

Restoring Europe's Rivers

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Rivers provide many services and restoration can significantly increase those provided by a **healthy ecosystem**. We need to rethink our relationship with rivers. As cities have grown and agricultural practices have developed we have culverted, diverted and polluted our rivers. Those were some of the key messages to emerge from yesterday's seminar in Brussels, looking at the benefits of restoring natural river processes.

'Over the past ten years, Europe suffered more than 175 major floods, causing deaths, the displacement of people and large economic losses. At the same time drought is increasing across Europe with the number of countries affected almost doubling between 1971 to 2011.' (EEA, key facts 2010 and 2012).

RESTORE project manager Toni Scarr kicked off by outlining that river restoration is all about working with the natural process of the river, she said – not only the channel itself but also the floodplain and from the river's source right out to where it meets the sea. Good work is being done in giving people greater access to wildlife and breaking down previously dislocated riverside buildings from the water, cutting down walls and improving connections. But lessons could also be learned from practices around Europe, such as extensive work done on the Lea River has transformed the area around the Olympic Park in London. She noted that restoration of rivers through urban green space have seen increased use of that space, better flood protection, increased access and associated improvements include a reduction in the fear of crime. The talk finished by showing how RESTORE is a repository of information about river restoration and the different methods it uses to do that: [website](#), [RiverWiki](#) and a guide for planners, developers and architects will shortly be published.

Yves Hubert, principal designer at Joining Nature and Cities discussed a site near Lille that had problems with low flows, poor water quality which supported a limited diversity of wildlife. They wanted to create a 'living environment', increase the value of the landscape and develop access and recreation associated with the river. So they re-profiled the river, created backwaters and addressed the water quality issues. They also improve the access to the site and the river. He discussed benefits such as natural water treatment, flood risk management, recreation activities such as walking and fishing but also much more diverse habitats. Where previously they had no waterfowl now the ducks were enjoying themselves!



The Tortoise - Le Parc de la Deûle – copyright 

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We learnt about cross border collaboration on the Meuse from Katia Nagels. She described an international river rehabilitation project which aims to restore the natural river processes.



Katia Nagels Agency for Nature and Forests

This project spans Flanders and the Netherlands, she emphasised the importance of collaboration where rivers do not 'recognise' our borders. She also asked for better join up between European Directives influencing water management and improving nature conservation. Her work looked at creating natural riverine landscapes, including replacing gravel beds in the rivers, removing engineered bank protection and creating wet woodland and flower rich grasslands in the floodplain. The river had become degraded from decades of intensive agriculture, gravel extraction and separation of the river from its floodplain. A new river park was opened at the end of last year.

Given the high profile of water front projects such as MAS and the Antwerp Port building, as well as the increasing demand for more natural surroundings, improved access to rivers, clean water and pollution control, this approach is integral to future development.