

LIFE-Nature river and floodplain projects in Europe

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Abstract

More than 200 LIFE Nature projects targeting rivers and floodplain, in order to improve the Natura 2000 network, have been carried out in the EU and Romania since 1992. This is not surprising as more than 1/3 of all Natura 2000 habitats occur in humid zones. The Continental biogeographical region has most river and floodplain habitats: one reason why Austria, straddling Alpine and Continental regions, has so far had 17 LIFE river and floodplain restoration projects.

Several common elements are found in most of the projects, despite diversity of local conditions. These affect the projects' public awareness and networking aspects.

1) the project concepts take into account the multifunctional role rivers play: traffic route, food and water source, recreation space, habitat for water species etc – all combining the water course itself with the connected floodplain. Neither can be tackled without considering the other – thus LIFE projects characteristically target water and land habitats, or follow each other in time in order to maximize the conservation benefit. The projects' benefits are not single-focused, but bring together flood protection, habitat restoration, re-introduction of traditional management, and large scale planning issues. Therefore LIFE river and floodplain projects normally do not produce information material for one target group only or describe only one specific project aim, but combine PR materials to different stakeholders, like general and local public, land owners, fishermen, water engineers, tourists etc. They also inform about the river landscape and its interactions, with their various functions, instead of the river or the floodplain forest only.

2) river and floodplain restoration mostly needs long-term and large-scale projects. This leads to the combined use of various national and international funding instruments, of which European mechanisms include LIFE-Nature and Environment, Interreg, Phare, Leader, agricultural and structural funds. This makes also a considerable number of international LIFE projects possible e.g. Schelde (BE/NL), Guadiana (ES/PT), Lafnitz (AT/HU), Danube (AT/DE). Consequently, information materials and networking are often funded by different instruments, complementing each other, and in different languages.

3) river restoration projects need to be conceived on a catchment basis to have a maximum effect, which is exactly what the EU Water Framework Directive requires. Thus, since the Directive's adoption in 2000, a rising number of LIFE-Nature projects are simultaneously adjusting their planning and monitoring work not only to Natura 2000 exigencies, but also regarding the implementation of the Water Framework Directive. This has implications for both the public relations work (informing about both directives) and the partnership building with authorities in the catchment area (must be irrespective of administrative and territorial borders).

4) in these LIFE projects, partnership building joins nature protection authorities and NGOs, scientific monitoring bodies, land use authorities, river engineering people and water authorities. These partnerships replace traditional friend-enemy schemes and last longer than the duration of the LIFE projects. For communications, this means the dissemination of the lessons learnt (the 2003 LIFE Upper Drau river symposium, which managed to bring water engineers and nature protection topics, is an example).

5) rivers are often target of large-scale plans and programs potentially threatening the conservation status of the habitats, e.g. Donau-Oder-Kanal, Donauschiffahrtsstrasse, Elbebaggerung, Trasvase Ebro-Segura, New Váscarhelyi Plan. On one hand, the results of a number of LIFE projects might be threatened by the realization of each of these plans. On the other hand, the LIFE projects can act as catalyst for modifying these plans to a more nature-friendly way, or even to abandon them.

6) rivers are very suitable for large-scale demonstration projects such as LIFE. New techniques for the re-dynamisation of the river landscape can be implemented on a restricted river section and, after the LIFE project, adopted as standard technique for river management. This has been done very successfully in Austrian river projects.

7) river floodplains are very attractive landscapes for the public. This makes them on the one hand easy to use for public relation work, as there is often a positive emotional connotation of the river ("when I was child, I learned swimming there"). Species protection measures (for *Austropotamobius pallipes*, *Hucho hucho*, *Salmo marmoratus*/salar, *Accipenser sturio*, *Misgurnus fossilis*, *Acipenser ruthenus*, *Myricaria germanica*, *Typha minima*, *Oenanthe conioidea*) give the chance to link the restoration of the habitat (mosaic) with a concrete, easy recognizable species. Popularization of the river or its species with mascots, river parties, expositions etc are often successful. On the other hand, fear of floods, e.g. when dismantling bank stabilization, and visitor guidance and restrictions in areas of high tourist pressure, are not always easy but have to be addressed in most of the LIFE freshwater projects.

8) LIFE-Nature projects can not solve all the problems of a river landscape, due to their time, financial and target restrictions. After the LIFE projects, issues like artificial flash-floods caused by water power stations upstream, lack of buffer zones to intensively used areas, gaps in the floodplain landscape, lack of the typical bed load gravel input and difficult collaboration with the competent water authorities in neighbouring territories, rising temperatures in the river sections and continuing nutrient inflow are typical problems which have to be solved with other instruments.

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