



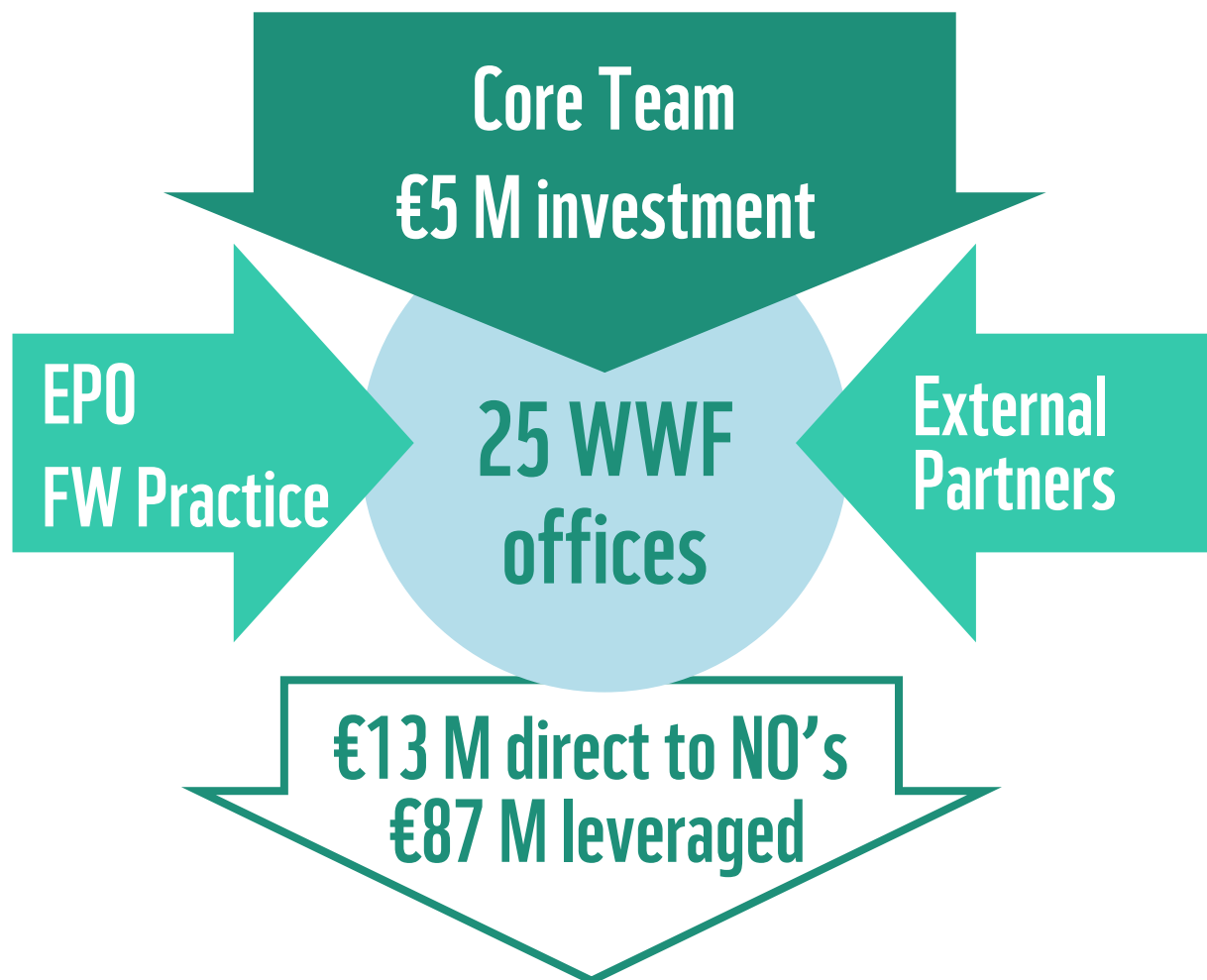
# Living European Rivers Initiative



**COLLECTIVELY DRIVING  
CHANGE IN EUROPE'S WATERS**

**Progress Report 2018 - 2023**

# Living European Rivers (LER) initiative: Snapshot of Six years of Success



WFD



WATER FRAMEWORK DIRECTIVE SAVED  
LIVING RIVERS EUROPE COALITION CREATED  
COURT CASES WON USING WFD

HYDROPOWER



TRANSFORMED NARRATIVE RE HYDROPOWER  
HP INCENTIVES REMOVED IN 3 COUNTRIES  
150 ORGS REJECT NEW HP PLANTS IN EUROPE

DAM REMOVALS +

HUGE GROWTH IN DAM REMOVAL MOVEMENT  
30 DAMS REMOVED BY WWF  
€50M RAISED FOR DAM REMOVAL

NbS



TRANSFORMED UNDERSTANDING OF NBS  
6 LARGE SCALE NbS PROJECTS ON THE WAY  
DEVELOPING INCUBATION FACILITY WITH EIB

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# Foreword



**Jelle de Jong**  
CEO, WWF-NL

The Dutch are renowned for water management, for transforming our landscape by taming our waters with high tech, engineering solutions. But in the last two decades, we have realised the best way to build resilience to climate change is to rely less on grey infrastructure and more on working with nature. In particular, we have learned the importance of providing more ‘Room for our Rivers’. Believing this new perspective could inspire others at a critical moment for Europe’s waterways, we helped create the Living European Rivers (LER) initiative to unite WWF offices around some key freshwater issues.

And we were right! LER helped safeguard the EU’s Water Framework Directive, mobilised tens of millions of euros for dam removals and Nature-based Solutions (NbS), supported WWF offices to scale up river restoration, and developed partnerships to drive even greater collective impact. Just take dam removals: LER has been instrumental in driving a “Riverlution” with unprecedented sums invested in river restoration and dam removal records broken year-after-year.

But none of this would have been possible without the tireless efforts of WWF colleagues all over Europe as well as partnerships with NGOs, institutions, communities and unusual partners like the insurance sector. LER is an example of the African proverb: *if you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.* And maybe the real promise of LER is still to come. Climate change is clearly impacting people in Europe, with a record number of flood and drought disasters last year. Nature is our best friend to tackle these challenges. I kindly ask you to join forces and together with LER, we can scale NbS in Europe so it becomes mainstream in water management.



