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Rowing for the „Amazon of Europe”

International Regatta demonstrates against the destruction of Danube’s unique nature

Batina, Croatia – More than 40 rowers and paddlers from Austria, Croatia, Hungary and Serbia came together on Sunday, October 9th at the small Croatian village of Batina, close to the Croatian-Serbian border. Rowing in a regatta on the Danube, they demonstrated against the destruction of two of the Danube’s most valuable areas, „Kopački rit” Nature Park in Croatia and „Gornje Podunavlje” Special Nature Reserve just across the border in Serbia. The two natural treasures are under immense pressure due to ongoing efforts by Croatia to turn this natural stretch of the river into little more than a canal.

„The channelling project is a criminal act not only against Croatia’s and Europe’s natural heritage. It would rip right through the heart of the prospective Transboundary UNESCO Biosphere Reserve “Mura-Drava-Danube”, the „Amazon of Europe”, said Arno Mohl, International Freshwater expert at WWF Austria. Regatta participants, WWF, Croatian NGO Zeleni Osijek (Green Osijek) and the Croatian Society for the Protection of Birds and Nature urge the Croatian government to immediately stop these destructive plans.

Since April 2010 the Croatian Ministry of Sea, Transport and Infrastructure and the Croatian Agency for Inland Waterways have been pushing for the regulation of 53 kilometres of the river which acts as a border between Croatia and Serbia. The measure shall be carried out between Batina and the confluence of the Danube and Drava at Osijek. 75 groins and heavy embankments would be built, thus heavily harming the natural river banks and transforming the meandering river into a lifeless canal.

At the beginning of October 2011, the Croatian Ministry of Environmental Protection started the Environmental Impact Assessment procedure for this project. This came just a few days after the Croatian Ministry of Culture applied to the UNESCO for the recognition of the same area – together with the Drava and Mura rivers – as a Transboundary Biosphere Reserve „Mura-Drava-Danube”.

„The Danube regulation plans contradict Croatia’s commitment and efforts to protect this area and they are against national and EU environmental laws”, Mohl said.

The proposed river regulation does not only threaten the unique species and wetland habitats of the region, but is also likely to have negative impact on the drinking water, forests and ecotourism in the area.

„We are not going to accept that the livelihoods of local people and our unique environment are sacrificed for the benefit of a small group of profiteers”, said Jasmin Sadikovic from Zeleni Osijek.

According to Croatian authorities the purpose of the regulation is to improve navigation and flood protection in the area. However, no justification for the need of such measures is given. The area has no big settlements or infrastructure that might be threatened by floods, especially with nearby huge wetlands of Kopački rit and Gornje Podunavlje which serve as retention areas and natural flood protection. Moreover, modern and sustainable navigation on the Danube does not require a regulated river bed.

„It seems, the main purpose of the plan is to maintain a system of outdated water management practises in Croatia”, Mohl said.

Regardless of their international background, participants in the regatta agreed that „This most beautiful stretch of the Danube must be preserved for future generations”. They appealed to the European Commission to act immediately to help stop this outdated plan and to avoid the irreversible destruction of Croatia’s and Europe’s natural treasures months before Croatia’s accession to the EU.

Photos of the regatta and a map as to the regulation plans can be downloaded at: www.wwf.at/presse

Further information:

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