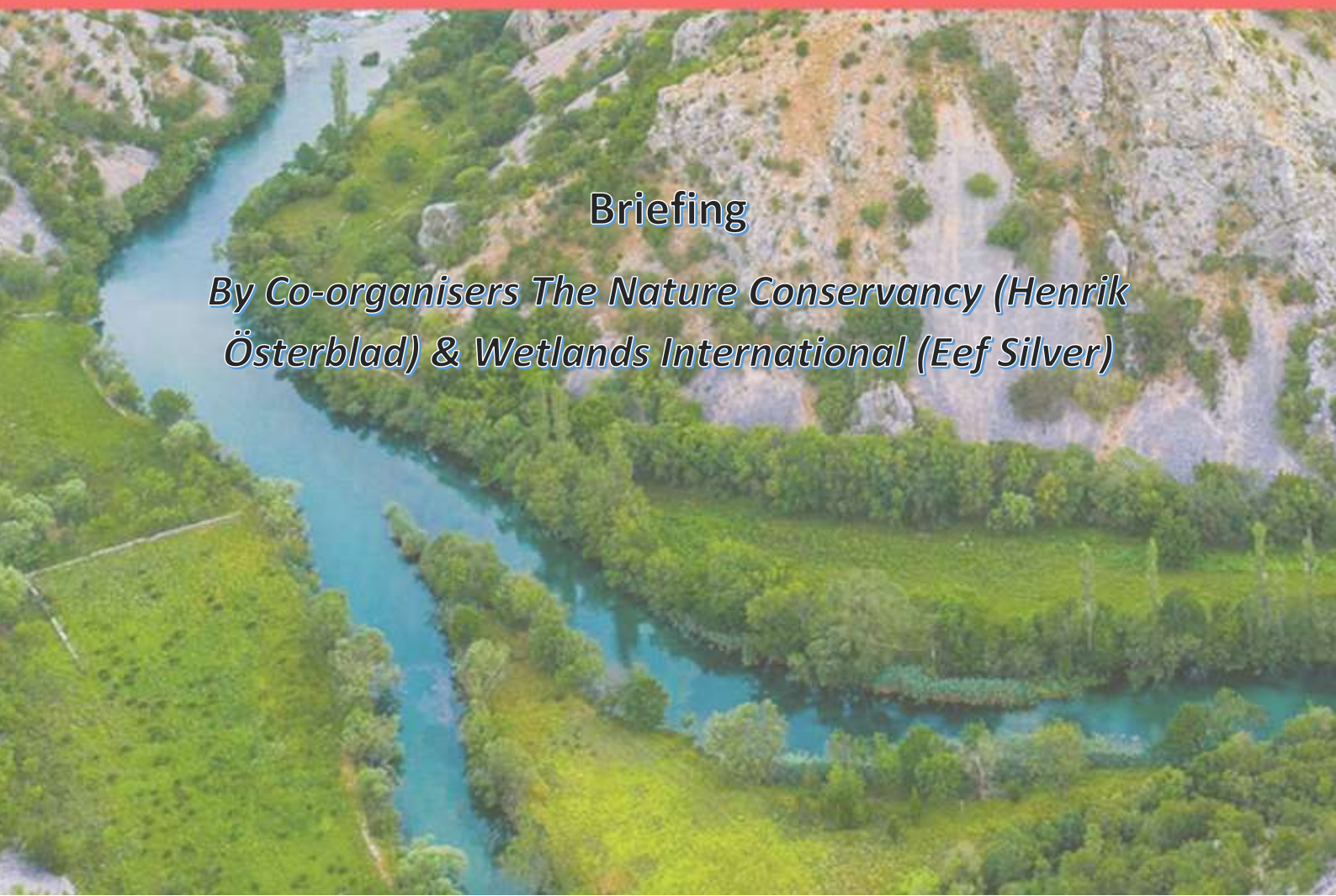
# RESTORATION & PROTECTION OF FRESHWATER IN EUROPE

## RIVERS AS LIFELINES FOR PEOPLE & NATURE

The Nature Conservancy Europe

Wetlands International



Briefing

*By Co-organisers The Nature Conservancy (Henrik Österblad) & Wetlands International (Eef Silver)*

