

6th European River Restoration Conference

Connecting River Restoration Thinking to Innovative River Management

Conference Statement of Participants

Vienna, 29 October 2014

Findings

The 6th European River Restoration Conference together with the final event of the SEE River project convened in Vienna 27-30 October 2014, and was attended by 230 registered representatives from government, inter-government, research and civil society organisations from 35 countries in Europe and beyond. By providing a platform for sharing expertise and experience, the Conference aimed at contributing to the increased uptake of the principles and best practices of river restoration and integrated river basin management into policy and practices, towards returning Europe's rivers into a more natural state, in balance with society's choices and preferences.

During 4 days of intensive interactions, participants to the 6th ERRC & SEE River Project Final Event reflected on the state-of-the-art in cross-cutting and innovative approaches for integrated river basin management and river restoration. Keynote speakers and contributors to plenary and parallel sessions as well as field excursions outlined the current state of knowledge & research, capacity & finance as well as scale & effectiveness of practical restoration measures. They reflected on the opportunities for innovative Integrated River Basin Management provided by emerging policy initiatives, with specific focus on using approaches like Green Infrastructure, Natural Water Retention, and Contemporary River Corridor Management.

Evidence outlined by participants in presentations and posters, and conclusions from break-out sessions and working groups highlighted the extensive work done in recent decades towards developing best practice approaches for river restoration, towards restoring the ecological state of rivers and their biodiversity. With specifically water quality having been significantly improved, attention is shifting towards addressing hydro-morphological pressures and issues of re-installing lateral and longitudinal connectivity. Practical applications commonly rely on pilot projects in small and large rivers targeted for subsequent upscaling, using qualitative and quantitative survey, modelling and monitoring tools. Other actual themes include urban resilience, sustainable land use and hydropower, as well as the integrated consideration for ecological and economic benefits.

Participants' contributions and field excursions demonstrated the ongoing shift from local, science-oriented river restoration practices targeting singular species or river stretches towards larger-scale integrated, cross-sectoral approaches at the river corridor and river basin level. In order to reach win-win results, river and floodplain restoration, rehabilitating fish migration and upgrading flood protection, requires repeated consultation with and support of local stakeholders, as well as sound preparation – inventories, modelling, long-term monitoring and adaptive reworking. Increasingly due attention is paid to balancing ecological and socio-economic needs and the application of accepted principles such as ecosystem services, sustainable & precautionary planning and decision making, and stakeholder involvement at all relevant levels, including transboundary concerns. Endorsed relevant EU Directives – the WFD, FD, HBD, Natura-2000, RES-E, and others – provide the enabling environment for embedding the overarching principles into policy development and implementation. This strengthens common understanding, and creates the enabling environment for targeted action on addressing ecological concerns in sustainable development planning.

Meanwhile, significant challenges remain. While improvements are observed, the status of many rivers in Europe is still critical. Although there is an increased awareness and knowledge on the factual and future consequences of past impacts on water from development activities, European wide assessments show that agreed Programmes of Measures to 2015 were insufficiently ambitious; both in defining actions needed, in coordinating actions among Directives, and in factual addressing identified pressures towards an improved ecological status of the aquatic environment. Meanwhile, the envisioned expansion of hydro power is a threat for the ecological status of Europe's pristine rivers, if the guidance on maintaining continuity and environmental flows is not urgently developed and efficiently implemented. Also the forecasted increase in pressures on water resources from population growth, economic development, climate change and others strengthen the need for a paradigm shift towards proactive, integrated, adaptive planning, decision making and action at the appropriate scale, based on inclusive public participation and broad stakeholder involvement, comprehensive hazard & risk assessments, and continuous monitoring. Reaching on-the-ground success further requires political will & courage, an appropriate legal framework, comprehensive economic valuation, sufficient financial resources, and ever-increasing knowledge, information and (scientific) learning, on non-linearity, thresholds and tipping points, through modelling and scenarios.

Statements

Having been acquainted with the current practices on strengthening river restoration principles into river basin management practices, driven by the enabling regional & national policy context and legislative frameworks in the EU and elsewhere, the participants of the 6th ERRC & SEE River Project Final Event highlight the following Directional Statements, to guide decision making on the planning and implementation of river restoration and innovative river basin management in the years ahead:

1. The 6th ERRC & SEE River project final event: Much knowledge and demonstration of practice is gained, many gaps remain.

The showcased results of implemented river restoration and river basin management initiatives, addressing themes of urban resilience, sustainable land use, hydropower, hydro-morphological continuity, fish migration, and ecological & economical benefits in relation to the practical aspects of effectiveness, capacity, finance, policy and research, confirmed the significant progress made in shifting from the science & ecology focus on the local level towards integrated, cross-sectoral policy and planning practices over regions and basins.

2. Innovative approaches & instruments: Apply a holistic approach in integrating natural processes with socio-economic development, based on ecosystem services & multiple benefits.

The demonstrated value of a focused exchange of knowledge and experiences among peers and between involved sectors should encourage river restoration practitioners to expand the practical application of innovative approaches and instruments - Natural Water Retention Measures, Green Infrastructure, Contemporary River Corridor Management and Environmental Flows - in contributing to holistic considerations of maintaining natural river processes, by aligning sustainable socio-economic development planning through considerations for the multiple benefits from ecosystem services & natural values.

3. Cross-cutting planning & implementation: Link general pressures with local measures.

The impacts from known, underestimated as well as new, unexpected pressures on rivers and aquatic ecosystems – increased water consumption & regulation, as well as hydro-morphological alterations in response to population growth, food & energy needs, climate changes (water scarcity, floods), and others – remain significant. Addressing these impacts with sustainable integrated river basin management approaches requires the strengthening of cross-cutting planning and implementation, between countries & basins, sectors & themes, policy & legislation, stakeholders and the public. Instruments like Contemporary River Corridor Management and its underlying toolbox provide an exciting framework for facilitating further guidance on integrated thinking & planning, sharing of benefits, awareness raising & outreach, ownership and capacity building at all appropriate levels.

4. The planning framework: Vision – Ambition – Tangible results.

The planning cycle of the adopted EU policy framework, specifically the preparation of 2nd River Basin Management plans under the WFD, provides opportunities for countries and basins to strengthen the cross-sectoral planning of practical, realistic and tangible measures to address identified pressures. Success depends on the strategic planning of the harmonizing of relevant EU Directives (WFD, HBD, FD, RES-E), as well as the CAP and other land use planning instruments, based on proper stakeholder participation, awareness raising and public involvement. The subsequent implementation of agreed practical measures towards tangible results will in turn expand the knowledge base to strengthen future cross-sectoral planning.

5. Societal choices: Based on leadership, courage, cooperation, public participation and stakeholder involvement.

Successful integrated river basin management, as valued by citizens while addressing the pressures, depends on the proper reflection of societal choices on sustainable socio-economic development into a realistic and practical planning and implementation framework, based on public participation and stakeholder involvement. Win-win solutions, linking economic gain with adaptation & mitigation of impacts need to be considered, taking uncertainties regarding socio-economic development and climate change into account.

6. Best practices of integrated river basin management.

The demonstrated achievements of ecological river restoration up-scaling should serve as best practice guidance for a broader application of the integrated approach in river basin management. Raising awareness and strengthening the increasing commitments, leading from engagement to responsibility, to developing and implementing long-term visions and management frameworks, merging socio-economic development issues and impacts from land use, hydropower, agriculture and others with defined environmental targets, creates the enabling environment and responsibilities towards reaching tangible improvements, bringing the ecological status of rivers in Europe more in balance with society.