Experiences of the Polish ECRR National River Restoration Centre

River Vistula, Warsaw, Polish, source weatlas.com

The Polish ECRR National Centre works as an informal group of scientists and practitioners. The contact point was placed in Warsaw University of Life Sciences, Department of Hydraulic Engineering with Dr. Mateusz Grygoruk as the leader. The actual river restoration issues and activities are strongly de-centralized with many fantastic initiators of river restoration research and implementation (e.g. IOP - Institute for Environmental Protection of Polish Academy of Sciences in Cracow, Poznań Universty of Life Sciences, Inland Fisheries Institute in Olsztyn, University of Warsaw, fishing clubs and many other entities).

Although the year 2017 was proclaimed to be the Year of Vistula, the last few years unfortunately have not brought any systematic or nation-wide programs aimed at increasing the quality of rivers. Instead, we have been facing increasing pressures from river regulation for navigation and agriculture. The National programs for the development of river navigation not only do not address the need of WFD implementation for increasing ecological status/potential of Polish rivers, but even aim at increasing the scale of technical modification of the most valuable water bodies. Additionally, the management of agricultural rivers that consumed nearly 30 billion of Polish Zlotys (some 7 BLN EUR) in years 2010-2015 (official information of the Ministry of Environment of Poland), has not accounted for any actions related to river restoration.

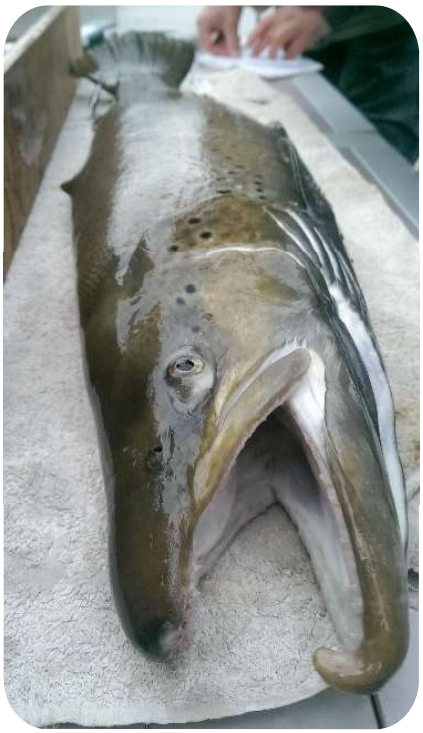
Such a background does not seem a desirable prerequisite for river restoration in Poland in the near future. Nevertheless, the society of scientists and NGOs related to rivers recently formed the Coalition "Save the Rivers" (Pol. Koalicja Ratujmy Rzeki) in order to plan future actions and counteract the lobby for river regulation. In this messy field, the Polish branch of ECRR was present in many pivotal initiatives, starting from the Parliament of Poland, through the scientific conferences, ending (or rather starting from) upon the lowland and mountain rivers.

In September 2016, Józef Jeleński from AbOvo association, Prof. Bartłomiej Wyżga from IOP together with Joanna Zawiejka (Pedagogical University of Cracow) managed to arrange a successful international River Restoration Conference and gathered the best river (restoration) specialists on a few-days meeting in the Cracow University of Technology. Discussions and field sessions allowed to draw some interesting conclusions, especially referring to the catchment of the Raba River. Over there some dams were removed, what not only changed the ecosystems of the tributaries, but is mainly influencing the local stakeholders towards a positive attitude towards the environment. Some of the advances in river restoration presented at the conference will be presented soon in special issues of journals which will be announced in the coming issues of the ECRR Newsletter.

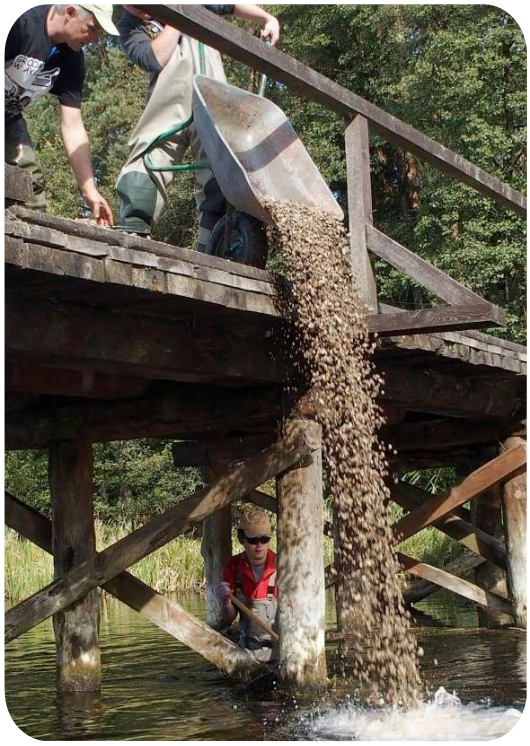
Some good news were reported from the Regional Board of Water Management in Warsaw (Pokropski, 2017) and the team of Prof. Piotr Dębowski (Inland Fisheries Institute) about the numbers of fish migrating through one of the most critical Polish dams – the Włocławek Dam (Lower Vistula). This dam, located approx. 250 km upstream from the Vistula estuary, was for a couple of decades a dead end for the Baltic sea trout, salmon and vimba bream for upstream migration. It closed the migration way to the rivers in 88% of the whole Vistula catchment. This includes also the Carpathian rivers, being formerly well functioning spawning grounds for sea trout and salmon. The fish-pass was recently reconstructed. Prof. Dębowski's team involved in the monitoring of fish-pass efficiency (catching, recording, tagging and releasing