**The Current Situation for Freshwater in Europe**

The conference was opened by **Chris Baker** (Moderator for the event), **Programme Head Water Resources for Wetlands International global office** and **Yurena Lorenzo, head of office for Wetlands International Europe**, as a representative of one of the co-hosting organisations. Ms. Lorenzo highlighted the reasons for which the event had been organised, namely, to draw attention to the dire situation of freshwater ecosystems, including rivers and wetlands, their biodiversity and the opportunities to improve protection and restoration. She noted that **rivers are one of the most endangered ecosystems in the world**. In Europe, this situation is not any better. Rivers are increasingly disconnected due to dams and other hard infrastructure, meaning few rivers are still free flowing. Over one-third of Europe's freshwater species are threatened. The EU has the urgently needed policy instruments to protect and restore our rivers, notably the Water Framework Directive. This directive has proven to be successful when properly implemented and enforced. Yet, **more actions are needed to bring Europe's freshwater ecosystems into good health**. The EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 is a big step in the right direction. Ms. Lorenzo reminded us that **it is the task of all of us to ensure no further delay – we must reinforce our efforts to protect and restore rivers and the species that depend on them, with all stakeholders**. Wetlands International Europe will continue to work with EC, European Parliament, Members States, and stakeholders to improve the joint efforts to achieve these objectives.

**MEP Pär Holmgren** of the Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance, and a representative of the Swedish Green Party (Miljöpartiet de Gröna), followed up with a speech opening with his personal drive to bring science into policy and practice. He has been working on the topic of climate change for a long time and currently his main focus is to bring climate change issues into the policy discussions, as they have a large effect on society. He went on to stress the problem of temperature rise and the speed of changes in the hydrological cycle which cause extreme rain showers and heatwaves. An increase in water stress will have an impact on the environment and economic sectors. Coastal zones will be under great pressure of rising sea level, one of the main problems being the intrusion of saline water. Given the importance of these problems to everyone and everything in Europe, Mr. Holmgren stated that **discussions on climate change should be the basis for all discussions in the European Parliament and in Europe,** and not be restricted to the Environment Committee. The Common Agricultural Policy, subject to voting in the European Parliament next week, is the one of the most important topics in the EU in this respect. **Nature and biodiversity doing well is the best insurance we can have in Europe.**

Finally, rounding up the opening of the Conference, Hans Stielstra, Deputy Head of Unit, from the European Commission's Clean Water Unit in DG Environment gave the Commission's perspective on the status of European rivers and the existing legislative framework to address the pressures on rivers, focusing on the EU Water Framework Directive. He noted that the EU Water Framework Directive regulates 1.2 million km of rivers with the goal to achieve good status in 2027. The Commission expects Member States to do their utmost to ensure degraded rivers achieve this objective. But the **EU Water Framework Directive also requires that no deterioration takes place**. Mr. Stielstra highlighted the current implementation gap; there is a need to go from ~45% of rivers in good ecological condition now to 100% in 2027. **The presence of barriers, weirs and dams are a major problem for rivers and addressing those would be a major step in the right direction**. Good status does not just mean restoration of river continuity, but also achieving standards for chemical quality, biology and flow

standards, for example. The Commission recently concluded that the EU Water Framework Directive is largely fit for purpose but there is room for improvement in implementation, enforcement, monitoring and reporting, overcoming the investment gap, and integration into other policy areas. Mr. Stielstra concluded his introduction by saying that he is convinced that **momentum has been reached for addressing problems for rivers and surface waters, based on the European Green Deal and associated initiatives such as the Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 and the Farm to Fork Strategy.** These new initiatives in combination with the existing strong legislative framework and its deadlines, will provide **room for better integration of water concerns into other policy areas and generate the resources** that are needed for investment in river protection and restoration.

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**Free-flowing Lifelines for All - River Conservation**

To set the tone for the rest of the event, Eef Silver, Policy Officer for Water at Wetlands International, opened with a session on the "**Main Pressures on Freshwater Ecosystems & Water Quality**", with the aim to ensure from the outset there was a clear picture of what issues our freshwater environment is facing, especially focused on European Rivers, and what these issues stem from.

Only 40% of our freshwater bodies are in good ecological status and 38% in good chemical status in Europe, affecting freshwater fish and other biota in our rivers, lakes and wetlands. Habitat loss (Ca. 66% of wetlands, and 95% of floodplains). As for the cause of the current situation for rivers, these are well documented, being pollution (from agriculture, industry, households & emerging sources like pharmaceuticals and microplastics).

