European Centre for River Restoration
Declaration on River Restoration,
Lelystad, 28 May 2009

Considerations

Throughout Europe the ever increasing intensity of use of rivers and their floodplains for the benefit of mankind has resulted in a widespread physical, morfological, chemical and biological deterioration of aquatic and riverine habitats. The relationship between culture and nature needs a rebalancing by wise use and interventions to restore, renew and innovate the qualities of a river, basin wide. And for that reason river restoration appears to be more an art than a science.

Ecological river restoration focuses on regaining lost ecological functions, contributing to biological diversity and as such in many respect, to the human society itself. River restoration, including stream and floodplain restoration on a basin scale can support species recovery, improved inland and coastal water quality by means of sediment particle retention and associated nutrients and pollutants during flooding making use of natural ecological processes in the riverine environment, the development of new habitats for wildlife, while promoting alternative human activities like recreation. Ecological restoration is necessary due to all interferences that took place in the past or still takes place at present, but most important is to conserve and protect the remaining natural river and wetland ecosystems on our globe.

ECRR's findings are that:

1. As a result of the expansion of river restoration projects being implemented during the last 10-15 years, an increased learning from practice can be observed.
2. There is a progressively growing awareness and knowledge among stakeholders of the need to use new approaches.
3. More national policies become available and/or are under implementation, while there is more attention for the regional differences within Europe.
4. There is an increased awareness and understanding of opportunities and benefits related with river restoration among the various stakeholder levels.

ECRR also expresses a number of specific observations on the future to river restoration are formulated:

1. River restoration should target at restoring complete ecosystems and ecosystem processes, in which, as in undisturbed nature, dynamism is a key feature, expressed as the self-sustaining capacity of river and stream ecosystems and their capacity to respond to imposed external environmental changes. In this, regarding the four dimensions of a river, hydro-morphological processes remain a key factor in steering ecosystem processes and ecosystem quality;

2. River restoration should aim at tackling or contributing to solving regional impact factors, from the river to the basin via the floodplain. Early involvement of local stakeholders and enterprises in river restoration projects is essential to enhance the quality, financial health and so the sustainability of the project results;
3. The embedding of river restoration into an appropriate policy context is crucial to decision-making processes and implementation practices towards reaching defined results. In Western Europe, policy such as the Water Framework Directive (WFD) has been an effective driver although slow to makes its effect felt.
4. River restoration practices are being supportive to the implementation of various EU Directives, especially WFD, FFH, SPA and FRD, while on the other hand the implementation obligations under the EU Directives often are a driving force for the implementation of river restoration projects.
5. River restoration is based on an integrated ecosystem development approach. This difference creates obvious good opportunities, but also some threats with respect to an effective joined implementation of both river restoration measures and the EU directives.
6. The EU and related national implementation programmes can be targeted to finance river restoration, especially when river restoration targets are formulated in line with programmes on flood defence, water quality improvement, the Common Agricultural Programme, ecological networks, fisheries, renewable energy etc.
7. In defining ecological success criteria external changes need to be taken into account, like climate change, human population growth, land use changes, economic development etc. Therefore, design rivers for the future with respect to the past, with the understanding that only selected services can be realistically restored.
8. River restoration, when linked to new societal needs, is in fact a long term strategic economic investment, and should be communicated more as such.

ECRR wants to communicate that:

1. The strategic objective of the ECRR is to promote the translation from research oriented local river restoration activities to the elaboration and implementation of integrated larger-scale practical activities. As such, ECRR activities aim at increasing the knowledge base and common understanding of expectations among scientists, practitioners and decision-takers at the European level by means of publications, website conferences, all tailor-made based on the recognition of the various stakeholder groups – technical disciplines, policy makers, decision makers, practitioners, funders, the large public including young people, etc.
2. The ECRR will emphasise the link between the strategic and operational levels, by improving the knowledge base of decision takers (awareness raising) and improving the understanding of scientists and practitioners on relevance and complexity at the policy level. It also provides scientists and practitioners with opportunities to exchange experiences and best practices of river restoration, based on a planning process with integrated research ad design and adequate stakeholder involvement.
3. For its members, the ECRR serves as a representative to international and national platforms like the national governments and the EU, at international conferences, river basin commissions, the World Water Forum, etc., where the common view on river restoration can be furthered.

ECRR wants to recommend that:

The European national governments ensure their international credibility by applying an ecosystem approach to manage their rivers on a basin scale, in particular the transboundary rivers, in addition to the integrated river basin management approach and use the opportunities to address ecological river restoration and conservation within the implementation plans of the EU Directives.