



FACTSHEET

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THE AMAZON OF EUROPE: WORLD'S FIRST 5-COUNTRY BIOSPHERE RESERVE

For almost 30 years, nature conservationists have been working towards the preservation of the largest semi-natural river and floodplain ecosystem in Central Europe along the Mura, Drava and Danube Rivers within a transboundary Biosphere Reserve. The so-called Amazon of Europe stretches across Austria, Slovenia, Hungary, Croatia and Serbia.

In September 2021, UNESCO recognized this unique river landscape as the world's first 5-country Biosphere Reserve (TBR MDD). With an area of around 930,000 hectares and population of almost million people, it makes up Europe's largest protected riverine area.

The biosphere reserve, once fully implemented, will significantly counteract the loss of biodiversity in Europe through its size and targeted protection measures. The increased resilience of the rivers resulting from their preservation and large-scale restoration will help to mitigate the effects of climate change in the region. The harmonisation of human activities with the goals of the reserve will lead to sustainable practices and more green job opportunities. With respect to the historic dimension of the region, it also builds bridges between people, societies and nature, and strengthens the political integration process in the region, through joint understanding and cooperation.

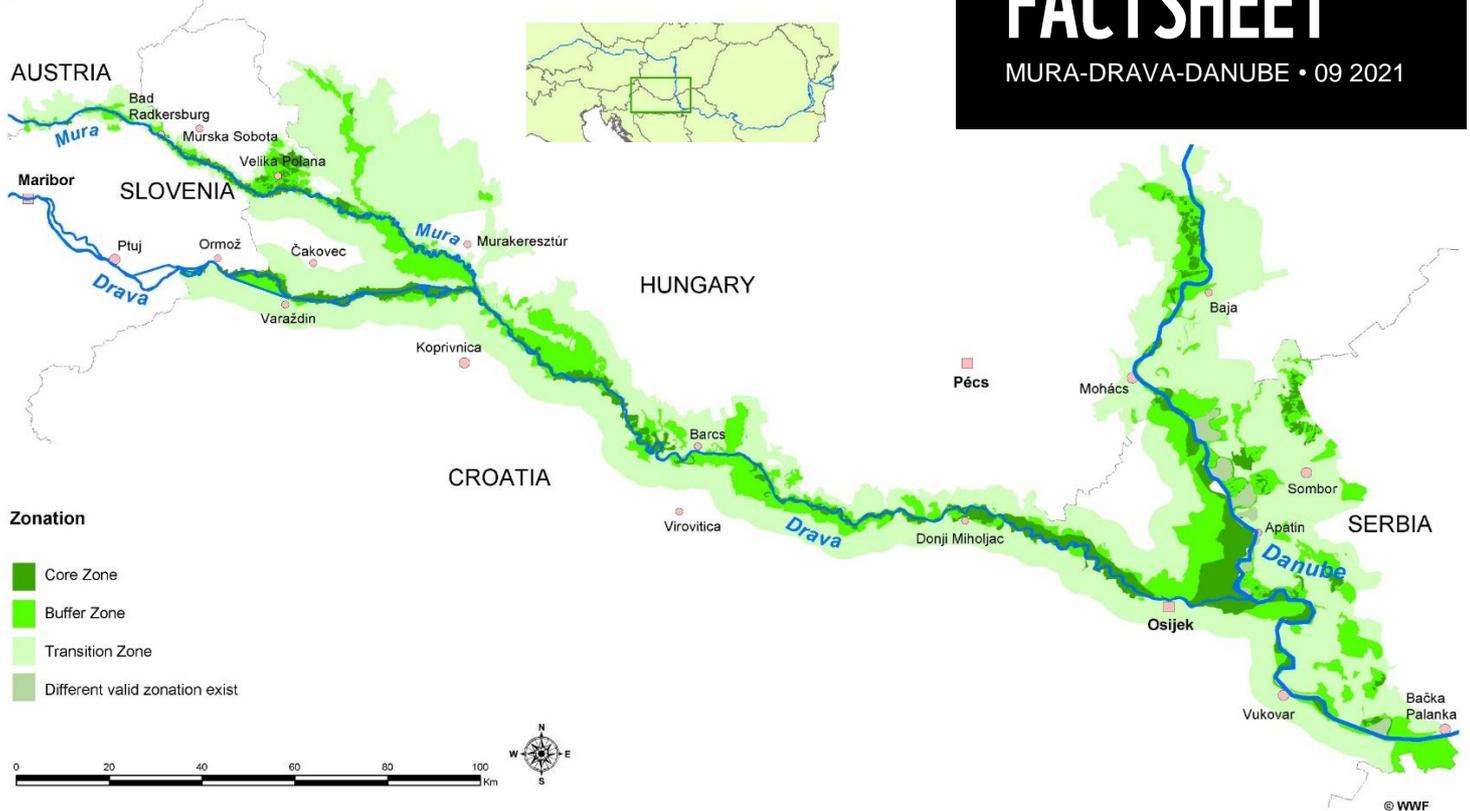
UNIQUE FEATURES

- Central Europe's largest near natural free-flowing river system without any dams across five countries
- The 1st Biosphere Reserve in the world, which is commonly shared and managed by five countries
- With 930,000 ha along 700 km of the Mura, Drava and Danube Rivers Europe's largest river protected area
- Flagship project for international understanding and regional cooperation