Notably, the greatest issue affecting rivers is that of physical alteration to their natural channel or flow regime, leading to direct degradation of habitats for freshwater species, with the main reason being that of fragmentation of the river continuum by in-stream barriers. The situation developing in the Western Balkans was highlighted as particularly difficult, with a balancing act between freshwater conservation and renewable energy development taking place. Currently, the biggest threat to freshwater biodiversity in the region is small Hydropower Plants.

Eef Silver concluded the ongoing legislative efforts such as the Water Framework Directive (WFD) are a good basis for tackling the above-mentioned issues, a Directive without which the situation for rivers would be far worse than it is today.

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"**Why Restore and Protect Rivers, and Why Now?",** and what measures can achieve both favourable conservation status and effectively reverse biodiversity decline in our rivers, as elaborated in Eef Silver's presentation, was tackled by Henrik Österblad, Freshwater Conservation Coordinator at The Nature Conservancy Europe.

The fact the EU and its Member States have a solid and purposeful water framework in place is no question. Even if implementation lags behind in certain countries, for the next 10 years, it effectively combines with the upcoming 2030 Biodiversity Strategy, the global Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), as well as the UN Decade of Restoration to provide political and legal momentum to restore and protect our rivers, not only in Europe but World Wide. This is where Europe can lead by example, being on the forefront of water policy.

To date, large and basin scale approaches to river continuity (stream and floodplain) restoration have been limited in scope, except for a few countries, and the same can be said for protection designations for entire rivers in Europe. It was, and can be, concluded that these efforts need to be stepped up, in order to fully implement the EU environmental acquis as well as upcoming obligations stemming from the Global conversation about biodiversity decline.

As for restoration measures, there is a clear correlation between removing obsolete barriers in rivers, including other related measures restoring overall connectivity, produce exponential positive ecological responses in rivers, often in a very short time frame. The same can be said for the social and economic (fisheries, recreation, resource availability, food sources, export, fishing licenses, etc.) response as a direct impact of fish and other species returning at a larger scale to the watershed and upper reaches of the rivers which were previously not accessible or blocked.

Concluding on the topic of the presentation, regarding the current and developing political momentum, there is a call for the EU to step up integration of freshwater conservation commitments in its approach for the coming decade – to ensure a coherent network of restored, protected, and fully functioning rivers through financing, setting targets and tackling prioritisation and other questions asked by the scientific community and Member States.

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**A Legal Framework in Place – Water Framework Directive; National Law: Achieving Good Ecological Status by 2027 - through Protect and Restore**

In this presentation, Mr. **Hans Stielstra** (DG Environment, Deputy Head of Unit, Clean Water) went into more detail about the EU water legislation and its requirements of Member States. He also looked at the relevance of the new EU Biodiversity Strategy for rivers and how the Strategy is connected to the work on the Water Framework Directive. The conclusions of the recent evaluation of the water related directives showed that the WFD has delivered a governance structure for integrated water resources management, that water status deterioration has slowed down across the EU and that there has been a reduction of pollution of rivers. But the big concern remains that there is a **significant delay in implementation**, partially due to the fact that half of the EU water bodies are under exemption from achieving the objectives. The European Commission is discussing at political level what actions are needed in the follow up **to accelerate achievement of the WFD objectives.** Mr. Stielstra went on to highlight the WFD requirements for reducing hydromorphological pressures on rivers. A major recent policy development is **the adoption of the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 which puts forward targets to restore freshwater ecosystems**. Specific targets are to restore ecological flows and restore 25,000 km of free-flowing rivers which can have amazing effects on biodiversity and the social and economic dimensions. Therefore, the Commission finds it extremely important to give these targets a lot of attention. Finally, Mr. Stielstra pointed at the **upcoming new legislation for restoration targets by 2021**, possibly including proposals for restoration targets on top of the WFD.

Ms. Eef Silver continued by diving a little bit more into the river restoration concept and the implementation gap of the WFD with respect to river restoration. She stated that the definition of river restoration is important in order to show the wider scope of restoration. The gap in river restoration efforts shows **the imbalance between the scale of pressures and the scale of restoration efforts implemented so far**. Interventions have improved water body status but only locally, not at water body scale. **More efforts are needed to achieve improvements of ecological status at water body scale** (larger scale restoration measures) and naturally, more funding is needed for that. Furthermore, **more attention needs to be given to the basin approach**, because restoring a local site

