

## Help the Odra River revive and be free-flowing again

The Odra River is one of the last free-flowing rivers in Europe. As a river left relatively untouched by major human interventions, the Odra River maintains extensive flood plains and wetlands that are home to numerous endangered species of animals and plants.

Due to the ecological catastrophe which caused a massive fish and molluscs die-off in the summer of 2022, the entire ecosystem is now severely damaged. Over 300 tons of dead fish, clams and snails were recovered on the German and Polish sides. Many more sank to the ground.

This disaster was clearly caused by human activities, as the report of the German Expert Commission on the Odra catastrophe demonstrates. The sources of contamination are currently under further investigation. What is certain however, is that highly saline waters were discharged in the upper river in large quantities. This allowed the *Prymnesium parvum* algae to multiply rapidly, since it flourishes in brackish waters. The algae produced massive amounts of blossoms which produced toxins that affected the fish and molluscs, causing their slow and painful death through suffocation. Heat, stagnant water in retention basins, and low water levels have further aggravated the consequences of this environmental crime.

We call on Poland and Germany to intensify the bilateral cooperation with regards to clarifying the causes of this disaster. We demand the reasons to be fully explained and the results of investigations to be made fully transparent and public by German and Polish authorities.

We call on the Polish local and national authorities to bring all those responsible to justice. It will probably take years for the river to recover. We must do everything we can to support its recovery, protect the river from any further damage and prevent such disasters from happening in Odra and other rivers across Europe.

Full responsibility should be taken by the Polish authorities who disregarded the alarm protocol established by the International Commission for the Protection of the Odra River against Pollution (ICPO) in case of environmental calamities. Action should have been taken upon alarm signals of upcoming disaster. There were many. A repetition of these types of accidents should be avoided at all costs by assuring that responsible authorities do act on existing and – if necessary – improved disaster preparedness/reduction protocols at basin level.

Thus, we demand that all works on the river should be stopped and the plan for the regulation of the river, agreed by Germany and Poland in 2015, be urgently reviewed. The deepening of the Odra as planned by the Polish 'Odra Vistula Flood Management Project' threatens the unique river landscape, the Lower Odra Valley national park in Germany and the Lower Odra Valley Landscape Conservation Park on the Polish river side. The ongoing works aimed at "modernising" the river are in fact another ecological disaster. According to a legal expertise commissioned by the Greens/EFA group in the European Parliament, the works are inconsistent with the European Habitats Directive and the European Water Framework Directive and violate the rules of the European Environmental Impact Assessment Directive.

Our goal should be the protection of our river ecosystems as stated in European Law, not their destruction. Therefore, we call upon the European Commission, the World Bank and the Council of Europe Development Bank not to allocate any funds for works on the Odra without prior check and approval from "green sensitive" bodies with the aim to preserve the river's biodiversity and prevent deterioration of the river's ecosystem and thus ecological status. European money intended for flood protection is currently being misused to transform the entire river into a waterway, which will permanently damage the river's ecosystem. River basin management needs to take on a holistic view of the entire basin and its peoples and build on existing local knowledge. It needs to take into account and counteract current and future challenges of climate change, biodiversity loss and the need to assure that food is produced in a sustainable way. The Odra River should be excluded as a potential waterway within the current revision of the TEN-T guidelines regulation and no funding should be granted under the Connecting Europe Facility for any works therein.

In addition to the careful analysis of risks to nature and people of the current planned activities, we call on the authorities to plan restoration of the basin. The restoration process should be inclusive of all those living and working in the area. It should at a minimum take into account adaptation to climate change, potential to restore and where possible increase biodiversity. If relevant, the restoration process should build on existing experiences with sustainable food production.

We call on Poland and Germany to renegotiate the German-Polish agreement on water flow management of the Odra river of 2015 in the light of the ongoing climate crisis, the recent ecological disaster, the European water framework directive and recent scientific expertise.

We call on the responsible authorities in Germany, Poland and the Czech Republic to install a joint cross-border monitoring system for water quality and biodiversity along the river, to ensure that data is regularly published online, and to build up a trilateral warning system, based on experiences made at the river Rhine after the chemical disaster of 1985.

We call on the relevant authorities and the European Commission to establish a European threshold for chemical pollution and salt concentration of freshwater rivers and to change the current system of wastewater discharges based on static quotas towards one that takes into account the pollution levels in the river.

We call on the German and Polish authorities to take extensive measures to stabilise and enhance the natural resilience of Odra's ecosystem that allows adaptation to climate change. Therefore, its remaining near-natural habitat with natural processes for flood protection and water retention in the landscape should be restored.

Finally, we call on the Polish national authorities to establish a new national park covering the entire area of the Lower Odra Valley, to allow the establishment of a cross-border national park encompassing this unique natural environment, to take stock of the lessons learnt from the Odra River disaster and ensure that there is an effective knowledge sharing platform in place that authorities across the EU can access easily.