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5-country Biosphere Reserve Mura-Drava-Danube (TBR MDD)



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OUTSTANDING NATURAL AND CULTURAL VALUES

The Mura-Drava-Danube rivers host highly valuable natural and cultural landscapes in all five countries, with long river sections forming the state borders. Despite numerous past human interventions, this stunning river landscape kept an amazing biological diversity. It is home to

- Danube's largest floodplains and floodplain forests
- Danube's most intact floodplain areas
- continental Europe's highest breeding density of the white-tailed eagle (*Haliaeetus albicilla*)
- most important fish spawning areas along the Danube (besides the Danube Delta)
- resting and feeding place for more than a quarter million of water birds
- one of the rarest river bird species, the little tern (*Sternula albifrons*)

These natural values are protected by a chain of 13 larger single protected areas with a size of around 280,000 hectares, forming the core and buffer zones of the TBR MDD. Both are surrounded by a transition zone of about 650,000 hectares, which is inhabited by around 900,000 people. For many of them, the intact river and floodplains are vital for their livelihoods, natural flood protection, clean water for drinking, fisheries, traditional forestry and agriculture as well as recreation and sustainable business practices. The rivers are part of their rich multi-ethnic cultural heritage.

WHAT ARE TRANSBOUNDARY BIOSPHERE RESERVES?

As borders between states are political rather than ecological, ecosystems often occur across national boundaries, and may be subject to different, or even conflicting, management and land use practices.

TBRs provide a tool for common management. A TBR is an official recognition at the international level and by a UN institution of a political will to co-operate in the conservation and sustainable use, through common management, of a shared ecosystem.

Currently, there are 714 biosphere reserves in 129 countries, only 21 are transboundary, which are mostly bilateral.

Biosphere reserves fulfil three functions:

- maintaining ecosystems,
- developing the region in socio-economic and ecologically sustainable terms,
- encouraging education, research and environmental monitoring.

Their management relies on three different zones:

- the core zone
- the buffer zone
- the transition zone



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30 YEARS OF CONSERVATION WORK FOR THE AMAZON OF EUROPE

Because of the border area of past political systems, large parts of the riverine landscape were not used intensively by people and still have natural river dynamic. After the borders were opened in the 90's they were faced with increased human pressure and therefore had to be protected. The history of the 5-country TBR looks back on several major phases:

1992-1999: The conception phase

The vision of a biosphere reserve was formulated and promoted in the 1990s. Under the coordination of EuroNatur, a series of conferences and workshops were organised and a concept was prepared.

2000-2021: The development and build-up phase

With promotion and support of many partners and stakeholders across the region the foundation and essential building blocks for the biosphere reserve were established with support of WWF:

- completion of the protection of the rivers and floodplains through eleven major protected areas,
- preservation of 270 km long near natural river stretches from destruction by river regulation, sediment extraction and new hydropower dams,
- two ministerial declarations for the establishment of the TBR MDD,
- designation of one bi-lateral and three single biosphere reserves: Croatian-Hungarian TBR MDD (2012); Serbian BR "Bačko Podunavlje" (2017); Slovenian BR "Mura" (2018); Austrian BR "Lower Mura Valley" (2019),
- implementation of several EU projects with regard to nature conservation, river and wetland restoration, floodplain forest management and sustainable tourism.

2021: The year of designation

The 5-country Biosphere Reserve, which merges all national biosphere reserves under one umbrella, was designated by UNESCO in September 2021.