might not mean achieving Good Ecological Status as long as there are upstream pressures on the river. She illustrated these points by showing a case study of a small-scale restoration project at the river Glaven in the UK. Lessons learned were i.a. that restoration projects should not just focus on measures in and monitoring of the stream itself but also **adjacent wetlands and habitats, which can be particularly important for biodiversity restoration**. The size and scope of the restoration measure has to be proportional to the system size. She concluded that the new Biodiversity Strategy can support the achievement of the WFD objectives and go beyond it, e.g. by considering elements such as restoring connectivity at landscape level; binding targets for wetlands and small water bodies such as ponds, not covered by the WFD but relevant to achieve biodiversity targets in rivers; binding targets for restoring free flowing rivers; ring-fenced funds under the new Biodiversity Strategy to increase investment in addition to the WFD economic principles; and finally, the role of Nature-Based Solutions.

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**Panel Discussion – River Conservation in Member States: Effective Restoration & Protection to date, Successful legal frameworks for River Conservation at National Level**

Member States Present (in order of presentations):

**Saija Koljonen**
(*Finland* - Freshwater Centre, Finnish Environment Institute, SYKE);

**Danijel Rojšek**
(*Slovenia* - Institute of The Republic of Slovenia For Nature Conservation; Zavod Republike Slovenije za varstvo narave)

**Corinne Belveze**
(*France* - Water Resources, aquatic environment and fresh-water fishing (EARM3); Water and Biodiversity Directorate, Ministry for the Ecological Transition)

**Fernando Magdaleno**
(*Spain* - Ministry for the Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge, Water Directorate)

Moderation: **Chris Baker** (Wetlands International)

For the panel discussion, the **four Member State representatives were asked to present what their respective countries have done so far on the restoration and protection of rivers**, pre- and post WFD. This included covering any obstacles to success of any efforts, including a discussion on where these current initiatives can evolve taking the new EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, including what can be, or should be, done overall to optimise efforts by Member States.

**Saija Koljonen** kick started the panel with coverage over what Finland has done to date. 64% of Finnish rivers are in good or excellent status, however there is still a major challenge of hydropower development since the 2nd World War, when permits were made "eternal" – though only one Hydropower plant is planned for construction in the country at present. In terms of what SYKE sees as important for a paradigm shift in fish conservation, is more research, environmentally friendly energy, Nature Based Solutions (NbS), cost-benefit analyses, alongside a step up of political ambition and will to tackle the issues mentioned. Restoring 25,000 km of European rivers is a 'new hope' for the future of both Finnish and pan-European rivers.

**Danijel Rojšek** continued the discussion with an overview of the Soča river, its nature, and the issues that Europe's oldest protected river is facing. Slovenia was one of the first countries to designate a river as protected, back in 1976. The issues this landmark designation is facing is gravel abstraction, and expensive bank erosion protection, which from discussions can be better protected by purchasing 50m of either side of the river and letting the river take its course, for example. There are calls on the Slovenian Water Administration to step up their approach to restoration, close extraction sites, restore degraded banks, and revitalise 'dead' meanders. As such, there seems to be numerous outstanding issues which need to be tackled on the Soca River, even with it's legal protection.

**Corinne Belveze** presented France's legal framework for restoration, which contains several provisions for river management, for managing biological flows. Focusing on the discussion around the EU 2030 Biodiversity Strategy, and on river continuity, France has a classification system with two categories, "List 1" – one which lists rivers which need to be protected because of their have good biological status, biological reservoir or are migratory access – no new obstacles may be build. "List 2" details rivers to be restored. Here, the legal framework requires sufficient flow of both water and sediment in the river for its healthy functioning and aims to do so within the next 5-10 years. The current aim is to reconcile these lists and integrate them into French Water law. As there are stakeholders who have interests on these rivers (renewable energy developers, fish farmers, etc.) National reconciliation action plan was launched in 2018 to find solutions for all stakeholders, aiming to find case by case basis solutions for conflicts of interest, considering local context and issues. The key next step is the question of a second prioritisation, as to which dams and barriers to remove, with over 100,000 barriers to address. Now, this second prioritisation is underway with the aim to assess 5000 weirs by 2027. The new EU biodiversity Strategy for 2030 is seen as a new opportunity for France to implement these legal requirements better, and showcase benefits for stakeholders.

