution and global warming. An intensification of competition with rail for bulk goods by means of expensive and ecologically incompatible waterway development measures is neither appropriate from an eco-political nor economic point of view.

European inland waterway navigation is presently in a stage of technological change that considerably increases the prospects for ecologically compatible river navigation on the Danube. Today, new ship-building technologies as well as new information and communication systems offer the possibility of increasing both productivity and interest of inland navigation without needing massive interventions in the river landscape. A re-orientation to other groups of goods also changes the requirements for inland navigation, i.e. flexible, regular and frequent offers. This in turn demands closed logistics chains, where the emphasis is put on vessels showing the following characteristics: multi-purpose use, high specialisation, integration in an information and communication network of the waterway, fleet and logistics management.

A main barrier to the above market shift is inadequate overhead clearances under bridges which prevent the passage of two-layer container shipping. Some Danube bridges, such as on the Bavarian Danube, currently fail to allow adequate clearance.

The WWF report shows that this market shift will be possible. The Rhine River serves as a good example where between 1991 and 1999 a significant drop in the shipping of bulk goods was compensated by an increase in shipping chemicals, finished goods and agricultural products. Furthermore, waterway traffic on the Rhine heavier is much heavier than on the Danube, and yet, the minimum depth of the Rhine is only 2.1 metres, far less than the 3.2 metre depth proposed for the Danube in the new plans. Finally, a considerable increase in transported goods on the Danube is also expected, strengthened by increased use of the Rhine-Main-Danube waterway.

Overall, the key shift in development planning should be away from adapting the river to the ships, to adapting the ships to the river and current economic needs. New ecologically compatible ship design and technologies will also reduce ecologically destructive trucking transport. River transport has a better future when it uses existing river transport capacities and when it accepts and adapts to certain natural limits of navigability: we cannot continue to re-engineer our rivers according to certain types of ships but we can make better use of the rivers by upgrading our transport intelligence.

Finally, past economic projects resulting in regulating navigation routes did not sufficiently take into account indirect economic impacts such as losses in biodiversity, flood retention, soil productivity, water quality and recreational values. Over the last twenty years, the ecological requirements of the Danube as a natural entity have become a significant criterion for the evaluation of the ecological compatibility of navigation. WWF estimates the annual economic value for the remaining 1.7 million hectares of Danube floodplains at over 666 million EUR.

Politics of Environment and Shipping

A variety of legal and political instruments have been agreed to over the last few decades to protect and save the remaining natural habitats of national and international importance on the in Europe and on the Danube.

The International Convention for the Protection of the Danube River, signed by 11 countries along the Danube and the EC, aims at drafting a River Basin Management Plan in accordance with the new EU Water Framework Directive (2000/60/EC). That directive and the Flora Fauna Habitat (92/43/EEC) and Wild Birds Directives (79/409/EEC) with their Natura 2000 network are new binding regulations which aim at banning the further deterioration of riverine landscapes in EU and EU accession countries. And in September of 2001, European transport ministers voted for the environmental sustainability, safety and efficiency of inland waterway transport in their Rotterdam Declaration.

The suggestions of the new WWF report strongly support the EU's determination to integrate environmental concerns into other sectors including transport.

The analysis of existing international agreements also shows that current Danube water depths respond to minimum recommended norms. This applies to the 1996 "European Convention on main inland waterways of international importance" and the 1998 "Recommendations on the determination of regulations for the navigable channel as well as on river engineering and other development of the Danube."

At the same time, there are some 50 large protected areas along the navigable routes of the Danube and its tributaries, many with large remaining tracts of former floodplains.

The high degree of political commitment to protecting the Danube's freshwater systems reached a peak in April 2001 with the *Summit on Environment and Sustainable Development in the Carpathian and Danube Region* which took place in Bucharest, Romania. There, the UK's Prince Philip, Presidents from 9 countries in the region and others adopted a joint Declaration expressing their support for rehabilitating the Danube River Basin – to be presented at the Rio+10 UN conference this year in Johannesburg.

The Summit was organized by the Vienna-based WWF Danube Carpathian Programme Office (DCPO) which has worked in the Danube region for over ten years and which has a long-term commitment to protect and restore the Danube River. WWF-supported activities include the development of the 'Lower Danube Green Corridor' – the largest international, cross-border wetland restoration and protection initiative in Europe. The corridor will include a minimum of some 900,000 hectares of protected areas and restored floodplain habitats along the Danube in Romania, Bulgaria, Moldova and Ukraine. Additional projects work to restore the biologically rich Danube Delta at the Black Sea, re-introduce lost species, and facilitate governmental cooperation to protect threatened trans-border areas.

The efforts of the WWF DCPO are part of and are strengthened by WWF's global "Living Waters Programme" aimed at protecting threatened freshwater ecosystems worldwide.

Conclusion

The new shipping development plans for the Danube are in strong conflict with national, international and EU nature protection regulations and work against recent commitments and work in the region. This makes their future implementation unrealistic and unacceptable from both an environmental and economic perspective.

“The new projects are clearly the largest threat to the last few remaining natural areas in this part of Europe,” said Philip Weller, Director of WWF's Danube Carpathian Programme. “WWF is not against shipping, but we are against those projects which make neither economic nor ecological sense.”

WWF calls for an immediate halt to the unrealistic and unacceptable implementation of current shipping development plans, followed by their review and alteration. It also offers its assistance in the process, using its global network of resources to continue its long-term commitment to conservation, restoration and sustainable development along the Danube.

Adapt the ships to the river, not the river to the ships!

For more information, please contact:

Paul Csagoly: Communications Manager, WWF Danube Carpathian Programme Office. Ottakringer Str.114-116, A-1162, Vienna, Austria.

Tel: (Mobile in Hungary) +36-30-250-5869

E-mail: pc@wwf.at

Fax: +43-1-488-17-276

Additional information available:

- 1) Backgrounder to the WWF Report
- 2) Two Hot Spot Maps
- 3) Video (B-roll) of spots (i.e. biodiversity, river, dams) for broadcasters
- 4) Executive Summary of WWF Report
- 5) Full WWF Report

Websites:

To view the press release, backgrounder, maps, Executive Summary, Full Report, and info related to the video, go to: www.panda.org/livingwaters.

To view full WWF report: www.panda.org/europe/freshwater.

For more about WWF Danube Carpathian Programme: www.panda.org/danube-carpathian.