**Andreas Beckmann**  
CEO, WWF-CEE

The unprecedented droughts that hit large parts of the Danube basin last year underlined the increasing challenges posed by climate change compounded by decades of mismanagement of our watersheds. The result is that Hungary, for example, is literally drying out. This is having serious impacts with harvests in some parts of the country dropping by as much as 90%.

The Living European Rivers initiative presents an answer to this growing challenge. It has provided an effective framework and platform for promoting local action – demonstrating the feasibility and the benefits of restoring rivers and wetlands, and working with nature rather than against it – while shaping the enabling environment at national, regional, and European levels.

It has been instrumental in our efforts to remove dams, and develop transformative Nature-based Solutions and an incubator for nurturing larger projects. Thanks to the initiative, WWF and partners successfully defended the EU’s pioneering Water Framework Directive.

The CEE region contains many of Europe’s greatest remaining river and wetland treasures, and freshwater resources will be key to the area’s future development and well-being. Therefore, WWF-CEE will continue to be a strong supporter of the Living European Rivers initiative.

I would like to express my appreciation, particularly to WWF-Netherlands, Eva Hernandez, and the Living European Rivers core team for driving this initiative.

# Living European Rivers initiative: Collectively driving action on freshwater

Europe's societies and economies depend on healthy freshwater ecosystems. Yet the vast majority of the continent's rivers, lakes and wetlands have been lost or degraded over the past 400 years due to intense human activity. And we are continuing to degrade them – damming, dredging, draining and polluting our water bodies. The result: most of Europe's waters are in a bad ecological status, freshwater species are in freefall, and we are losing the irreplaceable benefits that healthy freshwater ecosystems provide people and nature – threatening our water and food security, driving greater nature loss, and undermining efforts to adapt to the worsening impacts of climate change and build resilience.

While WWF offices have played a critical role in protecting and restoring freshwater ecosystems from Doñana to the Danube delta, it was clear that the systemic threats to the continent's waters, including increasing uncertainty around the review of the Water Framework Directive, required a new approach. So the WWF Living European Rivers initiative was born. With an ambitious aim: to work collectively to bring back hope and biodiversity by safeguarding Europe's renowned legal framework and using it to drive change, raising awareness about the critical role of healthy freshwater ecosystems in tackling our nature and climate crises, and accelerating impact by scaling up investment in restoration and resilience.

**Urgent need to ramp up collective action in Europe:**

**93% fall in migratory fish populations in Europe since 1970**

**60% water bodies in bad health**

**More than 1 million barriers blocking our rivers, many of them obsolete**

**21,300 hydropower plants, with 8,800 additional plants planned or under construction**



# A shared vision for 2030: focus, innovation and scale

LER was launched in late 2017 by WWF's European Freshwater Network with support from the Freshwater Practice Core Team after securing the endorsement of European Conservation Directors and CEOs. The initiative was primarily funded by WWF-NL, which hosted LER until 2023, when it was transferred to WWF-CEE for an interim period.

Initiatives were created to scale up WWF's efforts to tackle some of the unprecedented challenges facing people and nature, and contribute towards our global 2030 goals. The Living European Rivers initiative has risen to this challenge by enhancing collaboration across offices, stimulating innovation at scale, leveraging tens of millions of Euros, working with partners, and driving conservation impact across the continent.

From its launch, LER has **FOCUSED ON KEY TOPICS**, which offer the greatest opportunity for collective action and impact.

It started with successful joint policy, advocacy and communications efforts to safeguard the Water Framework Directive before pivoting to help secure adoption of the landmark Nature Restoration Law. LER has also been critical in the Europe-wide push to halt new hydropower, the dam removal *riverlution*, and the growing momentum behind transformative Nature-based Solutions (NbS) for climate adaptation.

**INNOVATION** has been key to LER's success, not only in its selection of topics but also in the way it operates: while keeping its focus, it is flexible enough to adapt to an increasingly unstable context, from changing political priorities to unimaginable health and security crises to worsening water-related climate impacts. LER has been able to adapt to changes and seize new opportunities as well pull back when an exit point is reached.

Along with finding productive ways to work with offices, LER has innovated in relation to cross-border collaboration, aligning strategies across countries, building strong alliances with other NGOs, like in Dam Removal Europe, and exploring continent-wide partnerships with key sectors, such as finance, insurance and agriculture – all of which benefit from a collective European scale approach.

Along with partnerships, LER has driven a shift in **SCALE** in resource mobilisation by focusing on funds for restoration at landscape scale rather than small scale ad hoc projects.

"By 2030, WWF Living European Rivers Initiative has contributed to shift the current water management paradigm in order to halt the degradation of European freshwater ecosystems and bend the curve of their biodiversity loss, while they become essential elements of resilience and adaptation to climate change."

# Focus on transformative themes. First four, today two...

LER's collective efforts initially focused on four thematic areas, which each addressed critical systemic challenges. After achieving significant progress, LER underwent an internal evaluation in 2021, which further **focused its work on the two greatest opportunities and areas of added value**: Nature-based Solutions for climate adaptation and the Dam Removal movement. Policy and hydropower incentive work remained in the hands of EPO and relevant offices.

## Water Framework Directive



Amid calls by big business and some states for this key piece of EU legislation to be watered down, LER worked with EPO on the successful **#ProtectWater campaign in coalition with other NGOs** operating at European level. LER's policy work continued with collective efforts to secure ambitious targets in the Nature Restoration Law.

## Free Flowing Rivers & Hydropower



To protect the last Free Flowing Rivers in Europe, especially in the Western Balkans, LER collaborated with EPO, offices and the global Freshwater Practice to push back new hydropower by highlighting **the value of healthy connected rivers** and the negative impacts of hydropower, and campaigning against incentives.