**Fernando Magdaleno** presented the audience and rest of the panel with an overview of current restoration strategy, and what has been achieved with Spain's rivers, lakes and groundwater, which is currently in place to enhance the protection of their most pristine river courses and lakes. Currently, Spain is trying to consolidate the restoration efforts in the country. Bit by bit, the aim is to create more well-connected protected river corridors and systems. Spain has been very active in restoring freshwater habitats: so far, the country has removed almost 300 weirs and small dams and reconnected a large array of river reaches. The same goes for other restoration activity, removing artificial levees and augmenting sediment. Spain has a significant flood-defence approach, using floodplain excavation for nature flood defence, and floodable parks in cities, while using controlled floods to test the resilience of the natural system and its functionality to protect. So far, the wave of restoration activity listed above has resulted in an increase in recreational uses, and promoted river stewardship, adding an element of responsibility and ownership for a healthy, functioning river.

The biggest obstacle in Finland was and is the water act, which was not geared towards water protection but for water use when it was written a good time ago. The basis for the law is people based -however there is more and more talk about changing the law, because of the aspects for hydropower being seen as outdated. In one instance, there was a 150 year wait for a fishway to be constructed to bypass a dam. Problems seem to be similar across some other member states.

In Slovenia 2018, there was a proposal to potentially remove 3 dams on the Soča, in the long term this may happen since there is a lack of energy, as the gravel filling up reservoirs make hydropower less viable, and others. The river is shared between Slovenia and Italy. Compared to Slovenian river protection policy the Italian use of the river is mainly geared towards using the Soča for irrigation,

rendering the Soča a small stream in comparison to upstream – hence, this international aspect needs to be addressed, as well as the issue of upstream fragmentation, when looking at ensuring the best possible conditions for Europe's first river protection designation.

As for Spain's experience, the EU 2030 Biodiversity Strategy combined with the WFD can effectively be described as a 'combined tool' which can effectively be used to potentially expand on the current individual Member State's actions on restoration and protection of rivers. So far, obstacle removal is a proven concept, but these efforts need further and be more communicated across Europe, to people and organisations alike what the benefits are, and translate actions into things which people can understand well – ecosystem services, water cycle recovery, etc. – rendering the technical something understood by the majority. Our Main challenge is to improve communication aspects of restoration and protection and take the successful examples and make them transferable to a greater level of basins in Spain.

Similarly, in France, the take on river conservation is close to that of Spain's experience. The restoration and protection of rivers can be challenging, and communication is a main challenge and seen as a key important factor in France. There is currently an attempt to create tools which can be used a local level to address the finding of solutions, where these are needed, reflecting the questions around river conservation France is currently facing with relevant stakeholders.

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## The Tools for River Conservation – Funding, Designations & Definitions

On the question on how finance restoration projects, Rewilding Europe Representatives Wouter Helmer (Senior Adviser) and Helena Newell (Enterprise Manager) spoke on the topic "**Dam Removal: Financial Models for Scaling up**" covering preliminary ideas for scaling up dam removal in Europe (and beyond). The models explored take varying approaches, but all are guided with the aim to further restoration of the river network and/or finance past projects.

When looking into feasibility, and the likelihood of support for these financing approaches, it was found that new fish economies, biodiversity offsets, hydropower offsets, small wind and solar conversion of HPP, buying and obtaining land after dam removal are the measures which were the most promising for financing dam removal projects and initiatives. Those models covered during the presentation were the following, ranging from the most promising from a financial and functional perspective to the least:

- "New fish economies " - Opening rivers and allowing more fish mobility will allow for more angling, and with catch and release – combined with permits and a local partner/overseeing body – can pay towards financing a project and are good alternatives to expensive fish ladders.

- "Small hydropower to wind conversion" – permits for wind and solar can be linked to the removal of HPPs – 5-20 MW HPPs can effectively be replaced by 1-2 windmills, and local ownership of these can create support for this type of activity overall.

- "Sediment solutions" – As dams disturb natural sediment dynamics, leading to increased costs downstream. Dam removal upstream can be used as an alternative measure and effectively

be financed by the transfer of management costs for bank, shore and coastal reinforcements, since sediment supply is restored, mitigating erosion.

· "Sales of land after dam removal" – Some big dams flooded large areas of land. This land is often of value, and can outweigh the monetary value of the dam itself, which means down the line, dam removal can also act as a sustainable development of floodplains upstream of the dam, with partners such as farmers, foresters, tourism sectors etc.

Those approaches with low or medium low potential included Improving water quality, "the sand engine", support for specialised dam removal companies, sediment solutions, and sales of land after dam removal. The most promising and high likelihood of success measures were:

- "New fish economies ",
  "Biodiversity offsets",
  "Hydropower offsetting",
  "Small hydropower to wind conversion" &
  "Buying/obtaining dams/rights"

Next steps include exploring enabling conditions of the above-mentioned financing methods per country, as the important thing to remember is that no two countries are the same and may have different enabling conditions for different types of financing approaches.

