



Austrian-Croatian-Hungarian-Serbian-Slovenian Declaration 25, March 2011

## Mura-Drava-Danube UNESCO Trans-Boundary Biosphere Reserve

<b>Ecoregion</b>	Danube-Carpathians
<b>Priority Place</b>	Greater Black Sea Basin
<b>Area</b>	Lower sections of the Drava and Mura Rivers incl. related Danube areas
<b>Countries</b>	Austria, Croatia, Hungary, Serbia, Slovenia

### SUMMARY

On 25 March 2011, in an act of great environmental leadership and trans-boundary cooperation, the Ministers responsible for environment and nature conservation of Austria, Croatia, Hungary, Serbia and Slovenia signed a joint declaration to establish a Trans-Boundary Biosphere Reserve along the Mura, Drava and Danube Rivers.

This declaration paves the way to create the **world's first five-country protected area** and **Europe's largest river protection area**.

The signing has taken place in the frame of the Informal Ministerial Meeting within the Hungarians EU-Presidency in Budapest/Hungary.

The agreement on the establishment of the Trans-Boundary Biosphere Reserve, which strongly builds on the Croatian-Hungarian agreement from 2009, will protect a 700 km section of the Mura, Drava and Danube river system in all five countries, connecting over 800,000 ha highly valuable natural and cultural landscapes.

The Biosphere Reserve will lead to an improved standard of management in a number of existing protected areas of about 260,000 ha (core and buffer zones) and will establish and support sustainable management of the natural resources in the area of another 540,000 ha (transition zones).

The conservation benefits will include cooperative action on common threats and to protect endangered habitats and species and hundred thousands of migratory waterfowls.



White-tailed eagle in the Hungarian National Park (Credit: M. Romulic).

Furthermore it will foster regional cooperation and international understanding by implementing a common

positive vision across five countries, including current and future EU members.

The governmental agreement between Austria, Croatia, Hungary, Serbia and Slovenia is based on over a decade of work by park authorities, nature conservation institutions and governments with strong promotion of the non-governmental sector including WWF, EuroNatur, Drava League, Green Action, Green Osijek, Croatian Society for Bird and Nature Protection, ZEUS, ZEO Nobilis, DOPPS-Birdlife Slovenia and Drava Federation.



Oxbow lakes in the Danube floodplains (Credit: M. Romulic).

### BACKGROUND

The trans-boundary river system of the Mura, Drava and Danube Rivers - spanning Austria, Croatia, Hungary, Serbia and Slovenia - is among Europe's most important and largest.

The area is a hot spot of rare natural habitats in Europe such as large floodplain forests, river islands, gravel and sand banks and oxbows. It is home to the highest density of breeding pairs of the White-tailed Eagles (*Haliaeetus albicilla*) in Europe and hosts endangered species such as Little Tern (*Sterna albifrons*), Black Stork (*Ciconia nigra*), Otter (*Lutra lutra*) and Sturgeons (*Acipenser sp.*) as well as being an important stepping stone for more than 250,000 migratory waterfowls every year.

Moreover, the river ecosystem is vital for the socio-economic well being of the trans-boundary region. It is a major source for good drinking water, for natural flood protection, sustainable forestry and fisheries as well as having an important role in promoting eco-tourism, awareness raising and environmental education in the region.

### EXISTING PROTECTED AREAS

In the last 15 years all five countries involved have taken efforts to protect their portion of the river system in protected areas that include a National Park, Nature and Regional Parks and Natura 2000 sites.

This protected area system now includes amongst others:

Austria (ca. 6000 ha)

- Natura 2000 site "Border Mura" (ca. 2000 ha)
- Landscape Protected Area incl. N2K (ca. 6000 ha)

Croatia (ca. 111,000 ha)

- Regional Park "Drava-Mura" (ca. 88,000 ha)
- Nature Park and Special Zoological Reserve "Kopački Rit" (23,000 ha)

Hungary (ca. 52,000 ha)

- Danube-Drava National Park (50,000 ha)
- Mura Landscape Protected Area (2100 ha)

Serbia (ca. 20,000 ha)

- Special Nature Reserve "Gornje Podunavlje" (20,000 ha)

Slovenia (ca. 20,000 ha)

- Natura 2000 Mura (11,000 ha)
- Natura 2000 Drava (9000 ha)

All areas are or are planned to be protected as part of the EU wide Natura 2000 network.

### PLANNED TRANS-BOUNDARY BIOSPHERE RESERVE

All conservation areas are or are planned to be managed by local management authorities. However, conservation of the natural values and resources of this international area cannot be tackled without effective collaboration across borders.

Therefore, the establishment of a common protection and management regime under a Trans-Boundary Biosphere Reserve is one of WWF's major conservation objectives within the Danube-Carpathian region.

Once established the Biosphere Reserve would be Europe's largest single river protected area, spanning current and future EU members and the world's first Biosphere Reserve, which is commonly shared and managed across five countries.

On 17 September 2009 in a major first act the Ministers of Croatia and Hungary H.E. Božo Biškupić (Minister of Culture) and H.E. Imre Szabó (Minister for Environment and Water) have agreed to establish the Biosphere Reserve. On 25 March 2011 the Ministers responsible environment and nature conservation in Austria, Croatia, Hungary, Serbia and Slovenia, Mr Nikolaus Berlakovich, Mr Jasen Mesić, Mr Sándor Fazekas, Mr Oliver Dulić and Mr Roko Žarnić have agreed to cooperate and to lift it to a 5-country initiative. The signing ceremony in the presence of the press took place in Gödöllő near Budapest in the frame of the Informal Ministerial Meeting within the Hungarians EU-Presidency.

Given the global significance of this agreement, on behalf of WWF, the Director of the WWF Danube-Carpathian Programme Andreas Beckmann and the CEO of WWF Hungary Gábor Figezky has highlighted the significant role of the Ministries and this common achievement with the WWF "Wild Heart of Europe" award.

The joint reserve will consist of three zones as defined by the Biosphere Reserve concept. The core & buffer zones (legally protected areas) include an area of about 260,000 ha, the transition zone (area of sustainable resource management) and area of about 540,000 ha, totalling about 800,000 ha.

The joint governmental declaration is a major step towards the establishment of the Mura-Drava-Danube Trans-Boundary Biosphere Reserve between all five countries. It is of huge significance for conservation in the region and an example of transfrontier cooperation to jointly manage precious freshwater resources.

The TBR MDD, once finally achieved, the Governments will be honoured with a 'Gift to the Earth', WWF's highest accolade for applauding environmental leadership in a globally significant contribution to the protection of the living world.

### CONSERVATION BENEFITS

A Mura-Drava-Danube Trans-Boundary Biosphere Reserve will provide a strong international framework for developing common protection and management of the area's unique natural values and forming a catalyst for sustainable development in the region. The reserve will consist of a common zonation plan (one core, - buffer, - and transition zone) as well as a joint structure devoted to its co-ordination. It will facilitate the sharing of information, skills and staff between both countries and the development of collaborative protection, management, research and sustainable development projects. The degradation of the natural values of the area due to river regulation, gravel and sand extraction and existing hydropower dams needs to be tackled jointly, including the restoration of the vital conditions of the river ecosystem.

The protection and management of the area within a Biosphere Reserve will be beneficial for achieving compliance with the requirements of the EU Water Framework Directives, Flood Directives and Habitats and Birds Directives. It will likely foster and attract major funding of international donors such as the EU.



Nature: Intact river landscape of the Mura in Croatia (Credit: A. Mohl/WWF).



Culture: Traditional livelihood in Croatia (Credit: M. Romulic).

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

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