## Dam Removal Movement



Protecting rivers is not enough. Europe needs to restore rivers too, especially by removing thousands of obsolete dams and barriers. LER seized the opportunity to transform views of dams and WWF's work to restore rivers by creating awareness, building capacity, removing barriers, and **inspiring a movement** via Dam Removal Europe.

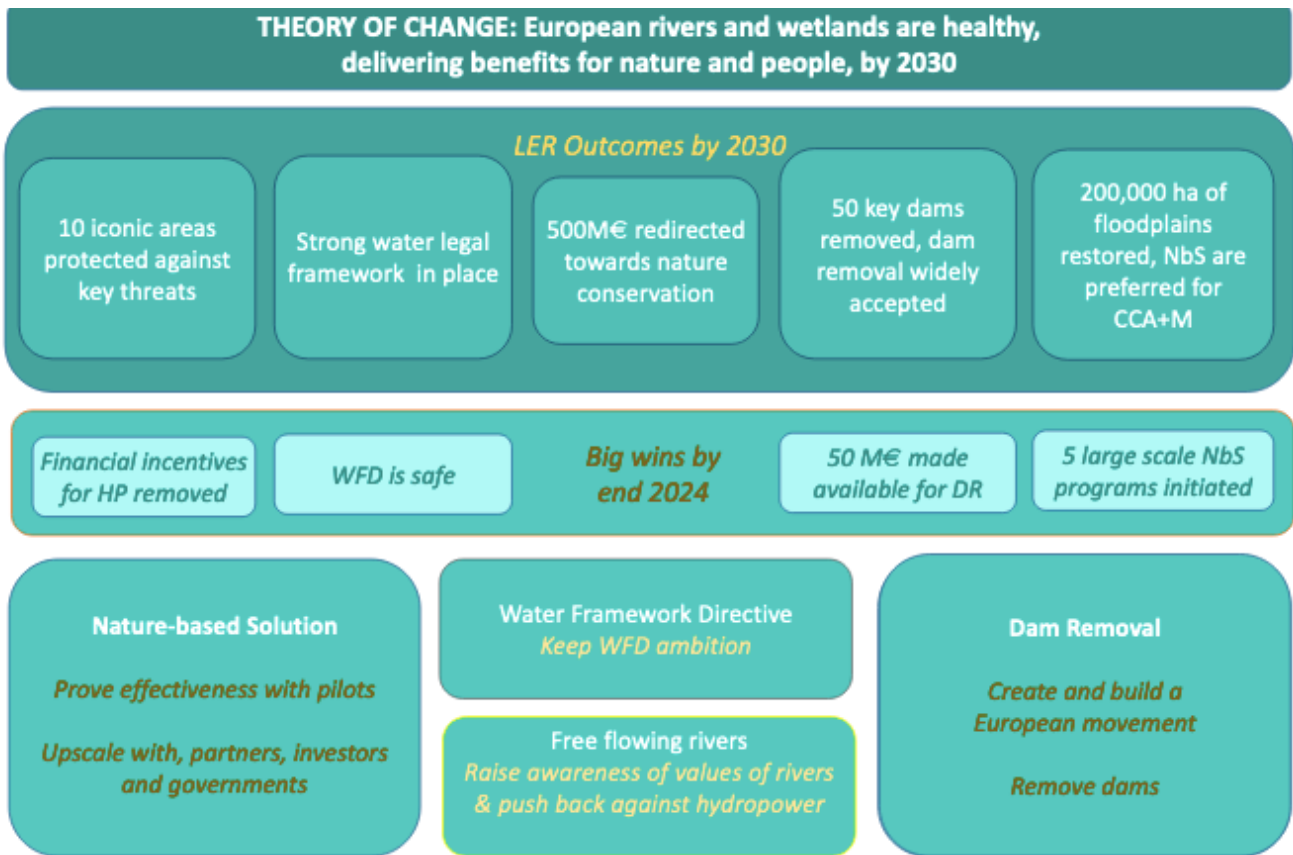
## Nature-Based Solutions



LER has promoted Nature-based Solutions for **climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction through river and wetland restoration at scale**. LER has helped create a pipeline of large-scale projects, attract investment, build capacity of offices, bring in new partners and collaborate with EPO on creating an appropriate legal framework.