In Sweden, the opportunity is particularly great, as all hydropower must be relicensed between 2022 and 2036, under the Nationell Prövningsplan (NAP): Owners of HPPs under 10 GWh/year can choose to either implement environmental mitigation measures, or decommission their plant, with the a fund in place for financing action.

Rewilding Europe are currently in the process of exploring mechanisms with Älvräddarna, and are working on a pilot, how to maximise the number of dams removed under the new licensing plan. Overall, the options for financing dam removal seem viable, numerous, and varied, and can be effective when applied for restoration projects.

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## Durable Freshwater Protection a framework and cases including the Wild & Scenic Rivers Act

Tara Moberg, Freshwater Advisor at TNC, in the USA, presented on the topic of protecting rivers in the long term, and the tools to do so. As for what Europe can do to tackle the issue, inspiration can be found in the USA, in the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (WSRA).

Currently, 500 dams are planned or under construction in already protected areas, and ther are already 1249 located in protected areas, which means altogether, the question of protecting their connectivity

The WSRA states "*rivers of the United States needs to be complemented by a policy that would preserve other selected rivers or sections thereof in their free-flowing condition to protect the water quality of such rivers and to fulfil other vital national conservation purposes*", with the aim to protect rivers of outstandingly remarkable scenic, recreational, geologic, fish and wildlife, cultural or similar

values. The key point emphasised, is that these values should be preserved in free-flowing condition and include protection of any immediate environments. The WSRA uses several classes to define protection levels and takes an eligibility with to “outstandingly remarkable values” (ORVs) of rivers in question, which includes specific species of conservation concern, amongst other relevant factors.

In conclusion, the WSRA offers a framework on top of current EU legislation, which can serve to effectively conserve rivers and their biodiversity, Riverine ecosystems conservation has not been a priority in the design, management and evaluations of protected areas, and an organized approach to highlighting potential protection mechanisms and their applications to support more effective freshwater protection is lacking. However, no one way is best suited in all circumstances for river protection, depending on local factors and existing conditions, including legal, cultural and traditional contexts.

They key takeaway is that river protection mechanisms and their applications must be designed to develop interventions that address threats over time to river ecosystems and the processes (e.g. flow, connectivity) that are critical to sustain the values identified by communities, municipalities, and countries. Also, protection designations must be *Durable*, in the long term, reinforcing legal, social, and economic structures in order to be successful. It can be stated, the Water Framework Directive already tackles these aspects, however the question of extra measures related to designations of rivers as protected “areas” remains a central question, considering the new EU 2030 Biodiversity Strategy and its protection target (“30 by 30”).

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**Zooming in: Lessons learned in the Western Balkans current evolving restoration and protection**

Ms. Irma Popović Dujmović, biologist by background and working at WWF Adria, brought a piece of **good news from the Western Balkans to the event, showing its rich biodiversity values** thanks to its location on the intersection of four biogeographical regions in Europe. This results in many different landscapes, rivers and species, especially fish, cave fauna, molluscs, invertebrates, and flora, many of which are endemic. Ms. Popović Dujmović pointed out that unfortunately much data is lacking, and very little research has been done, especially in Albania and Montenegro. **For some areas or rivers there is no data, which is problematic for assessing impacts of projects on certain sites**. But work is in progress. She showed that back in 2013, based on available data, two thirds of the rivers in the Wester Balkans had outstanding values in terms of preservation. **The main threat to these rivers comes from hydropower, mainly the large reservoirs and the recent boom in small hydropower plants which cause disappearance of water in large stretches of river.** In addition, rivers in the Balkans face pressures from sediment extraction, flood management measures such as dikes and embankments, pollution from wastewater and solid waste, navigation and agriculture. Ms. Popović Dujmović went on to explain the conservation efforts of WWF Adria and partners. They are addressing investments in small hydropower plants, pushing governments to stop subsidizing these projects. Secondly, they are working to set up a durable river protection mechanism to protect the free-flowing rivers and to promote the Western Balkans as a refuge of free-flowing rivers within Europe and globally. Furthermore, they are active in promoting river basin management planning according to the EU WFD and engage with the European Commission, alongside taking legal actions. Transformation of the currently traditional water management and energy sectors is a challenge. Ms. Popović Dujmović **welcomed the new EU Biodiversity Strategy as she believed that it will contribute to bend the curve of freshwater biodiversity loss,** such as the proposal to establish a network of freshwater protected areas.

