

Restoring floodplain habitats and rural livelihoods along the Slovak-Hungarian Danube

SUMMARY

The 'LIFE Danube floodplains' project restored floodplain habitats in the Slovak-Hungarian border region of the Danube inland delta, affected by dam construction, river regulation and intensive land use. It improved the water regime on 1 805 hectares, restored and re-wetted river branches and wetlands, and restored grassland and forest habitats. It also revived traditional grazing and willow pollarding, created rural jobs and carried out public engagement.



CONTEXT

Two centuries of dam construction, river regulation and intensive land use have severely affected the Danube inland delta in the Slovak-Hungarian border region, including between Dobrohošť and Sap in Slovakia. Old river branches have been cut off, floodplain wetlands have dried out, invasive species have colonised forest habitats, and traditional low-intensity land uses have declined. This has affected biodiversity dramatically, eroded the rural livelihoods these ecosystems used to sustain and weakened the region's ability to buffer floods and adapt to climate change. The 'LIFE Danube floodplains' project addressed these challenges with a combination of hydrological engineering, forest and grassland restoration, revival of traditional practices, and public engagement.



OBJECTIVES

- > Restore the water regime of the Danube inland delta between Dobrohošť and Sap through controlled flooding and hydrological works;
- > Restore floodplain forest and grassland habitats and remove invasive species;
- > Revive traditional low-intensity land uses (extensive grazing and willow pollarding) with local farmers;
- > Support biodiversity recovery (birds, fish and amphibians).



Themes: Nature and environment; climate; spatial planning; employment; forestry; land use

Country: Slovakia

Organisations:

- > BROZ (Slovakia), civil society organisation
- > Vodohospodárska Výstavba, š.p. (Slovakia), public authority
- > Výskumný ústav vodného hospodárstva (Slovakia), academic/research institution
- > Národné lesnícke centrum (Slovakia), academic/research institution
- > Duna-Ipoly National Park Directorate (Hungary), public authority

Start & end date: 01/2015 - 09/2024

Budget: EUR 6 000 000

Funding source:

- > EU LIFE programme

Website: www.broz.sk/en/projekty/dunajskeluhy/

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ACTIVITIES, KEY ACTORS, AND TIMELINE

The project **improved the water regime** on 1 805 hectares of the **Danube inland delta** through controlled flooding. It reconstructed seven weirs and culverts, restored 9 570 metres of three main river branches, rewetted old branches and wetlands, and recreated conditions for amphibian reproduction and fish spawning.

Forest habitats were restored on 128 hectares by removal of invasive species (tree of heaven, Japanese knotweed, box elder and white ash) and **planting 73 900 native tree seedlings**. These included common alder, wild cherry, European hornbeam, European ash, and grey, white and black poplar, mostly grown in project nurseries.

Grassland habitats were revived on 82 hectares through **extensive grazing** in cooperation with local agricultural cooperatives and **traditional willow pollarding was reintroduced**.

The project **created rural employment** for tractor drivers, shepherds, horse handlers, visitor guides and forestry workers, and **engaged the public** through interpretation boards, a children's storybook, field visits, interactive exhibitions, family days, festivals and nature camps.



RESULTS

- > 1 805 hectares of **Danube inland delta hydrologically restored** through controlled flooding;
- > Seven **weirs and culverts reconstructed** and 9 570 metres of three main **river branches restored**;
- > 128 hectares of **forest habitats restored** and 73 900 **native tree seedlings planted**;
- > 82 hectares of **grassland habitats revived** through extensive grazing and **traditional willow pollarding reintroduced**;
- > Marked **increase in bird populations**, including herons, night herons, storks and white-tailed eagles;
- > **Recovery of amphibian reproduction and fish spawning**;
- > Direct **rural employment created** (tractor drivers, shepherds, horse handlers, visitor guides and forestry workers) and **thousands of citizens engaged** through education and events.



SUCCESS FACTORS/LESSONS LEARNT

Nature restoration on this scale takes time. The nine-year project horizon and EUR 6 million budget made it possible to combine hydrological engineering, forest planting, grassland revival and reintroduction of traditional practices into one coherent programme.

The project was a partnership between a non-governmental organisation and state institutions, which **enhanced the feasibility of achieving the objectives and created a strong knowledge and communication foundation** for future activities.

Reviving extensive grazing and willow pollarding in cooperation with local agricultural cooperatives and creating direct rural employment (for shepherds, tractor drivers, forestry workers and guides) **tied nature restoration to rural economic and social sustainability**.

Most of the 73 900 tree seedlings planted were grown in project nurseries which ensured forest **restoration used native species, reduced costs and built local expertise**.

Measures to engage the public, such as interpretation boards, a children's storybook, family days, festivals, exhibitions and nature camps, helped **build lasting local support for continued conservation**.



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