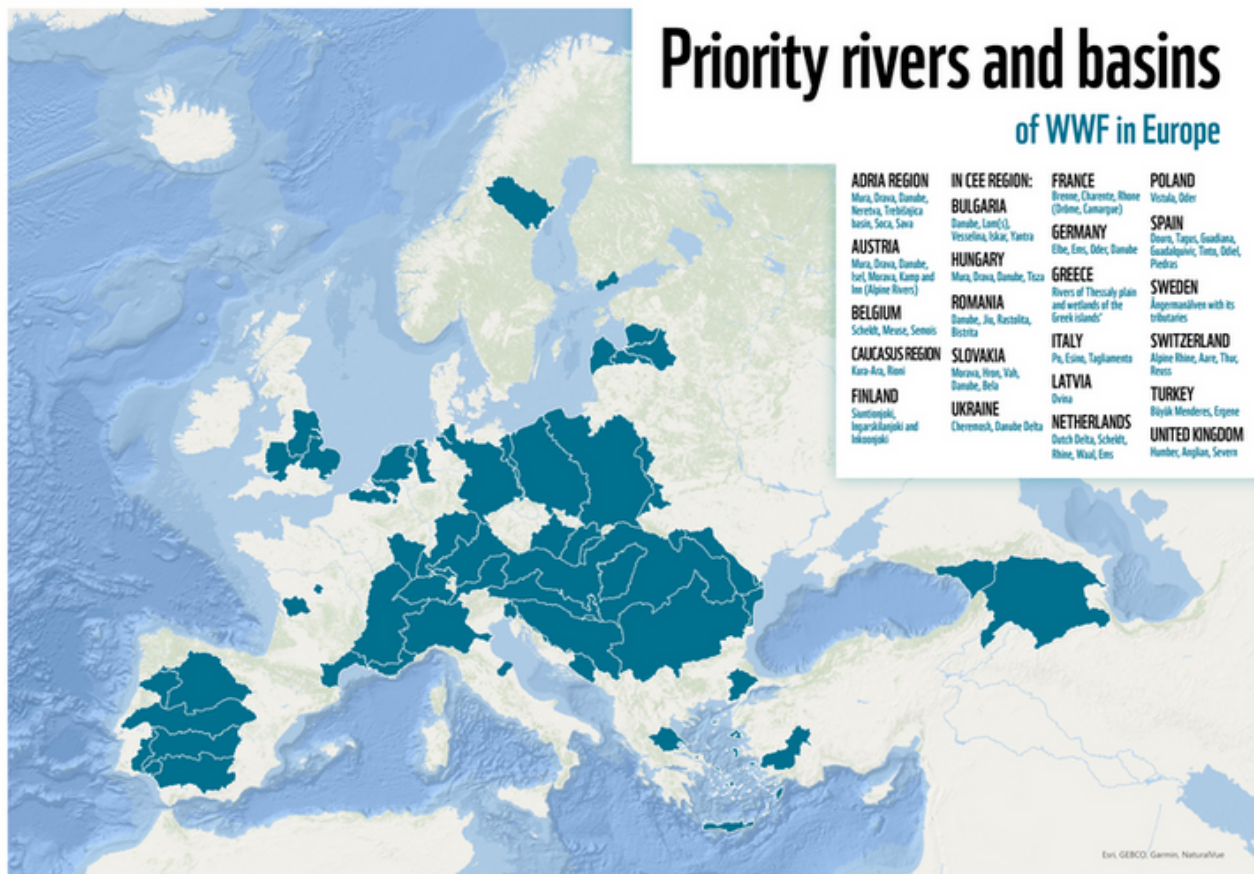


# Theory of change: building influence, driving impact



# Where we work: 25 countries across Europe

25 countries are currently participating in the Living European Rivers initiative, aligning efforts for river conservation and restoration. The map below shows the main basins where WWF offices are actively working on freshwater. While not all of them are on board with LER, the initiative remains open to future collaborations.





# Changing the face - and fate - of Europe's rivers: How LER has delivered impact at scale

*Restoring rivers for resilience, hydropower  
isn't green, and dams aren't forever:  
Transforming the narrative and building a  
continental movement for change*

# By any measure, the Living European Rivers initiative has been a remarkable success

It has already achieved many of its primary goals: safeguarding the Water Framework Directive, leveraging more than €100 million for river restoration and protection, ending incentives for hydropower in at least 3 countries, removing 30 dams across Europe, and building the case for 6 large scale NbS programmes. It has united WWF offices behind joint freshwater work, strengthening their capacity, inspiring them to innovate, and ensuring collective impact on a far greater scale.

But it is also achieving something even more significant: the initiative is transforming the narrative around rivers in Europe. It is shining a spotlight on the values of healthy rivers, challenging the water blindness that has undermined river restoration and protection for so long. It is raising rivers up the agenda, showing governments, donors, investors and the public why healthy rivers and wetlands are central to tackling our climate and nature crises. And so much more.

Together with WWF offices and partners, it is changing the face – and fate – of Europe’s rivers.



The Living European Rivers initiative was created to do things differently. Europe’s rivers were dying; its freshwater species were in freefall. Ad hoc projects were making a difference at the local level but the big picture was bleak. And getting bleaker. LER was designed to reverse this trend by changing the game and the way people view freshwater ecosystems. And it is.

Combining cutting edge thought leadership, collective advocacy and communications, innovative approaches, new partnerships, and projects on the ground, LER is shifting the paradigm around freshwater. **It has transformed how decision-makers and citizens value rivers and wetlands, convincing them that healthy freshwater ecosystems are our best allies when it comes to climate resilience.** It is challenging firmly-held beliefs about dams, hydropower, floods, droughts, and rivers as nothing more than water pipes. It has united WWF offices around key issues and inspired a broader movement for change. It has proven that

large scale river restoration is not only essential but possible and financeable. Take Free Flowing Rivers and Nature-based Solutions: neither of these were on any decision-maker's radar let alone part of the public discourse back in 2017. Just six years later, they are now fully embedded in the EU Green Deal, and the regulatory tools derived from it – from the Biodiversity Strategy and Nature Restoration Law to the Adaptation Strategy, EU Taxonomy and even the Farm2Fork Strategy. Incentives to Hydropower projects are being scrapped and every year the record for dam removals is being broken. With EPO and partners, LER played a critical role in driving this 'big picture' change.

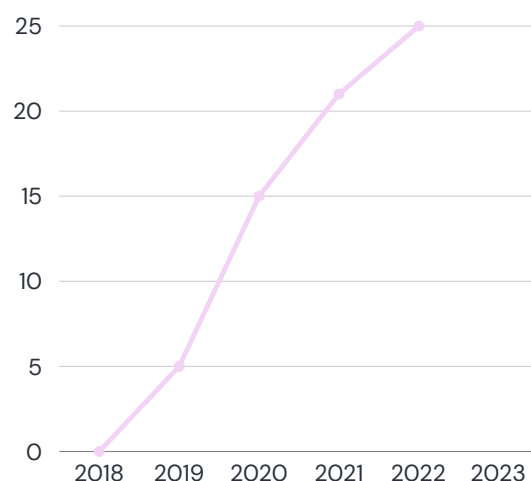
Talking about partnerships: our joint European work gave birth to the **Living Rivers Europe coalition**, a coalition of six environmental and fisheries organizations, led by EPO that has turbo-charged advocacy around the effective implementation and enforcement of the Water Framework Directive. And LER has also been a driving force behind the growth of **Dam Removal Europe (DRE)**: another coalition of six NGOs, which has spread the message about dam removals from Finland to France, UK to Ukraine, and created a Riverlution in river restoration, with hundreds of dams and barriers being removed each year. And a target of 25,000km of restored rivers being incorporated into the Nature Restoration Law.



