



Freshwater in Central and Eastern Europe

BRIEFING • JULY 2020

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A Green Recovery for CEE's Freshwater Habitats

All life on Earth needs water. Water is the world's most precious resource. Freshwater habitats such as lakes, rivers, streams, wetlands and aquifers house an incredible proportion of the world's biodiversity. More than 10% of all known animals and about 50% of all known fish species are found in freshwater habitats. However, these precious ecosystems are increasingly threatened by habitat shrinkage and deterioration, climate change and overexploitation driven by human activities and consumption patterns. Freshwater habitats are in much worse condition than forest, grassland or coastal system habitats. In fact, freshwater species have declined by 83% since 1970, much faster than terrestrial or marine species. The Danube River Basin is a prime example of a vital freshwater system at risk.

The Danube River runs through ten different countries, making the Danube River Basin the most international river basin in the world. It provides drinking water for 20 million people and is home to unique species like the white pelican and [sturgeon](#), many of which are critically endangered. Moreover, Central Eastern Europe (CEE) includes some of the most important wetlands around the globe. For example, the Danube Delta is home to over 320 bird species during the summer. The Danube River is also central to the future 5-country [Mura-Drava-Danube Biosphere Reserve](#), often referred to as the "Amazon of Europe."

What we mean by Green Recovery

The **Covid-19 pandemic** and its immediate health, social and economic impacts require an urgent response. Beyond this, however, public stimulus packages to relaunch the economy are already being developed, requiring crucial decisions on where these substantial financial flows should be directed or through which channels and vehicles, in order to bring most benefits.

Badly designed recovery plans in response to the Covid-19 outbreak risk exacerbating the social inequalities and environmental crisis. Instead, **governments must draw up their plans in a way that helps tackle social inequalities, climate and environmental breakdown, and the need to improve long-term resilience**, by taking a consistent approach across the board, and aiming clearly at a green, equitable and resilient recovery.

WWF is calling on the European Union and its governments to demonstrate leadership and foresight by continuing to follow, and reinforcing, a trajectory towards a resilient, sustainable and just economy and society, **in line with the European Green Deal, the Paris climate agreement, biodiversity goals and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).**



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However, over the past 150 years the Danube Basin and its wetlands have been heavily impacted by human activity. The main threats stem from unsustainable flood management plans, hydropower, navigation and drainage of lands due to intensive agricultural practices. The resulting dikes, dams, drainage and dredging activities have straightened large parts of the rivers, and cut off and dried out their floodplains. Overall, more than 80% of the Danube's wetlands have been lost, and with them, the ecosystem services they provide to people like flood protection, fish production, recreation, livelihoods and biomass.

What we need to do

How to make a recovery strategy 'green'?

Our decision makers in the EU, representatives in national governments and parliaments, and spokespersons at the municipal level must ensure just and sustainable recovery plans, by

1. directing **at least 50% of recovery plans into environmentally sustainable activities;**
2. **not supporting environmentally harmful activities;**
3. delivering social benefits through a **"just transition" for all;**
4. upholding and strengthening existing **environmental standards and policies;**
5. **communicating benefits** of improving the overall environmental health of societies;
6. and ensuring that **EU support to third countries adheres to the same principles.**

...and rethink regulation to strengthen resilience. This requires

7. strengthening and continuing the **implementation of the European green Deal;**
8. **ending environmentally harmful subsidies** and scaling up **environmental fiscal reform;**
9. reforming EU fiscal rules to **facilitate public investment in decarbonising the economy;**
10. accelerating **EU sustainable finance policies** to shift the trillions;
11. ensuring **sustainable production and supply chains** within and to the EU;
12. and putting **people's wellbeing at the heart of the crisis response.**

Timeline

September 2020	WWF Living Planet Report
22.09-23.09.2020	UN Biodiversity Summit New York
20.10-22.10.2020	EU Green Week and launch of the EU State of Nature Report
23.10.2020	EU Environment Council conclusions on EU Biodiversity Strategy
10.-11.12.2020	European Council meeting and adoption of the 2021-2027 EU budget
07.01-15.01.2021	IUCN World Conservation Congress
21.01-26.02.2021	World Economic Forum
17-30 May 2021	COP 15 - Convention of Biological Diversity

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Restoration of floodplains

CEE countries also have their part to play in to ensure that efforts in the [Green Heart of Europe](#) are in line with global freshwater conservation, biodiversity protection and climate targets. Therefore, we call on **ministries responsible for agriculture, water and flood management to design, secure funding for and (at least partially) implement restoration of 350,000 ha of floodplain habitats in the Danube Basin.** Priority should be given to those projects that make the highest combined contribution to the [EU Water Framework](#) and [Flood](#) Directives, as well as climate change adaptation. Not only should destroyed habitats be restored, it is also crucial that surviving water bodies be kept intact. In order to avoid new deterioration of water bodies impacted by new infrastructure development, **ministries responsible for water management or other responsible authorities in the Member States must enforce proper implementation of article 4.7** of the Water Framework Directive. Ambitious restoration strategies do not only make sense from an environmental perspective: according to a US study, every \$1 million invested on restoration supports the creation of on average 33 new jobs. Equivalent spending on the oil and gas industry yields only 5.2 new jobs.¹

