



Extended Comment of the Danube Environmental Forum (DEF)
on the
Danube River Basin District Management Plan (Draft)
22.7.2015

The Danube Environmental Forum (DEF) tries to contribute to the Danube River Basin District Management Plan (Draft) within working groups of the ICPDR, if possible. Due to capacity and time restrictions we have to confine our comment to some important issues. Additionally we hope to contribute to further issues and discussion of the DRBDM Plan until December to complete and refine the document.

“Protecting and improving the waters and environment of the Danube River Basin is substantial for achieving sustainable development and is vital for the long term health, well-being and prosperity for the population of the Danube region. Being aware of this issue and due to the fact that the sustainable management of water resources requires transboundary cooperation, the countries sharing the Danube River Basin agreed to jointly work towards the achievement of this objective.” (page 1). This commitment is not only shared by the Danube countries and the EU but also by the Danube Environmental Forum.

Integration of nature protection, biodiversity and green-blue infrastructure in river corridors

In the public participation process on significant water management issues the Danube Environmental Forum (DEF) intended to add nature protection, biodiversity and green infrastructure to the significant water management issues. We keep on thinking that these issues are important in water management. Nevertheless we are pleased to see this issue now dealt with in the integration issues chapter as chapter “6.3 Interlinkage between river basin management and nature protection”. Together with the prominent role of sturgeon protection in the management plan we are on a good way to integrate nature protection in the management plan. Thanks to all who cared about this issue.

We welcome the commitment expressed in chapter 6.6 to protect the Danube sturgeon species. With this commitment the ICPDR has a prominent and leading role in the conservation of important and endangered migrating fish species in Europe.

Although aspects of nature protection a water and water-related ecosystems are dealt with in the chapters for water protection and hydromorphological alterations it should be stated that some elements are especially important and that we have some more synergies e.g. by implementing green-blue infrastructure in river corridors.

Our colleagues from Danubeparks, WWF and IAD suggested some detailed measures also supported by DEF. What is especially important is to avoid further deterioration, to keep, improve and restore river, river bank and wetland dynamics together with adapted land use and landscape

planning in the river corridors. Improvement of information and research on water related and river corridor habitats and species is necessary for strategic planning processes. To implement better nature protection and all the other synergies in and along rivers the availability of land resources is a most crucial issue.

Already in December several environmental NGOs including DEF had stated that for the future development it would be necessary to strengthen the green or green-blue infrastructure along the rivers, to give more space for natural flooding and for river restoration. This would also mean to improve water self-purification and protection from hazardous substances and nutrients leading to a better quality of water, in many cases of drinking water, too. Additionally tourism can be a socio-economic factor of importance for sustainable development.

River corridors should include wetlands and former or existing floodplains but also river slopes, hills, mountainous and gorges regions along the river. To include the dry elements is important for erosion control and fine sediments, a major threat for river species causing colmation, but also for habitat and species protection and continuity. In these zones along rivers water protection, river restoration, flooding, biodiversity and habitat continuity should have some preferential role in management and development.

All these aspects can be developed in co-operation with the European Danube Regional Strategy (EUSDR, especially Priority Area 6 Biodiversity) and with environmental NGOs, regional stakeholders including agriculture, who can contribute to develop the range of synergies of water and nature protection.

So we would like to propose to add in chapter 6.3 (page 68) after the last but one paragraph:

“The Danube river is the most important element of green-blue infrastructure and habitat connection in Europe and the DRB offers a large variety of biodiversity. River basin management can help to improve nature protection in and along rivers by avoiding further deterioration, restoring river and wetland dynamics and fostering adapted uses, especially land use. Strategic sustainable development and landscape planning in river corridors and space along rivers including flooded and dry areas are instruments to create manifold synergies for biodiversity, habitat connectivity, flooding and water protection, erosion control and climate change adaptation. Together with EUSDR Priority Area 6, environmental NGOs and other stakeholders including agriculture, ICPDR can provide core elements and a significant share of information and co-operation on green infrastructure, biodiversity and habitat connectivity in the DRB.”

Dams, hydromorphological alterations and deterioration

The Danube Environmental Forum cares about many new planned hydropower plants in the DRB. Many of them may be so-called smaller ones and even outside of the range of the international management plan but as a whole of importance for DRB river and stream ecological status. Many of these new dams will be destroying rivers completely by building chains of dams, many on important tributaries like Sava river and in the Sava river basin, on Velika Morava, on western Balkans, Carpathian mountains and in alpine regions.

Impacts of dams cannot be compensated by fish migration aids. Streams and rivers need hydro power themselves for sustaining their ecological systems and dynamics. In most cases dams are destroying rivers in many aspects, in many basic ecological functions of rivers. Dams are damaging the breeding of many river species, dams are causing changes of water and groundwater levels and dynamics, dams are causing river incision and sediment regime changes downstream, dams are

interrupting vertical, horizontal and longitudinal continuity of river ecosystems and habitats. Turbines are injuring and killing fish on downstream migration, especially often high percentages of juvenile fish. Hydropeaking additionally causes losses of fish and other species populations.

These are well-known facts of fish biology and hydromorphology. How can any increase of these effects and impacts of hydropower be called sustainable? How does it fit to the objectives of river and water ecosystem protection, of avoidance of deterioration? The development of new hydropower is not sustainable, it destroys and deteriorates streams and rivers and therefore it should be stopped immediately.

