

## Let's give rivers a new life to save our own

In recent centuries, Europe's rivers have faced increasing exploitation and transformation, gradually losing their ability to host a rich wildlife and to undergo natural cycles that maintain the hydrological balance of our landscape. Today, cleaner and more sustainable modes of moving goods and generating electricity than waterways are available. We need rivers to take on an entirely different role which they can only play if they are protected and, if needed, restored – wherever possible and as soon as possible – to their natural state.

First, as climate change increases the frequency of droughts and disrupts precipitation patterns, healthy natural river basins with their unmatched water-retention potential are essential for storing and providing water for drinking, agriculture and industry. Secondly, the ambition to achieve climate neutrality means that we are going to need all the available carbon sinks and thus will have to restore, as much as possible, wetlands which used to exist in river valleys. Finally, natural rivers and their valleys are biodiversity hot spots and important wildlife corridors which are crucial for reversing the biodiversity decline which threatens our very existence.

**Therefore, the European Green Party demands:**

### **1. The effective and systemic conservation and restoration of rivers' water-retention and carbon-sink potential**

Wetland restoration is one of the most important ways to stop carbon emissions from degraded wetlands (which account for around 5% of global emissions) and turn them back into carbon sinks which we need to achieve climate neutrality. Climate change means longer and more frequent droughts and different patterns of precipitation, which will increasingly take the form of infrequent but torrential rain. Restored river-valley wetlands can store that water and prevent it from flowing into the sea and flooding towns and cities along the way.

This requires the conservation and large-scale management of wetlands and river valleys, from the sources to the estuary, over the entire catchment area, ensuring their ecological flow both in terms of volume and chemical composition, and promoting permanent grasslands and flood plain and wetland forests. Such nature-based solutions are effective, environmentally friendly and low-cost ways to mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change.

### **2. Conservation and large-scale restoration of habitats and wildlife corridors along rivers and river valleys**

Rivers, streams and their valleys are important habitats and wildlife corridors, connecting water and land habitats in increasingly fragmented landscapes. They enable short-distance movements and long-distance migration of various animal species. Rivers and river valleys should be kept unobstructed by dams and other infrastructure, preserved and restored to their natural state wherever possible. This is crucial also in order to preserve the natural sediment contribution that form and maintain Deltas, which are unique areas in terms of biodiversity, but also exceptionally rich agricultural areas. Obstruction causes lack of sedimentation,

resulting into net loss of particularly valuable land. Where barriers are already built, the obligations for owners of such facilities must be strengthened in order to better protect migratory fish. In addition to removing barriers, solutions for helping fish pass such barriers must also be introduced. Rewilding rivers and river valleys goes hand in hand with the aims of protecting and restoring carbon sinks and improving the water-retention potential of our landscapes. It also improves a number of other ecosystem services provided by rivers, such as: water self-purification which is essential as we face the risk of drinking-water shortages; nature-based flood protection that involves giving rivers room to freely overflow; as well as recreational and cultural functions.

### **3. Urgent cessation of new waterway and hydropower development plans for Europe's remaining natural rivers**

Rivers and their ecosystems are threatened by national and European plans for the development of class IV international river waterways as a part of the European TEN-T Network. In this context, it is of concern that, from 2021, the European Green Deal Roadmap is planning 'initiatives to increase and better manage the capacity of railways and inland waterways'. In particular, we consider as inadmissible the E40 Waterway project extending more than 2 000 kilometres across Poland, Belarus and Ukraine. It will cause irreversible hydrological changes, flooding in certain areas and re-draining in others, destruction of river-related ecosystems, as well as the inevitable spread of radionuclides accumulated after the Chernobyl disaster.

The project is also extremely questionable from the economic aspects. Due to the climate change many rivers have a much lower water flow than they used to or completely dry out in the summer time, thus being unusable for transport. Investments into their restructuring are mostly wasted, also because they are based on an old geography of the water flow that does not correspond to the present reality.

Inland navigation remains useful in EU countries like Belgium and The Netherlands, where it already exists and where its maintenance is possible, justified and does not harm the environment, especially where vessels can be electrified. However, the development of new river transport is much more expensive, slower and more carbon-intensive than rail. For example, the feasibility study procured by the Czechian government for the controversial Danube-Oder-Elbe Canal project was widely criticised by experts for having serious flaws, such as omitting significant external costs and downplaying environmental risks to unique habitats protected by EU legislation, whilst largely exaggerating benefits to local economies, flood protection, or reducing carbon emissions.

We also urge governments in the Balkans and all over Europe to stop building dams and small hydropower plants in protected areas and call for a ban of the subsidy schemes that foster development of small hydropower plants. Constructing these plants means that forests are cut down and river flows are disturbed, damaging river plants and fish. Rivers are also diverted into pipes which dries out the ground and opens the way for potentially deadly erosion. Some villages have lost access to water for cattle or agriculture, while the loss of forests is contributing to more frequent flash floods. Construction of small hydropower plants not only

lead to irreversible ecological devastation but can destroy livelihoods of communities through the destruction of their agricultural land and by causing displacement of these communities. Dams should not be built in earthquake prone areas such as the Balkans.

#### **4. Evidence-based water and stream management practices**

Water and stream management must be based on science and experience and must respect contemporary knowledge about rivers' geo-ecosystems. The practice of water-course maintenance must be modernised so that it can be based on 'cooperation' with the natural processes of river dynamics, which should also include a considerable scaling down of maintenance works. River training, if any, should use solutions which take into account rivers' hydraulic, geo-morphological and natural conditions, while water courses regulated according to the old concepts need to be rewilded on a large scale. Large-scale and long-distance water transfers between basins for economic purposes is an old-fashioned practice with severe ecological consequences that should be discarded by default. Continuation of the technical approach to the management of river systems and their drainage basins will inevitably exacerbate existing problems, droughts, floods and unfavourable changes in our continent's landscape. Rewilding the rivers and streams which were transformed in the past – or, in some cases, simply allowing such rivers to re-naturalise themselves through natural processes – will reinstate their characteristic species and habitats, slow down the run-off from the river basin, and enhance river valley retention.

#### **5. Give a protection status for a minimum of 30 % of wild rivers.**

It is necessary to give a strong protection status to rivers in an objective of preservation but also of reclaiming degraded space. This protective approach considers the entire river. Providing a strong legal footing for our rivers and wild rivers by relying on processes such as the Water Parliaments - deliberative bodies which bring together all the stakeholders for each water catchment - is a crucial step to be taken in order to protect these.