High regulatory standards

Strong and ambitious guidelines and regional cooperation are key elements of effective conservation work. In the case of freshwater environments in Europe, the EU Water Framework Directive is a fundamental building block in this regard. We appeal to **ministers responsible for water management and water directors** to support EU decisions for maintaining the **high regulatory standards of the EU Water Framework Directive and standing for not opening the directive to review.**

Financial framework

In addition to the right policy framework, favourable financial conditions are also essential to the effective conservation of CEE's water bodies. Restoration and preservation work must be ensured proper funding, while financial support for unsustainable practices must be discontinued. WWF calls on **ministries responsible for agriculture and EU funds to decrease support for intensive agriculture practices on active and former floodplains.**²³

Key facts & figures

- Following strong measures under the **EU Water Framework Directive**, 74% of the EU groundwater bodies have now achieved "good chemical status," and 89% of them have achieved "good quantitative status." In the case of surface waters, however, only 38% of them are in "good chemical status" and just 40% in "good ecological status" or ecological potential;¹
- In the Danube River Basin, 80% of the wetlands have been lost and only 25% of the 28,836 rkm river network in the basin has achieved a "good ecological status" or ecological potential. 70.7% have "achieved good chemical status;"²
- The 2019 [report](#) of the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) found that more animal and plant species are now threatened with extinction than ever before in human history - around 1 million, many within decades; and
- The WWF [Living Planet Report](#) from 2020 shows an average 68% decline in monitored populations, since 1970. This is a real crisis which will increasingly affect our lives.

Current trends can still be reversed if transformative changes are implemented that address the root causes of nature deterioration.

¹ T. BenDor, et al. (2015), „Estimating the Size and Impact of the Ecological Restoration Economy”, *PLoS ONE*, Vol. 10(6).

² European Commission (2019), *Report from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the implementation of the Water Framework Directive (2000/60/EC) and the Floods Directive (2007/60/EC)*, COM(2019) 95 final, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=COM:2019:95:FIN&from=EN>

³ ICPDR (2015), *The Danube River District Management Plan - 2015 Update*, available at: <https://www.icpdr.org/main/sites/default/files/nodes/documents/drbmp-update2015.pdf>



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Instead, support programmes for wetland restoration, sustainable aquaculture, biodiversity conservation and extensive agricultural practices with low impact on freshwater ecosystems should be quickly phased in. **Ministers of finance and EU funds should allocate sufficient funds for restoration measures**, including capacity-building measures that allow stakeholders to undertake the necessary steps and to systematically monitor the status of species and habitats.

Aside from input-intensive industrial agricultural production, other unsustainable practices include the construction of new hydropower plants and the expansion of waterways for inland navigation. Therefore, we call on **ministers responsible for energy and finance to disincentivise investment in new hydropower plants**, and instead promote renewable energy sources with lower environmental impact. **Ministries responsible for transportation and finance should stop investing in inland navigation infrastructure projects, which cannot cope with the changing climatic conditions** and cause strain on the environment.

Favourable legislative environment

The actions of EU-level actors are equally important when it comes to the creation of conducive financial conditions. In this context, we ask the **European Investment Bank (EIB) and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) to stop financing new hydropower projects and instead, promote renewable energy** with lower environmental impact. Furthermore, we urge the **European Commission and EU Member States to shift funding allocated to hydropower through regional funds, research programmes and projects of common interest away from new hydropower development** and target refurbishment of existing plants (including installation of fish ladders and passes) and alternative renewable energy sources instead.

Awareness-raising

Finally, in order to secure the support of the wider CEE public for the safeguarding of our natural heritage, we call on **all authorities dealing with planning, funding and implementing restoration measures to emphasise the benefits of bringing nature closer to people** as well as employment opportunities this can create. The socio-economic benefits of healthier rivers and wetlands must be explained through strong awareness-raising campaigns and by maximising the visibility of conservation projects; for example showcasing restoration in or near cities.

Further reading

- WWF, Building resilience: WWF recommendations for a sustainable and just recovery after Covid-19 (2020), available at: https://www.wwf.eu/wwf_news/media_center/?uNewsID=362052
- WEF, The Future of Nature and Business Policy Companion: Recommendations for policy-makers to reset towards a new nature economy (2020), available at: http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_NN_ER_II_The_Future_of_Business_and_Nature_Policy_Companion_2020.pdf
- IPBES, Summary for Policymakers of the Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (2019), available at: <https://www.ipbes.net/news/ipbes-global-assessment-summary-policymakers-pdf>
- WWF, Living Planet Report 2020, available here: <https://livingplanet.panda.org/>

For more information

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