



The Ministerial Declaration signed by the Ministers of Austria, Croatia, Hungary, Serbia and Slovenia in charge of environmental protection (Budapest, March 2011) contributed to the preparation of the transboundary nomination of UNESCO Biosphere Reserve "Mura - Drava - Danube", which is the only transboundary biosphere reserve connecting five states. The Serbian National Commission for Cooperation with UNESCO at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its Committee for UNESCO's The Man and the Biosphere Programme supported and coordinated the preparation of nomination for the so-called "Amazon of Europe", a green belt along the Drava, Mura and Danube, which is a highly protected area linking the countries of the region, their natural resources and culture. Serbia's support to this transboundary nomination is crucial in connecting and expanding protected areas in Europe and beyond, and the nomination was supported by all relevant institutions such as the World Wide Fund, the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR), the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the Ramsar Convention and Wetlands International. The deadline for submitting the Mura - Drava - Danube nomination is 30 September 2013, and it will be considered during UNESCO's The Man and the Biosphere Committee meeting next year in Paris. For the time being, Serbia has only one biosphere reserve Golija - Studenica (2001).

### **Mura-Drava-Danube Trans-boundary Biosphere Reserve: Serbia and the EU in the common natural environment**

The joint initiative of the WWF (World Wide Fund for Nature) and EuroNatur for the preservation of the "Amazon of Europe", establishing the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve "Mura - Drava - Danube", is the first protected area in the world which is shared and jointly managed by five countries – Serbia, Croatia, Hungary, Slovenia and Austria. This common "green vision" will be achieved by establishing Europe's largest river protected area. With the inclusion of parts from Serbia to Austria, it will encompass an area of 800 000 hectares. The UNESCO Biosphere Reserve "Mura -Drava - Danube" is a symbol of regional cooperation and sustainable development and is an excellent example of an initiative that combines the protection of biodiversity and mutual understanding between the peoples of the East and West.

The area around the rivers Mura, Drava and Danube are home to the most numerous population of white-tailed eagle in Europe and other endangered species such as the little tern, black stork, beaver and otter. It is also the last sanctuary of the nearly extinct bastard sturgeon fish, and the annual migration of more than 250 000 birds. The river ecosystem is vital for the

people who live there – it provides them with clean water and natural flood protection, ensures favourable conditions for subterranean waters and water self-purification. This is essential for drinking water, sustainable forestry, agriculture and fishing.

A network of 13 protected areas along these rivers highlights their ecological importance, including the world-famous Natural Park "Kopacki rit" at the confluence of the Drava and the Danube, Regional Park "Mura - Drava" in Croatia, Special Nature Reserve "Upper Danube" in Serbia and the National Park "Danube-Drava" in Hungary, as well as the Natura 2000 sites in Slovenia and Austria.

### **Serbia in the context of the "Amazon of Europe"**

In the framework of the "Amazon of Europe" in Serbia there are four protected areas, including a valuable Special Nature Reserve "Upper Danube". Among the most significant rare animal species of this area are the white-tailed eagle, black stork, ferruginous duck, wild cat, otter, badger, as well as the largest population of European reindeer in Serbia.

A large floodplain in northwest Vojvodina, which will become part of the Trans-boundary Biosphere Reserve "Mura - Drava - Danube", is one of the best preserved wetland units on the Danube running through Serbia. This stunning river scenery is an area of exceptional biodiversity and a centre of rare habitats such as large floodplain forests, river islands, gravel and sandy riverbanks, bayous and backwaters. In addition, it is characterized by cultural heritage that is living proof of the past of many nations and cultures.

### **Creation of the Reserve - "step by step"**

The initiative to protect these unique rivers and floodplains, often called the Amazon of Europe because of their rich biodiversity, has a long history. Since 1993, the WWF, EuroNatur and local NGOs have campaigned against the regulation of river, gravel and sand extraction, construction of dams and other destructive measures in the lower river basins of the Mura, Drava and the Danube. At the same time, the number of river restoration projects and the support of public institutions to these projects increased in individual countries. Over the past 15 years, the governments of all five countries have established 13 protected areas along their parts of these rivers, thus creating the basis for a step-by-step trans-boundary protection.

Croatia and Hungary signed a bilateral agreement in 2009, which was followed by the Joint Declaration signed in 2011 by the Ministers in charge of environmental protection of all the five countries. The Declaration established a biosphere reserve with the aim of environmental protection and cross-border cooperation. In July 2012, UNESCO MAB Committee in Paris officially approved the Croatian - Hungarian part of the biosphere reserve Mura - Drava - Danube. Since then, 80% of the territory of the future pentilateral river area of 800 hectares is under international protection.

Serbia will submit the nomination to UNESCO MAB Secretariat in Paris by the end of September 2013. The nominated area is extremely large and will represent the largest protected area in our country. Also, in addition to the Danube delta, it is the second most

important floodplain area in the Danube river basin.

The entire initiative is also part of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, which constitutes the basis for future EU funding.

#### Changing the way of managing rivers

- Transition from traditional to modern and environment-friendly river management;
- Ending the practice of channelling the rivers and further extraction of sand and gravel from river beds;
- Renewing the destroyed parts of the riverbed;
- Stopping the sudden fluctuations in water levels at the very last dam on the Drava near Donja Dubrava;
- Halting any further plans for the construction of new hydropower plants in the Transboundary Biosphere Reserve "Mura - Drava - Danube".

#### **For more information:**

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#### **WWF - World Wide Fund for Nature**

WWF is one of the largest, globally recognized, independent organizations, dealing with the protection of nature and has almost 5 million supporters and an active global network in over 100 countries. The WWF's mission is to stop the destruction of the environment and to create a future in which humans live in harmony with nature by preserving the world's biological diversity, the sustainable use of natural resources, reducing pollution and over-consumption.

More information: [www.panda.org/serbia](http://www.panda.org/serbia)