



European Parliament Forum on Recreational Fisheries and Aquatic Environment

REPORT

The Danube under threat

The Danube salmon – a barometer of the river basin's poor health

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European Parliament

MEP Norica Nicolai welcomed all the participants to the conference in her capacity as the President of the RecFishing Forum.

Herman Wanningen, World Fish Migration Foundation, opened his address by linking the event to the World Fish Migration Day on the 21st of May 2016. He noted that dams were being opened up in the United States and also in some parts of Europe, and said that he hoped that this process would continue into the Danube basin.

Dr Steven Weiss, University of Graz, Austria, opened his address by discussing the scientific characteristics of the varieties of the Danube salmon. He noted that the Huchen is a strictly freshwater fish, it migrates within a range of up to 100 km of where it spawns but does not migrate to the sea like other salmon species. He stated that it was historically distributed across 12 countries in Central and Eastern Europe, and it is now extinct in 7 of those countries. He stated that it is now highly endangered in Romania and Ukraine, with shrinking populations in Germany and Austria. He said that the healthiest populations of the Huchen is in Slovakia and in the Balkan nations of Slovenia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Serbia and Croatia. The Huchen do not die after reproducing like Atlantic salmon. Rather, they have a lifespan of up to 70 years and so can repeatedly spawn over that period. They first reach maturity at about 6-7 years and grow up to 60-70 cm in length. In Austria most fisheries organisations allow the capture of up to one Huchen per year, and thus he said that the strict regulations on its capture mean that sportfishing is not to be considered a threat to its survival. He stated that the main threat to the Huchen is the development of dams for hydropower. He noted that two thirds of Austrian electricity comes from hydroelectrical sources – there are approximately 5000 hydroelectric power facilities in Austria, with hundreds more yet to be built. He also stated that Austrian companies are expanding their operations to construct more dams in the Balkans. He stressed that a healthy population of Huchen is good for biodiversity, using the phrase “when you have a healthy Huchen, you have a healthy population of at least 50-100 other species nearby – a healthy ecosystem”. He stated that the nature of hydropower expansion and dam expansion in Austria and the Danube is not compatible with sustaining a healthy state of biodiversity – including for the Huchen, and that the Austrian hydropower industry is not compromising on this issue, making no concessions for environmental factors. He stated that it is possible to have a hydropower industry and also a healthy level of biodiversity, but that this is not currently happening in Austria, thus threatening the Huchen. He countered the argument of the hydropower industry of “If you want to protect the Huchen then don’t fish for it”, describing it as propaganda and defending the recreational fishers, noting that recreational fishers have been some of the biggest proponents for protecting these final populations of Huchen. He also noticed that catch



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and release recreational fishing is controversial in the German-speaking world, yet it is not controversial in other countries. He concluded his address by stressing that the Huchen is able to live amongst human activity, and that it is therefore not too difficult to protect it, noting that it does not require an enormous amount of alterable behaviour by humans to allow it to be protected.

Dr Daša Zabric, Fisheries Research Institute of Slovenia, opened her address by demonstrating that the range of distribution of the Huchen has declined in Slovenia, becoming extinct in certain parts of Slovenia due to hydropower plants. She stated that the area with the healthiest population of the Huchen is in the Sava region. She noted that in 2013 an announcement was made to increase the Natura 2000 protected area of Slovenia – an area which includes the natural habitat of the Huchen in the Sava. She stated that the announcement coincided with a plan to increase hydropower development, noting that this engendered a conflict, as the dams being built did not contain passages for the fish, having a detrimental effect on the ability of the fish to move through the river system. She noted that the hydropower reservoir flushing affects the nutrients, food and spawn of the Huchen. She stated that the research that her institute conducted collected data with the cooperation of sport fishers, finding that the current hydropower facilities are insufficient for sustaining the population of Danube salmon. She concluded by stating that a chain of hydropower plants in the Sava would destroy the population of Danube salmon in that region.

Dorel Lazu, Banat Sturio Association, recommended in his address the artificial restoration of the population of the Huchen. He suggested that Huchen should be captured and bred in captivity and then released back into the Danube in order to restock and resupply the population. He stated that this would restore the population. He also recommended a harmonisation of EU legislation relating to the Huchen and its habitat and also improving the practices for sharing data relevant to the Huchen and its conservation amongst the member states concerned.

Irene Lucius, Conservation Director of the Carpathian Basin for the World Wildlife Fund, spoke about the restoration projects for the Danube basin in Austria. She mentioned that the restoration projects are long-term and are designed to completely restore the habitats, using tactics such as re-meandering certain rivers. She noted that many projects have been co-financed by the Association of Anglers. Additionally, she mentioned that industries whose activities have degraded the river in the past have participated in the restoration projects, including the river navigation, construction, agricultural and hydropower industries. She stated that this model can be upscaled and moved into further conservation and restoration measures which can become more widespread. She hopes that in future these models will be implemented and improved upon, being better integrated into the Danube Basin Management Plan, allowing the angling associations and industry groups to cooperate.