Regarding a situation when most of the problems with existing hydropower are not even mitigated and upstream fish migration is not improved in many cases, some financial and political interests of the energy and building sector and some people in favour of renewable energy (often without knowledge on ecological impacts) are fostering a new wave of new dam building in the DRB. An implementation of these plans would cause massive further deterioration of rivers and streams. This is not in line with WFD objectives and there are definitely significantly better environmental options and alternatives.

The management plan tells us that the Danube guidance on hydropower could be a means to protect the rivers and streams. In reality this guidance has been produced under the domination of three leading countries with some strong interest to develop new hydropower in still free flowing river stretches. The side of river protection was not enough represented in the process of elaboration and in the end the objective has not been to protect rivers from new hydropower but to enable further hydropower infrastructure development including some mitigation for better acceptance. The guiding questions have been where and how new hydropower schemes should be built. Impacts of hydropower have been named but in a whole they have been played down suggesting that most impacts of hydropower development can be mitigated and accepted. The protection of free flowing river stretches is an exception in the guidance (exclusion zones) whereas the general approach is developing new hydropower due to an assessment matrix considering hydroelectric potential on one hand and environment and landscape on the other.

The paper may include the wish of some actors to protect as much as possible in a dam building wave which cannot be stopped because of the big political influence of the hydropower lobby and it recommends to protect river stretches with high ecological value and low hydroelectric potential. But then, should other river stretches be sacrificed? In this case the ICPDR left its point of view of water and river protection under the lead of the three countries with major hydropower development interest opening the door for further accepted deterioration. This was not a “balanced process” because the objective of new hydropower development was set.

The approach of general further deterioration by new hydropower development is not in line with the objectives of the Water Framework Directive (WFD). The WFD does not only aim at protecting the most natural rivers but to avoid deterioration of all water bodies and improvement of water bodies in bad or not favourable status. This point of view is now backed and strengthened by the judgement of the European Court of Justice on deepening of Weser river. It is not allowed to jeopardise the attainment of good water status by deterioration of one of the biological quality elements of annex V of the WFD text and if a waterbody is already in the lowest class, further deterioration is not acceptable. A derogation clause is possible, but derogation is or should not be the rule in water and river protection with the WFD.

In this perspective a revision of the guidelines with a new approach on protecting rivers from new hydropower development and mitigating or removing existing dams is necessary. Instead of even opening protected areas in Natura 2000 sites (as an exceptional possibility in the guidelines and

now in the consultation process in Brussels) the damming of free flowing stretches of rivers should be stopped from the perspective of river protection. Dam removal is an important solution to protect species and habitats, especially in protected areas like Natura 2000 or the Emerald network. In France and in the USA dams are removed under the perspective of nature and fish species protection. This is also an instrument of the WFD which should be used in the DRB. We recommend the recommendations of the German Federal Agency for Nature Protection on hydropower as a perspective for a new approach to protect free flowing river stretches. A new approach should also help to create alternatives for the development of energy and renewable energy solutions without deteriorating river ecosystems. A new approach should also improve information and knowledge on habitats and species threatened by existing and new hydropower. A strategic planning process from the perspective of river protection should include model projects for river restoration including mitigation of hydropower impacts. This can help the hydropower sector, too, to develop acceptable solutions to reach the good ecological potential.

The precautionary principle should be applied for every new planned alteration of river hydromorphology.

Some conclusions:

The danger of a massive deterioration of rivers in the DRB by a wave new hydropower projects has to be discussed clearly in this management plan basically aiming at river protection. Otherwise the objectives of the WFD are not met on this important issue. The chapter on hydropower and the guidelines should be revised from the perspective of river protection and the objectives of reaching good status and avoiding deterioration.

The precautionary principle is to be applied for all new planned alterations of hydromorphology. This is an addition to the chapters 6 and 8. Also for chapters 5, 6 and 8, especially 5.1, 6.1, 6.4, 6.5 and 8.1 the issue of strategic planning for river restoration including the impacts of uses could be sharpened. This DRB management plan and the national plans are indeed relevant instruments of strategic planning but the management plans could be implemented in river restoration plans and projects, best with a strategic approach including uses and stakeholders, but from the main perspective of river protection.

Heavily Modified Water Bodies (HMWB)

The designation of HMWB needs to be reviewed for this plan. There are still water bodies not correctly designed as HMWB like in the Lower Danube or in the Save river. This should be changed in time because it is important to have the right environmental objectives.

Environmental objectives

As a whole the exemptions of article 4.4 have been widely used. Exemptions according to articles 4.5 and 4.7 have to be explained. Map 25 is not really clearly showing the differences because colours are not so different for different issues. The causes for less stringent environmental objectives (article 4.5) or for article 4.7 should be made visible and transparent. 40 waterbodies are concerned. As these exemptions from the environmental objectives are substantial there is a need to discuss these exemptions on the international level.

Public participation, information and transparency

In the following implementation process it is necessary to improve public participation with information and understanding of the process. It is recommended for the countries to improve public participation processes.

An important instrument can be local and regional projects or projects for sectors, municipalities, NGOs, for integrated projects. To make this participation and implementation process better possible it is important to develop small grants without too much bureaucratic demands. To develop such tools could improve the whole implementation process.

Economic aspects of Danube river basin management

The economic analysis is an important element of the management plan. Water is important as drinking water and for many uses. The polluter pays principle should be a basic principle for all water uses. This principle often has not been applied but it would help to solve problems and to avoid deterioration.

Yet there are still a lot of differences on the definition of water services. Whatever the definitions it is important to have information on the environmental and resource costs of all uses. It is necessary to clear this problem soon. DEF advocates clearly the broader definition with the EU Commission. Otherwise the polluter pays principle would not work in many cases and water bodies are not improved because of restricted financial capacities.

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