



FACTSHEET

MURA-DRAVA-DANUBE

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

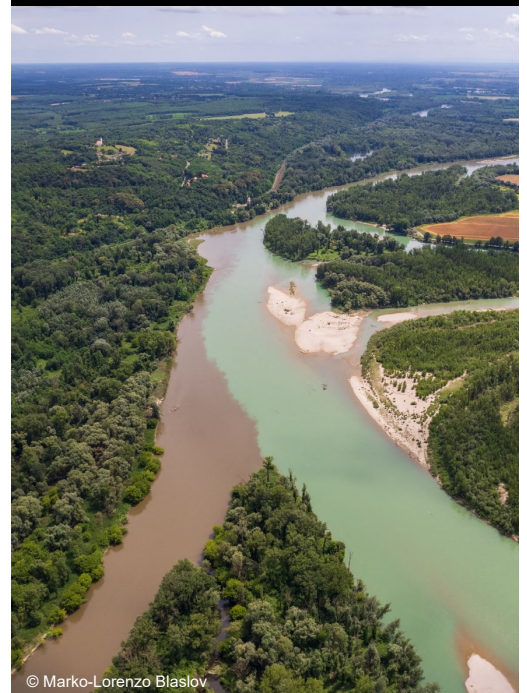
For almost 30 years, conservationists have been working to preserve the largest semi-natural river and floodplain ecosystem in Central Europe along the Mura, Drava and Danube rivers within a transboundary biosphere reserve. The so-called Amazon of Europe stretches across Austria, Slovenia, Hungary, Croatia and Serbia.

In September 2021, UNESCO designated this unique river landscape as the world's first Five-country Biosphere Reserve Mura-Drava-Danube (TBR MDD). With an area of around 930,000 hectares and a population of almost one million people, it is the largest protected riverine area in Europe.

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

UNIQUE FEATURES

- Central Europe's largest near natural free-flowing river system without any dams across five countries
- The first 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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Five-country Biosphere Reserve Mura-Drava-Danube (TBR MDD)



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OUTSTANDING NATURAL AND CULTURAL VALUES

The Mura-Drava-Danube rivers contain highly valuable natural and cultural landscapes in all five countries, with long stretches of river forming national borders. Despite numerous human interventions in the past, this stunning river landscape has retained an amazing biological diversity. It is home to:

- The Danube's largest floodplains and floodplain forests,
- the Danube's most intact floodplains,
- Continental Europe's highest breeding density of the white-tailed eagle (*Haliaeetus albicilla*),
- the 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 bird species, the little tern (*Sternula albifrons*).

These natural values are protected by a chain of 12 larger individual protected areas covering about 280,000 hectares, which form the core and buffer zones of the TBR MDD. Both are surrounded by a transition zone of about 650,000 hectares, inhabited by about 900,000 people. For many of them, intact rivers and floodplains are vital for their livelihoods, natural flood protection, clean drinking water, fisheries, traditional forestry and agriculture, recreation and sustainable business. The rivers are part of their rich multi-ethnic cultural heritage.

WHAT ARE TRANSBOUNDARY BIOSPHERE RESERVES?

Because 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 cooperate in the conservation and sustainable use, through common management, of a shared ecosystem.

Currently, there are 759 biosphere reserves in 136 countries, only 21 are transboundary, which are mostly bilateral.

Biosphere reserves fulfil three functions:

- To maintain ecosystems,
- to develop the region in a socio-economic and ecologically sustainable way,
- to promote 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

Due to the border areas of past political systems, large parts of the riverine landscape were not intensively used by humans and still have a natural river dynamic. After the opening of the borders in the 1990s, they came under increased human pressure and needed to be protected.

The history of the TBR MDD has several important 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 developed.

2000-2021: The development and build-up phase

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

These are:

- The completion of the protection of the rivers and floodplains through eleven major protected areas.
- The 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.
- The 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).
- The implementation of several EU projects focusing on nature conservation, river and wetland restoration, floodplain forest management and sustainable tourism.

2021: The year of designation

The five-country biosphere reserve, which merges all the national biosphere reserves under one roof, was designated by UNESCO in September 2021.

2022 – 2031: The implementation phase

Despite the success of the designation, the Amazon of Europe is under constant threat from new infrastructure projects, outdated river management practices, agricultural and forestry intensification and uncontrolled tourism. As part of the LIFE RESTORE for MDD project, which was launched in October 2023, comprehensive measures have been introduced to restore the natural course of the river and the adjacent floodplain forests. A transboundary planning strategy not only ensures the sustainability of these measures, but also creates a pioneering example of the potential of transboundary biosphere reserves.

IMPLEMENTATION PROJECTS

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

- **Five-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**
[LIFE RESTORE for MDD](#) 2023-28
[ELP](#) 2022-27
[DRAVA LIFE](#) (HR) 2015-24
[NaturaMura](#) (SI) 2020-23
[WISEDRAVALIFE](#) (HU/HR) 2019-23
[WetlandRestore](#) (HR/RS) 2019-21
[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 FIVE-COUNTRY BIOSPHERE RESERVE



with

150

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



Resting and feeding place for more than

250,000

water birds



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

12

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

VISION FOR THE NEXT 30 YEARS

Living rivers for nature and people

The common vision of the parties involved is the conservation, restoration and wise use of the Mura-Drava-Danube rivers and their ecosystems within the 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 rich biodiversity and sustainable livelihoods and quality of life for local people. The aim is to jointly conserve the river and its floodplains while maintaining and securing greater benefits for local people, ranging from high quality drinking water, natural flood protection, traditional land use, climate buffers, sustainable businesses and recreation.

CALL FOR ACTION

The long-term success of the TBR MDD will be measured by its ability to minimise activities harmful to the river's ecosystem and to transform the management of the area's natural values into a sustainable one. This would include:

- Restoring degraded river reaches and floodplains.
- Stopping river channelling and any further removal of gravel and sand from rivers.
- Stopping any further plans to build new hydroelectric dams on the Mur and Drava rivers.
- Ending peak operation of hydroelectric dams.
- Harmonising the protection status and management of the core zone.
- Protecting and restoring floodplain forests.
- Reviving extensive nature-friendly land use practices such as haying and grazing.
- Guiding visitors and promoting nature-based tourism such as cycling.

For more information:

Arno Mohl
WWF Program Leader Mura-Drava-Danube
arno.mohl@wwf.at
m: + 43 676 83 488 300
www.amazon-of-europe.com