The Sava and Drava floodplains:
Threatened ecosystems of international importance

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With 15 figures and 2 tables in the text

Abstract: About 200,000 hectares of alluvial wetlands offer sustainable flood control, natural water purification, and incomparable ecological value on the Sava and Drava Rivers between Croatia, Hungary, and Slovenia. The continuous riparian system formed by the rivers, their tributaries, and the Danube stretches over 2,000 km. An ecosystem of pan-European importance is being endangered by unsustainable water management, hydroelectric dams, and plans to ease navigation. Large biosphere reserves are proposed to maintain the high economic and ecological value and to promote best practices in natural resources management and tourism. Birds are discussed as an indicator of the ecological importance of the flooding and geomorphology of the alluvial wetlands.

Key words: alluvial wetlands, nature preservation, birds as indicator, flood control, navigation, water management.

Introduction

Until 1990, little was known about the floodplains in the former Yugoslavia. The first international actions initiated by the Council of Europe (YON & TENDRON 1981) and the International Council for Bird Preservation (IMBODEN 1987) to promote the specific importance of these riparian ecosystems did not mention the unique wetlands of the Drava and Sava rivers. At the same time, the Sava 2000 program funded internationally began destroying the largest alluvial wetlands existing at the time in Europe (SCHNEIDER 1986). On the Drava, the chain of hydroelectric dams had already reached the last parts of the furcation zone in Croatia and further dams were planned (SCHNEIDER-JACOBY 1994, 1996a).

During the socialist era, scientists and local people struggled without help from abroad against the construction of dams along the Drava and Mura. In the 1980s, the Mura was saved in Slovenia when local people pointed out the importance of the living river for the regional culture (ŠMEJ et al. 1994). The people of the Prekmurje (“beyond the Mura”) did not accept being separated of the rest of the

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