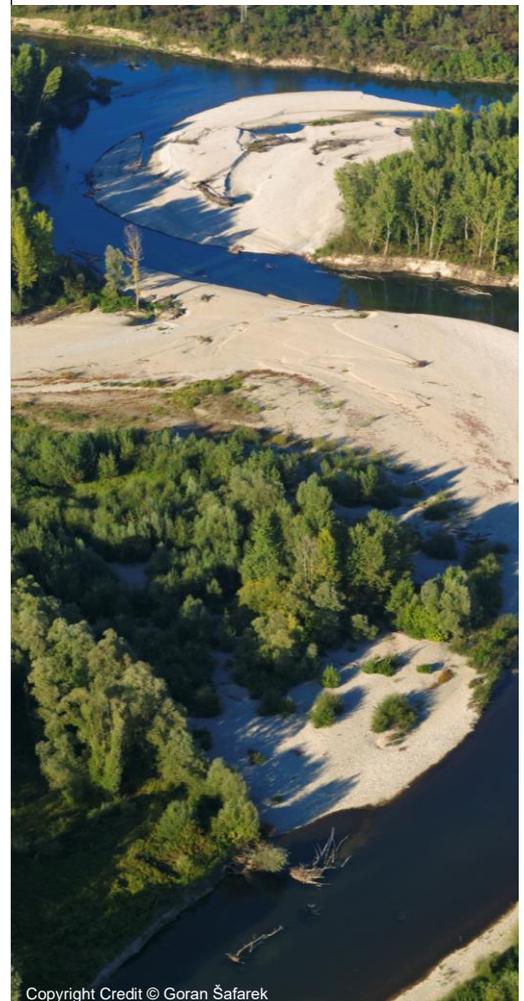
2022 – 2031: The implementation phase

2031 UNESCO will review the successful implementation of the BR. Therefore, the upcoming years are decisive for the long-term success of the 5-country Biosphere Reserve. Will it be possible to jointly develop the Reserve beyond political, administrative and sectoral interests to an international model, in which ecology and sustainable economy go hand in hand? Or will it suffer the fate of so many "paper parks" in which nature-destroying developments continue unrestrained? Despite the imminent success of designation, threats are constantly present at Europe's Amazon, reaching from new infrastructure development projects, to old-fashioned river management practices to the intensification of agriculture and forestry and uncontrolled recreation.

IMPLEMENTATION PROJECTS

Major recent EU funded projects, which serve the implementation of the 5-country Biosphere Reserve Mura-Drava-Danube:

- **5-country implementation projects**
Nature conservation: [Coop MDD](#)
River restoration: [Lifeline MDD](#)
Floodplain forest conservation: [REFOCuS](#)
Sustainable tourism:
[Amazon of Europe Bike Trail](#)
[Amazing Amazon of Europe](#)
- **River and wetland restoration projects**
[NaturaMura](#) (SI) 2020-23
[WISEDRAVALIFE](#) (HU/HR) 2019-23
[WetlandRestore](#) (HR/RS) 2019-21
[DRAVA LIFE](#) (HR) 2015-21
[Wetland restoration](#) (RS) 2014-20
[Old-Drava LIFE](#) (HU/HR) 2014-18
[LIVEDRAVA \(SI\)](#) 2012-17
- [goMURra \(AT/SI\)](#) 2018-21



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World's first 5-country Biosphere Reserve



Resting and feeding place for more than

250.000

water birds



with

150

breeding pairs of white-tailed eagles Continental Europe's highest breeding density



Europe's largest protected riverine area:

930.000 ha

along 700 km

including Danube's largest floodplain forests, most intact floodplain areas and most important fish spawning areas

13

single protected areas including Natura 2000 sites, a regional park, a national park, special nature reserves and nature parks

900.000

people living in the area



The Biosphere Reserve is divided into three different zones: The core zone strictly protects nature. The buffer zone promotes traditional land use such as extensive agriculture and forestry, whereas the transition zone supports sustainable regional development such as ecotourism and provides scientific support to the reserve.



THE CHALLENGE

Getting the Biosphere Reserve successfully on track

In order to achieve a fully functional TBR MDD, following the designation a joint management structure across the five countries needs to be established. Furthermore, restoration of rivers with their floodplain meadows and forests, sustainable management of natural resources, extensive agriculture and forestry, species protection and sustainable tourism should be in place. It should all be supported with environmental education, research and monitoring to fully implement all pillars of a biosphere reserve. At the same time, river engineering projects that would counteract the conservation goal must be stopped.

VISION FOR THE NEXT 30 YEARS

Living rivers for nature and people

The joint vision of the parties involved is conservation, restoration and wise use of the Mura-Drava-Danube Rivers and their ecosystems within the 5-country Biosphere Reserve.

The long-term vision for the TBR MDD is to jointly maintain and promote a fully natural and dynamic river ecosystem as the basis for the rich biodiversity and sustainable livelihoods and life quality of local people. The aim is while jointly conserving the river and floodplains maintaining and ensuring greater benefits for local people, reaching from high quality drinking water, natural flood protection, traditional land use, climate buffer, sustainable business and recreation.

CALL FOR ACTION

The long-term success of the TBR MDD will be measured by whether it succeeds to minimize harmful activities to the river ecosystem and to transform the management of the natural values of the area into a sustainable one. This would include amongst others:

- Restore degraded river stretches and floodplain areas
- Stop river channelling and any further removal of gravel and sand from the rivers
- Halt any further construction plans of new hydropower dams along the Mura and Drava
- Stop peak mode operation of the hydropower dams
- Harmonise protection status and management of the core zone
- Protect and restore floodplain forests
- Revive extensive nature friendly land use practices such as hay making and pasturing
- Guide visitors and promote nature-oriented tourism such as cycling

For more information

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