



WWF believes that our vision goes hand in hand with ecological approaches to flood management, and our field demonstrations aim to prove this at the local scale. But this switch from arable to wetland use in the catchment also has important implications in the planning of the forthcoming agri-environmental measures. With the aim of the field implementation of the vision in the area of the Szamos-Krasznaközi water retention zone, WWF has been involved and continues to strive towards making available various financial supports for making the switch. This could apply not only along the Tisza, but also on other Hungarian rivers and indeed anywhere in the EU. Thus the activities on the ground also serve as a demonstration for the forthcoming reform of the Common Agricultural Policy as a whole.

Background information

The Hungarian government's response to the 1999-2001 flood extremes is called the "New Vásárhelyi Plan" (or known by its Hungarian acronym, VTT). This plan (and since, May, 2004 the implementation too) proposes six, later 14 lowland retention reservoirs which will be used to manage future flood events. WWF Hungary is deeply engaged in this process, and will use its leverage to argue for a more ecological, sustainable development approach to reservoir creation and management, and for the return to living river reaches and floodplains. WWF's vision on the Tisza and the New Vásárhelyi Plan are inseparable elements and there is a continuous search for understanding between the parties.

Since nature – and water – knows no borders, WWF is also working in the upper Tisza in neighbouring Romania. Through the WWF Danube-Carpathian Programme, an office was opened in Baia Mare in order to implement One Europe More Nature activities in the headwaters and tributaries which drain the Oas-Gutai plateau in Maramures. Also aiming at mechanisms for integrated land-, water-, and flood management in harmony with nature and serving local economic needs, the Romanian activities are complimentary to those in Hungary.

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Tisza Vision

A Vision for the Tisza and its floodplains

The agricultural management of the riparian landscape along the Tisza has always adapted to the geographical, climatic and economic conditions. Within the last four to six generations this practice has been changed, modernized and is now seen to have failed. The degradation of the Tisza is one of Hungary's most pressing concerns.

WWF's long-term vision is a **fully ecologically functioning Tisza river which is connected to its restored floodplains and wetlands and which not only supports a variety of important habitats and species but also which underpins the entire economic viability of the region, including through natural and effective management of floods.**

To achieve this, it is necessary to reactivate, restore and re-connect the floodplains, for example by introducing site-specific agricultural measures which offer an economic incentive in the critical, first, years of such a profound change in land-use.

Through the One Europe, More Nature project WWF is pulling together various experts, stakeholders and institutions in order to draft the long-term vision for the Tisza river. WWF helps to convince farmers, local communities, and national decision-makers that flood and floodplain management cannot be separated. This work is supported by scientific baseline studies, independent consultations and continuous campaigning. The Government of Hungary already decided upon an innovative approach to flood management, based on a system of water reservoirs for use in times of high flows. Our aim is to shift the planning of the 14 water reservoirs (security water storage areas) to the direction of reactivation of deep elevation floodplains: wetland restoration for nature and for economic uses; reconnection of floodplains and the river; sustainable development based on the river and its wetland resources.



This aerial photo was taken in the Upper-Tisza valley during the spring-flood in March 2000.

Tisza Vision

The 14 retention zones total some 70,000 hectares of Tisza floodplain and therefore constitute an important first step towards revitalization of the river basin – if properly managed. Through the One Europe, More Nature field sites (see map) WWF and partners are demonstrating that these areas can be managed in a way which is positive to nature, flood management and the local economy. Thus the first practical steps are being taken for the achievement of the vision.

These steps centre on a change in land-use. A switch – from the failed, monoculture, hydrologically damaging arable crop production – across to a mixed patchwork of wet and intermittently wet land-uses including wet grazing, alternative agriculture, fishing, tourism and recreation, plus of course straightforward water retention as required by the VTT.





Since the New Vásárhelyi Plan (also known as VTT – see below the explanation of the Hungarian flood-prevention scheme in the Tisza basin) has now started on the ground, WWF aims to route the country's second largest

investment (within the next three years worth a half billion Euro) to the direction from mere flood-protection to a complex river management.

All the actions related to the VTT are implemented as necessary components in the long-term strategy for realization of the vision: for a healthy and viable Tisza.



Drawing: Pagony Landscape Architecture Studio

Yet as mentioned above, the areas outside the designated retention zones are also vital. By showing how beneficial this “natural approach” can be, WWF and partners aim to extend the restoration beyond the dykes. Often, this makes sense hydrologically anyway. An example where this is already happening, pioneered by the Bokartisz (public benefit company) at Cigánd, is an excellent and inspirational lesson. Here the various stakeholders decided to leave for flooding large areas outside the dyke, thus effectively re-connecting the Tisza with the Bodrogek, the largest surviving open floodplain along the Tisza.