Juan Pablo Pertierra, European Commission DG Environment Water Unit, spoke about the Water Framework Directive. He stated that it was hoped that “good ecological status” should have been obtained by now but this has been postponed until next year. He stated that the objectives of the Directive are implemented in conjunction with the River Basin Management plans. He stressed that it works in conjunction with the other relevant environmental directives, representing the interdependence and synergy of these environmental aspects. He noted that this is important because many pressures need to be taken into account in order to obtain best practice in water management. He also noted that the variety of different uses of water also need to be taken into account. He stated that the Water Framework Directive uses different classing systems in order to determine the health of particular waterways. He discussed the hydromorphological effect, stating that the damming and



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dredging are areas which require monitoring and regulation, noting that when a body of water is modified it does not have the status of “good ecological status” but rather the status of “good ecological potential”. He noted the agricultural effects of nutrient runoff as being a contributing factor to the detriment of the waterways. He discussed that a better permit system for physically changing a river, as well as better enforcement of anti-poaching regulations could assist the management and conservation of the Danube.

Debate

MEP Ivan Jakovic, stated that for him as a Croatian, the protection of the Huchen is very important, considering that the Danube, Drava and Sava rivers all flow through Croatia. He recommended that the EU take a prominent role in managing the river to ensure its conservation, as it is shared by several member states. He stressed that whilst he is not against hydropower and sees it as an important source of electricity, he nevertheless believes that it should be implemented in a manner which protects biodiversity, including protecting the Danube salmon.

MEP Ricardo Serrao Santos, stated that whilst he does not have a specific knowledge of freshwater fish, being a marine biologist specialising in oceanic fish, he is nevertheless interested in it. He noted that the carbon credits which he purchased for his flights were contributing to hydropower plants as a green alternative. He mentioned that the Portuguese government is in fact decommissioning many hydropower plants due to the disruption which they cause to the ecosystems.

MEP Igor Soltes, stated that whilst he is mostly involved in financial and tax policy, as a Slovenian MEP he recognises that the Danube basin is important to his country and that he therefore supports increased cooperation between states through which the Danube River flows, facilitated by the EU. He also stated that it is important to find a balance between producers of energy and the importance of the conservation of the environment and biodiversity. He recommended discussion which is inclusive of all interests, including those of the private sector.

Walburga Hemetsberger, Verbund Hydropower GmbH Austria, stated that Verbund Hydropower is the biggest producer of hydropower in Austria. She stated that hydropower produces 50% of renewable energy produced in Europe, saving 118 million tonnes of CO₂ every year. She mentioned that 45 million euros are being invested in Austria in order to construct fish passages on dams to assist with the conservation of fish such as the Huchen.

Fred Bloot, President of the European Anglers’ Alliance, recommended that a fish directive would be necessary, similar to the birds and habitats directive which is already in place.

Dr Steven Weiss, University of Graz, Austria, stated that Huchen do not establish themselves in water outside of their natural range, and that action on invasive species will have minimal effect on the Huchen. He stated that the problem is in the growth of hydropower dam construction, citing the fact that the President of Verbund Hydropower GmbH Austria has said that it is not necessary to have more power, as there is a high supply of electricity, lowering the market level price. He attacked the hydropower industry for the construction of new dams despite the low electricity prices.

Stefan Spahn, European Anglers’ Alliance Germany, mentioned that despite the fact that the hydropower reduces CO₂ gas, it nevertheless produces methane gas.



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Irene Lucius, Conservation Director of the Caparthy Basin for the World Wildlife Fund, stated that the lack of information and knowledge has a detrimental effect on planning for projects – especially lacks of relevant scientific information. She also mentioned that whilst the strategic shift to renewables is supported by the WWF, energy saving options should be investigated in order to mitigate the degrading of the environment and biodiversity through practices such as the construction of unnecessary hydropower facilities.

Herman Wanningen, World Fish Migration Foundation, stated that he is very concerned by the proliferation of poor hydropower planning which is having a detrimental effect on the movement and migration of fish. He recommended that better planning be undertaken for hydropower, that obsolete dams be removed to allow the free flowing of rivers, and that cooperation between the hydropower industry and relevant NGOs be increased in order to protect biodiversity.

MEP Ivan Jakovic, concluded the debate by thanking the participants and stressed that the Balkans needs to be the area in which a focus is maintained on improving the situation for the Huchen.

MEP Norica Nicolai concluded the session by thanking the stakeholders in the issue for participating in the debate, stressing the fact that the Danube is important for Europe and that its health is therefore necessary to be properly maintained. She recommended further cooperation between the Commission, the member states, the industries, the Parliament and the relevant NGOs in order to better protect the river basin. She stated that a long-term vision is required.