But changing the narrative alone is not enough because money really talks. And **critically, LER has leveraged significant resources** by shifting from the business-as-usual approach of fundraising for individual projects to mobilising resources for the (large scale) benefit of our rivers. The scale at which it operates, and the high quality of its proposals, have attracted funding from a range of sources, including opening the door to new donors. Such as the the €5 million Mura-Drava-Danube project from the Endangered Landscapes Programme. Or the €42 million Open Rivers Programme. Or how LER core work helped deliver MERLIN, a large Horizon project on NbS that not only provides 3 WWF offices with budget to implement NbS, but devotes €22 million towards NbS upscaling in 17 European countries, and is allowing us to explore potential partnerships with different sectors.

We know money is not all, but it's a very good indicator of whether we are playing at the right scale and whether we are building momentum behind our goals and approaches. In LER's case, the answer is an unequivocal 'yes'. In just 6 years, LER has transformed the €5 million invested in it by the network, mostly by WWF-NL, into a 20-fold return by leveraging €100 million for river restoration and protection, including €13 million for WWF offices directly.

None of this would have been possible without building support and buy-in across the WWF network in Europe. Gradually, **WWF offices began incorporating LER priorities into their strategies**, bringing greater focus and collective impact. The LER core team backed this up by building capacity on its priority topics with online and in-person trainings, providing a “hot-line” of advice, especially on Dam Removal and Nature-based Solutions, and securing the seed funding needed to launch work on LER priorities in many of offices. Critically, the LER Core Team has also been a key connection with the global Freshwater Practice.



*Graph: Growth in the number of participating WWF offices.*

**Nature-based Solutions: this was an unknown term** for most of our offices when the initiative was launched but now 14 offices are active on NbS planning, advocacy and implementation. Meanwhile, **Dam Removal has expanded from a niche topic** in 3 countries to a major pillar of WWF freshwater work across 21 offices. And even in countries where we don’t directly remove dams, we have built partnerships with local NGOs and momentum so that barriers keep coming down.

Indeed, the key to LER’s success has been the commitment to ambitious collective action – focusing the weight of the WWF network in Europe on a few critical issues, strengthening traditional partnerships, building relationships with unusual sectors, seeking out and securing large funds for large-scale projects, and targeting transformational change in the way that Europe views and values rivers and wetlands. Together possible. And together, even more is possible given the momentum that LER has built over the past six years.



An aerial photograph of a river flowing through a dense, lush green forest. The river is a vibrant turquoise color, contrasting sharply with the surrounding greenery. The water appears to be moving over rocks, creating some white foam and rapids. The forest is thick and covers the entire landscape around the river.

# #ProtectWater

## Safeguarding the Water Framework Directive: Policy and progress

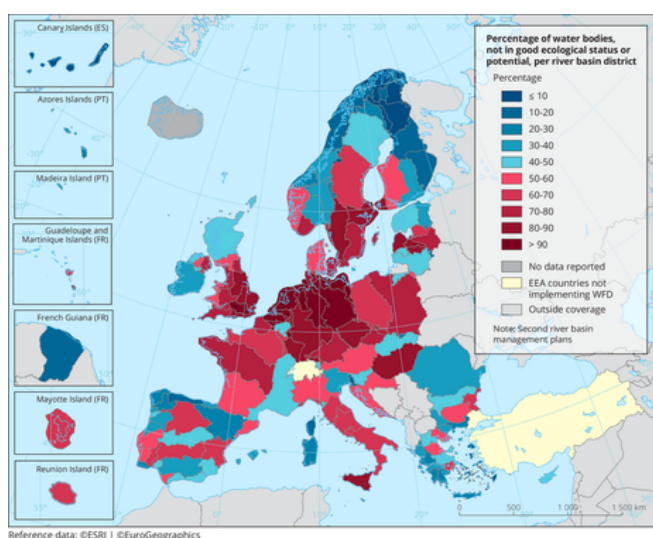
## One of LER's first priorities was to support the #ProtectWater campaign

The campaign was launched to safeguard the ambitious [EU Water Framework Directive \(WFD\)](#) – the primary piece of legislation governing the integrated management of freshwater resources in the EU, which was under concerted attack by certain business sectors and countries. Led by EPO, the campaign involved the [Living Rivers Europe](#) coalition – WWF and five other environmental and angling organizations.

Launched in October 2018, the [#ProtectWater campaign](#) garnered support from over 130 civil society groups and mobilized over 375,000 citizens to participate in the European Commission's consultation on the WFD. With the help of Water Stewardship colleagues, over 30 companies, including Coca-Cola, H&M, and Heineken, also backed the call and issued a [statement of support](#) for the WFD, which boosted the coalition's efforts to prevent the Directive from being watered down and safeguard Europe's freshwater resources.

In June 2020, thanks to the collective efforts of the coalition and the Protect Water campaign, [the European Commission declared the Directive "fit for purpose"](#) and decided not to revise it.

This was a huge win for LER, EPO and hopes for protecting and restoring Europe's waterways.



But needless to say, paper pledges need to be turned into practical impacts. So as soon as the Directive was saved, the focus of the Living Rivers Europe coalition shifted to the effective implementation of the WFD. While it has led to improvements in water management, the Directive has still not achieving its objective of attaining "good status" for all of Europe's waters. Currently, 60% of Europe's waters are estimated to be in bad condition, primarily due to agriculture, hydropower, flood defense infrastructure, and navigation.

## Paving the way to success from courts to reports



**IMPLEMENTING THE WATER FRAMEWORK DIRECTIVE IN GERMANY** – WWF-Germany published an influential report on the [“State of the inland waters in Germany”](#), which assessed the different implementation status of the WFD across the country.



### **SPAIN’S HIGH COURT RULES IN FAVOUR OF WWF-SPAIN & DOÑANA**

In a landmark ruling, the [High Court of Spain sided with WWF-Spain and blocked the dredging of the Guadalquivir River](#). The court acknowledged the outstanding value of Doñana, a Natura 2000 site Ramsar Wetland, World Heritage Site, and Biosphere Reserve, and recognized that the dredging could seriously damage the wetland. The decision aligned with the principles of the Water Framework Directive in protecting valuable wetland ecosystems.