**The Outlook & Challenges ahead:**

**Panel discussion: The Green Deal & Green Agenda for the Western Balkans and views from the region**

Panel Members:

**Madalina Ivanica**
European Commission (DG ENV)

**Neven Trenc**
Croatian Ministry for Sustainable Development, Institute for Nature Protection

**Irma Popović Dujmović**
WWF Adria

Moderation: **Henrik Österblad** (TNC)

**Madalina Ivanica** opened the panel discussion with an overview of the Green Agenda. The Green Agenda's economic investment plan for the Western Balkans was adopted on the 6th of October 2020, with aim to support long term economic recovery in the region, and to foster regional economic intervention. A new, sustainable economic model is in scope, which can bring benefits to the countries in economic terms but also in respect to protecting the environment. The Western Balkans is a very interesting and beautiful region of Europe that deserves much attention.

With the Green Agenda, there is a unique opportunity to move towards a circular economy, and the Commission has put forward guidelines for its implementation. This includes focus on several areas, including digital, infrastructure, and environmental aspects. On the environmental aspect, the Western Balkan countries' alignment with EU environmental acquis is an important and currently developing step. The countries should start thinking on and following the EU on these processes as soon as possible. The Green Agenda will be finalised at the Western Balkans Summit in Sofia (Bulgaria), on 10th of November 2020. Climate action, circular economy, biodiversity (protection and restoration), pollution, sustainable farming are the five pillars of the Agenda, mirroring the Green Deal for Europe.

In relation to water and biodiversity, restoration and protection, their financial, communications, and implementation aspects are very relevant to the Western Balkans and the Green Agenda pillar(s) - as it is an instrument to address water management, nature protection and biodiversity recovery. The aim is to maintain the unique biodiversity of the region, which is indeed important, and action should be considered especially where rivers have been destroyed or are facing significant pressures, we should try to get them back to their prior, more undisturbed state. And we need to protect the areas which may become protected sites in the future (Natura 2000).

Protection of the last pristine rivers in Europe, predominantly found in the Western Balkans, remains a challenge.

As for a perspective from Croatia (as seen by panellist **Neven Trenc**), on the question of Freshwater, accession, and experiences from the region, the country has the largest proportion of Natura 2000

areas (37%) in the country. As such, the Green Agenda is high on the agenda, it has been discussed in depth – and freshwater systems have been emphasised as one key element, especially restoration and connectivity questions. Currently, Croatia is learning what the best way to restore rivers, for their overall improvement and other benefits related to their restoration and aim to elaborate more guidance on how to restore rivers (obstacle removal pilot projects). Taking the sheer variation and number of different types of freshwater habitats and water bodies, the core elements for the best possible outcome for all the different types need to be elaborated. After the pilot projects, Croatia will move towards a Basin approach if possible. In terms of what this means for the rest of the region, there is acknowledgment that others in the region can learn from Croatia's restoration endeavours, especially since the countries in the region share these unique freshwater systems, and with these being affected by the same issues region-wide.

Hearing from WWF Adria (**Irma Popovic**), representing the view from a CSO on the Western Balkans and Green Agenda. The richness and importance of Western Balkan freshwater biodiversity really needs to be stressed; however, one main problem is a lack of freshwater protected areas and places, which are much needed. Now, many currently protected areas are lacking meaningful management plans, essentially being 'paper parks'. The law around Nature protection is sound, however the implementation is lagging. As for the Green Agenda, the commitment in the Agenda could be proposed as legally binding, so the targets are taken more seriously and approached earnestly. Change can be difficult but involving all relevant actors and countries from the start will make the transition easier and more effective, in implementing a Green Agenda for the entire region. As for the EU's approach, WWF Adria asks the Commission to be more proactive in approaching the countries