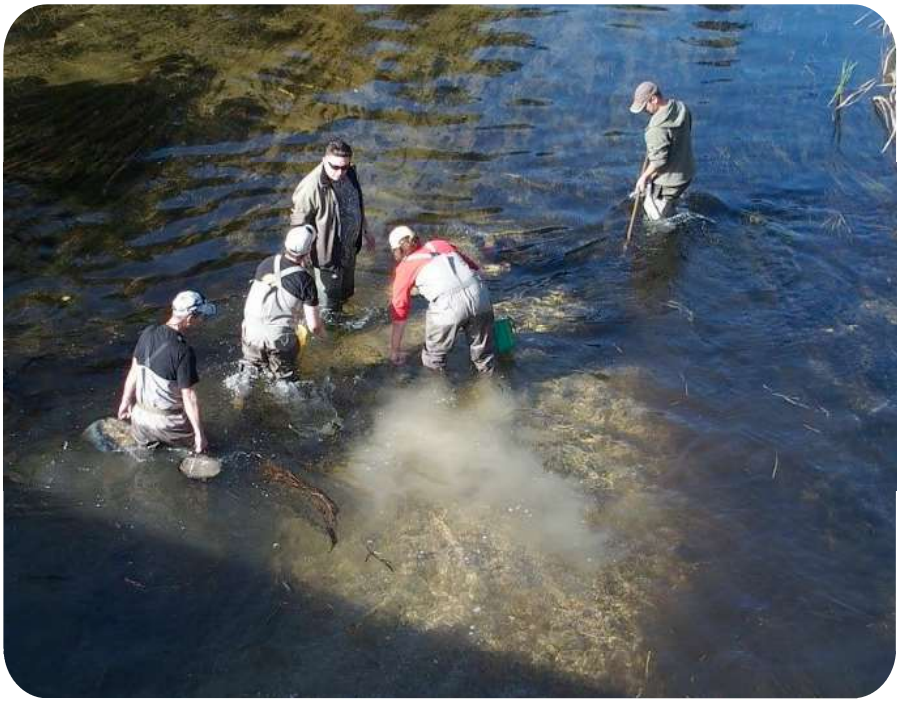
fish) reported significant increase mainly of the sea trout migration in 2015 (Dębowski, 2016) compared to the years before. However, in general the numbers of all the fish passing through (3882 fish in 2015 and 7946 in 2016; sea trout 1566 and 651 in 2015 and 2016 respectively) were much lower than expected. Considering the recent revitalization measures of the fish-pass, the general expectations for the future increase in the fish migration should not be considered too optimistic.

Fortunately, the local fish populations have also gained allies. Many local fishing clubs started working in the field to improve and re-establish spawning grounds. Among many others, rivers Bystrzyca (E Poland), Raba (S Poland), Czarna Hańcza (NE Poland), Wełna (Central Poland) and Ina and Gowienica (NW Poland) gained some new spawning grounds. The most important fact in this matter is that although the majority of these actions were initiated by local activists, some procedures were implemented by water management authorities. Still – too few to be happy about the future of trout in Poland, but at least one could observe how important the bottom up approach in this issue is. For more results, governmental programmes are highly desirable, however they are yet new to Polish water management.



A nice 97 cm coloured male sea trout recorded in a fish-pass of Włocławek Dam in November 2016.





Salmo Club Białystok making spawning grounds for brown trout in Czarna Hańcza river.

Despite the actions described above, river restoration in Poland, similarly to the most of Central-European countries, still did not reach the level of political, societal and economic importance high enough to allow looking forward to a bright future of the country's riverine ecosystems. However, some local river restoration actions undertaken by fishing clubs and environmental management authorities allow foreseeing the change of this alarming status. It becomes more and more obvious that accounting for systematic, legal and institutional solutions in Polish approach to river restoration is likely not to be an appropriate strategy. Instead – together with the rivers – I hope for a gradual increase of the level of the environmental education and local actions. The ECRR Poland in the coming years will do its best to contribute to these issues.

References:

Dębowski, P., 2016. (in Polish) Fish passage through the Włocławek Dam fishway in 2015. Komunikaty Rybackie 4/2016.

Pokropski, T., 2017. (in Polish) Monitoring of fish migration through the fish pass in Włocławek Dam in 2016. RZGW Warszawa. URL: https://warszawa.rzgw.gov.pl/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/15926/MONITORING-PRZEPŁAWKI-NA-STOPNIU-WE-WŁOCŁAWKU-RAPORT-2016.pdf (accessed on 01.07.2017).