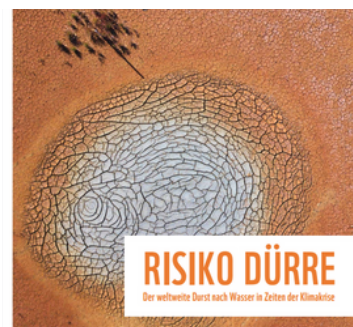


### **MANAGING WATER BETTER TO DEAL WITH DROUGHT**

As part of the broader push to highlight the importance of managing freshwater ecosystems better to help communities and countries adapt to climate change, EPO published [“Good water management: the heart of Europe’s drought response”](#). It analysed the drought situation in Europe in mid-summer, highlighting how proper WFD implementation would improve drought management.

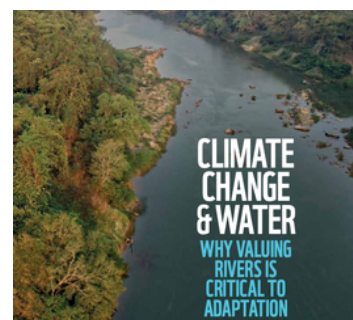
### **WORSENING DROUGHT IN THE ERA OF CLIMATE CHANGE**

WWF-Germany, in collaboration with LER’s core team, published a comprehensive [report on drought across the globe](#) in the era of climate change, which also zoomed in on Europe and Germany. The report was translated into English so that all the WWF offices in Europe and globally could use it.



### **WATER AND CLIMATE REPORT**

A global report on [water and climate change](#) was launched, emphasizing the importance of healthy rivers in adapting to water related issues in the era of climate change. The report was promoted by LER across Europe to raise awareness about the link between climate change and water – and the need to invest in healthy rivers and freshwater ecosystems as a central component of effective climate adaptation and resilience.





### WATER FRAMEWORK DIRECTIVE SAVED

On 22 June 2020, the EU Commissioner for Environment, Ocean and Fisheries, Virginijus Sinkevičius, confirmed that the WFD would not be opened up for revision, underscoring the need to focus on implementation and enforcement "without changing the directive". The decision came six months after the law was classified as "fit-for-purpose", following a thorough two-year evaluation. This would not have been achieved without the EPO-led #ProtectWater and the contribution of LER, WWF offices, the Living Rivers Europe coalition, scientists, businesses and hundreds of thousands of EU citizens, who all stood up for the WFD!



### SCRUTINISING STATES FOR POOR IMPLEMENTATION OF WATER FRAMEWORK DIRECTIVE

The European Commission opened a structural investigation into 26 EU Member States regarding issues related to the application of the Water Framework Directive. Member States had to reply and commit to take measures to address the shortcomings – demonstrating the importance of the EPO and LER pivot towards implementation and enforcement.



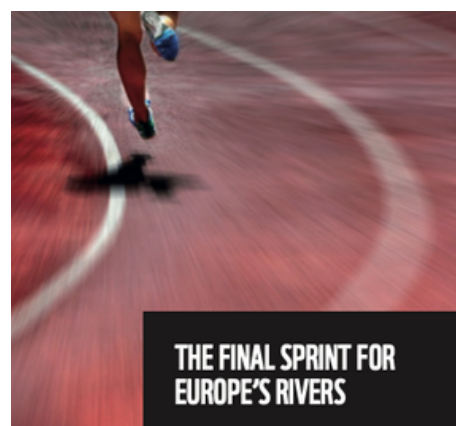
### EU COURT RULES AGAINST SPAIN ON DOÑANA

In June 2021, the EU Court of Justice ruled that Spain had broken EU law in the Doñana National Park due to the "excessive extractions of groundwater" that was driving the degradation of the wetland. The Court ruled Spain had infringed both the EU Water Framework and Habitats Directives. The judgment followed a complaint filed to the EU Commission by WWF-Spain back in 2014.



### FINAL SPRINT FOR EUROPE'S RIVERS

A joint report by the Living Rivers Europe coalition, the Final Sprint for Europe's Rivers analyzed 21 draft River Basin Management Plans in 11 EU Member States and found that only 2 out of the 21 (both in Finland) might lead to the rivers achieving good health by 2027. The report was led by EPO.