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**Scaling up: Europe**

Ms. Claire Baffert, Senior Water Policy Advisor at WWF (European Policy Office) and chairperson of the Living Rivers Europe coalition, reflected on the European Parliament Resolution on the implementation of the water legislation, currently under preparation. The Resolution follows the Fitness Check of the water legislation. The question is how the EP can make a difference for the implementation in this new Resolution? Ms. Baffert noted that it is positive that the EP addresses this key question in its Resolution, pinpointing essential issues such as funding for water measures, integration of WFD environmental objectives in sectoral policies and addressing the overuse of exemptions in the upcoming River Basin Management Plans (RBMPs). The **Living Rivers Europe coalition thinks that the Resolution should be tougher on addressing the key drivers of ecosystem degradation, especially the impact of specific sectors (hydropower, navigation, agriculture**). Moreover, it should be a **warning call to Member States and Commission, sending the message that barrier construction contradicts the WFD and Biodiversity Strategy objectives.** It should call out to the Commission to work with the Member States to achieve the target of 25,000 km of free-flowing rivers before the adoption of the RBMPs in 2021. Also, it should propose that public funding for new hydropower plants will be redirected to the refurbishment of existing hydropower plants to make them more efficient and to mitigate their environmental impact. Plans for shifting road freight to inland waterways freight announced in the Green Deal threaten the integrity of rivers and the Parliament should call upon the Commission to ensure this commitment will be in line with the 'no deterioration principle' of the existing environmental legislation. The upcoming Zero Pollution Action Plan for water, air and soil and the Climate Adaptation Strategy are opportunities for steering finances

more into the direction of Nature-Based solutions. Ms. Baffert concluded by saying that, **the one thing in common here is the lack of political will to prioritise freshwater ecosystems. It seems that at the political level there is not enough understanding of their importance to our life, our health and our planet. Rivers are Lifelines for People and Nature.** The Living Rivers Europe coalition counts on the EP to pass this message on and bring it into the political debate.

Reacting to Ms. Baffert's presentation, some participants of the event added some main points they would like to see reflected in the messages to improve the implementation of water legislation:

- conservation and restoration of floodplains and wetlands adjacent to water bodies. The assessment scheme of the WFD does not capture those and N2000 only parts thereof based on listed endangered habitats.
- more international coordination because every country has the responsibility for its biodiversity, but biodiversity does not recognize national borders.
- An option could be to relicense the system, e.g. the system in Sweden should be scaled up to the European level: improving remaining dams and offsetting their impact by removing other dams for at least the same river length.
- Incorporating the life cycle costs of dams into policy and regulatory decisions. Specifically, the cost and requirements of decommissioning are incorporated into business as usual when new infrastructure is considered. This is being required of the wind and solar industry in the U.S. and we're working to translate it to the hydropower industry. Very complex - but worth exploring.

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**Practical and Legislative Outlook to Conserve and Restore Rivers – summary from the discussions - Closing Statements**

**Marianne Kleiberg**, Europe Managing Director at TNC Europe, rounded off the conference with reflections and closing comments, thanking all participants and speakers for their contributions and valuable input:

The importance to tackle freshwater biodiversity decline was mentioned, as we know that Freshwater ecosystems are the most vulnerable ones at present, with many reports pointing out that they are effectively collapsing. We are entering the 24th hour in our chances to reverse this trend.

It is great and encouraging to see that the EU is very committed to restoring freshwater habitats, while also making huge strides towards protecting its terrestrial and marine areas.

Thus, it would be great if Council would endorse an ambitious Strategy, showing Member States, but also the global community, that Europe "means business" – and we don't have any more time to waste.

TNC has always been for real solutions, which benefit both nature and people in a holistic manner. Therefore, TNC would encourage Commission, Member States and Parliament, to draw up a "freshwater future" for Europe, including networks of healthy, resilient freshwater systems. As many of the European rivers are shared by two or more countries, the restoration efforts should also be shared and coordinated among them. By putting freshwater habitats on the path of recovery, we can ensure that we have a wide commitment to our future generation's benefit and enjoyment.

However, what would be ideal, would be to see that various EU policies and strategies are working towards the same “outcomes”. The protect and restore targets of the EU 2030 Biodiversity Strategy, the objectives of the WFD and Habitats Directives should all be treated in a complementary manner so that they are mutually supporting each other effectively.

In essence, TNC, and our colleagues in other Nature Organisations, would like to see restored, protected free-flowing rivers across the continent.

TNC recognizes that it is a huge undertaking. However, based on our experience in the US, we know for a fact that investment in restoration in protection has a high financial return. Of course, the upholding and restoring freshwater habitats will, as mentioned, also have an even greater non-material value for the people of Europe, and for all humanity.

TNC’s slogan is to “protect land and water” and we want to walk the talk, and together with other actors in the area, TNC would like to offer our assistance, both in the policy arena as well as on the ground.

*End*