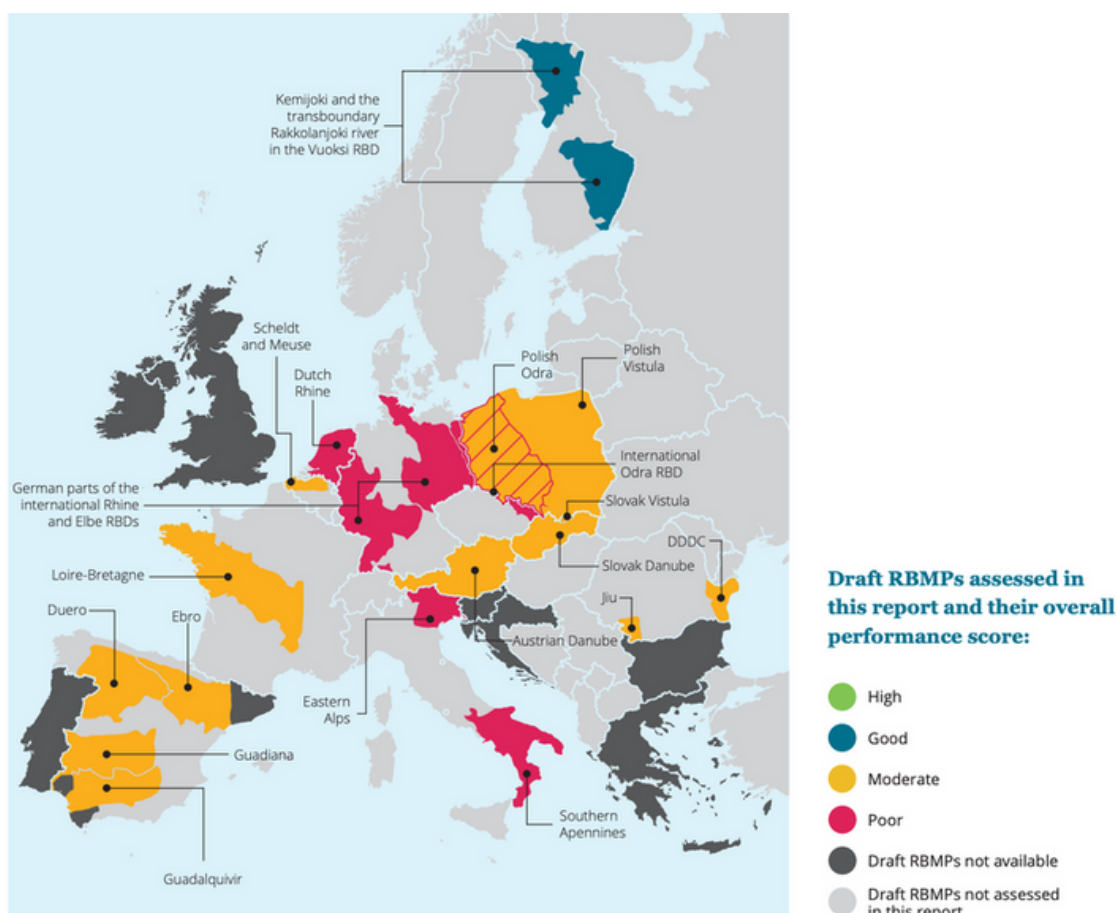


# The future: taking a back seat on implementation

Once the EU Water Framework Directive was officially safe, it was agreed that LER would focus on other topics and leave the main work around WFD implementation in the hands of the EPO and individual European offices, while ensuring overall alignment.

EPO will continue to support WWF offices and the Living Rivers Europe coalition to drive better implementation and enforcement of the Water Framework Directive, effective integration of water management into relevant sectoral policies such as agriculture, energy, flood risk management, and transport, and the maintenance of high standards for water resources and ecosystem protection. And there is a lot of work still to do as the map below of the likely impact of River Basin Management Plans shows. The map is based on analysis in the *The Final Sprint for Europe's Rivers*.

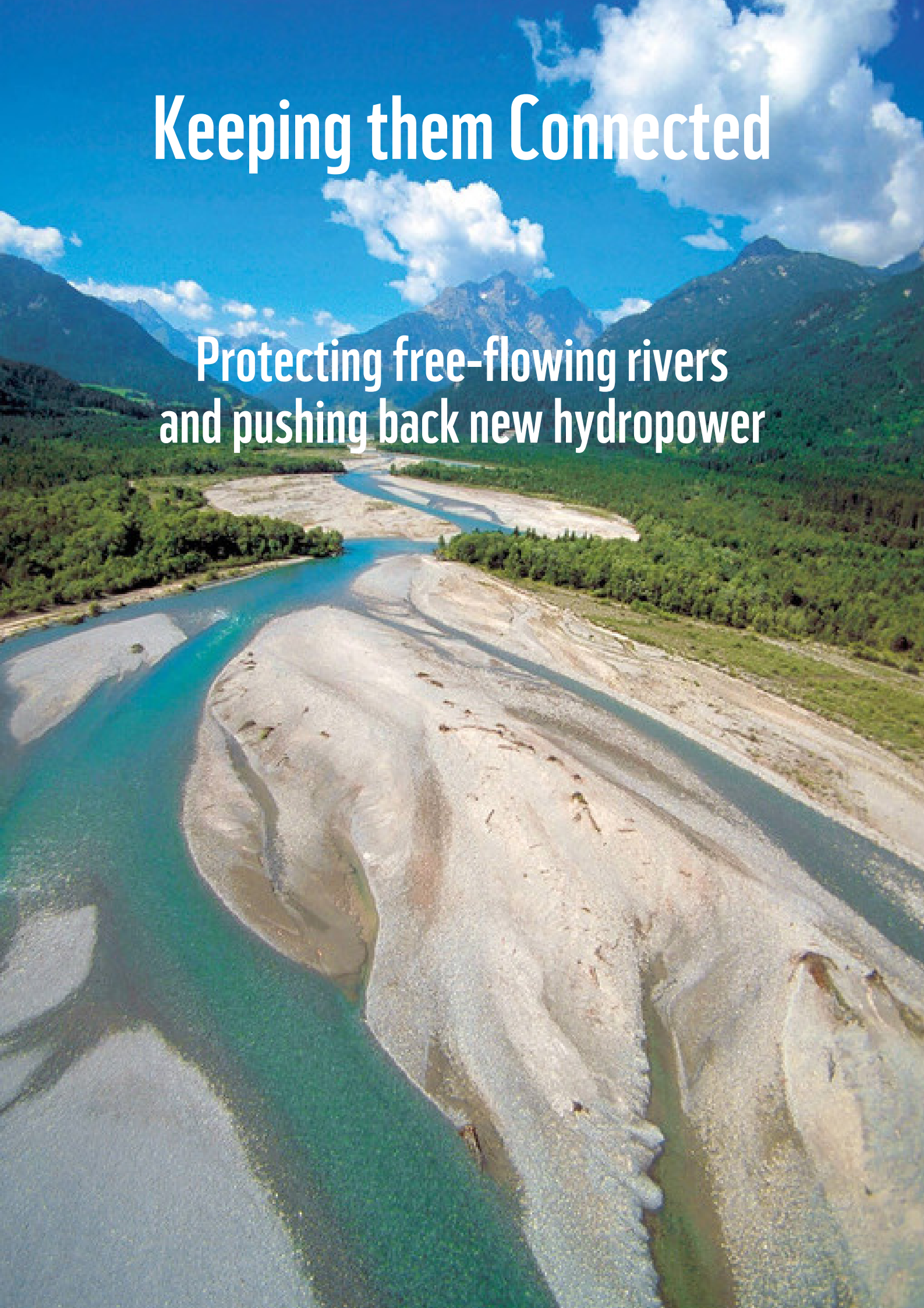
Most WWF offices remain committed to ensuring that the Water Framework Directive is fully implemented and enforced as this is a critical tool in efforts to restore Europe's waters. Needless to say, LER will continue to provide support when necessary



*In 2021, the Living European Rivers and WWF European Policy Office produced *The Final Sprint for Europe's Rivers*, a report that showed how most EU Member States were not on track to reach the objective of bringing all their water bodies in good status by 2027. The report included a map stating the current state and quality of the draft river basin national plans in the different European countries.*

# Keeping them Connected

Protecting free-flowing rivers  
and pushing back new hydropower



## Joining forces to save Europe's last unspoiled rivers and wetlands

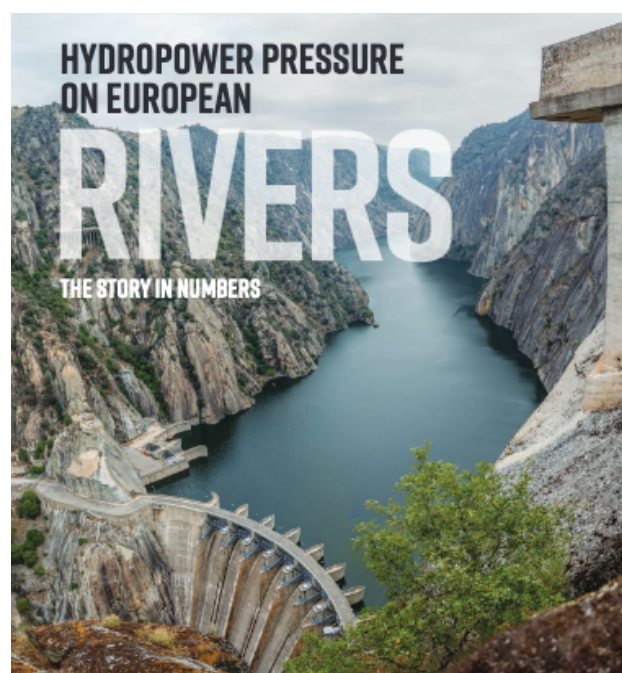
Under this thematic area, LER worked to create awareness across Europe about the value of rivers and the fact that the last free-flowing rivers would be lost in the next decade if nothing was done to protect them.

Europe has the most fragmented river landscape on the planet. At least one million barriers – dams, weirs, ramps, fords and culverts – are clogging up the continent's rivers, affecting their health, impacting the quality and availability of water, and threatening the survival of vulnerable species. While hydropower dams only represent a small share of all barriers in Europe, they were the main focus for this aspect of LER's work because they result in additional impacts on biodiversity due to hydro-peaking and fish mortality in turbines, and because there were plans for over 8000 new hydropower plants across the continent, many of them in protected areas.

LER's advocacy was focused on pushing back against new hydropower development, which is driven to a great extent by permitting and financing incentives from European institutions and national governments – with the last free-flowing rivers of the Balkans acting as the flagship. The hydropower threat is more acute in the Balkans than anywhere else with about 2,700 new plants planned in rivers and streams across the region despite it being home to some of the continent's last free-flowing rivers, supporting rich biodiversity and unique ecosystems.

LER supported EPO to work at the European level, first to debunk the narrative that hydropower is green. EPO advocated at the EU level for there to be no more new hydropower development in Europe, and for investments to move into the refurbishment of existing plants to lessen their impact on biodiversity, or to renewable alternatives such as solar and wind power.

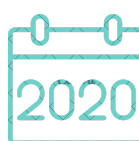
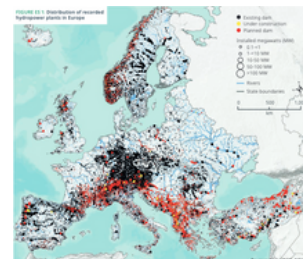
LER also supported various offices, particularly from the Balkan region, to oppose specific new hydropower projects threatening rivers. In the Balkans, LER supported WWF Adria to try and stop the generous subsidy regimes fuelling the hydropower boom. This has led to significant progress in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro.



# Progress against hydropower



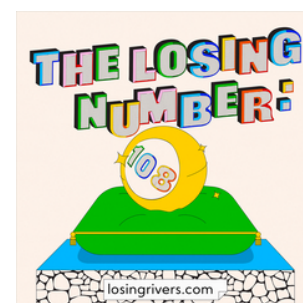
**HYDROPOWER PRESSURE ON EUROPEAN RIVERS:** EPO's landmark report collated the first ever European-wide inventory of hydropower plants, showing how rivers across the continent are saturated with hydropower dams – with thousands more on the cards.



**MANIFESTO AGAINST NEW HYDROPOWER PROJECTS**  
EPO's manifesto urging EU institutions to halt support for new hydropower projects gained endorsements from 150 organizations.



**THE LOSING NUMBER CAMPAIGN** – WWF–Adria launched The losing Number Campaign to avoid construction of new small hydropower in the Balkans because it is a game in which we all lose. The campaign gathered the support of 20,000 people in just 3 weeks, providing a strong back-up for the advocacy work in the region



**HALTING ILLEGAL DAM CONSTRUCTION IN AUSTRIA** – LER supported WWF–Austria in its ultimately successful campaign to halt the construction of the Tumpen–Habichen power plant on the Ötztaler Ache river in Tyrol. WWF–Austria held a protest with cardboard cutouts representing the 20,000+ people who signed the petition demanding a halt to the dam, which was being illegally constructed. The project was stopped as a result of the mobilisation.





## FEASIBILITY OF MAPPING FREE-FLOWING RIVERS IN EUROPE

– McGill University and LER core team conducted a Free-Flowing Rivers downscaling exercise in Europe, and produced a final feasibility study for continental-scale mapping.



**DANUBE ISLAND SAVED FROM DESTRUCTIVE FLOOD CONTROL SYSTEM** – Thanks to a petition that gathered 10,000 signatures, WWF-Hungary prevented the planned construction of an unnecessary flood control system on an island in the Danube – saving one of the last healthy floodplains in the entire river basin. The Danube has lost 80% of its floodplains .

**VICTORY AGAINST HYDROPOWER PLANT IN SERBIA FREES 50KM OF RIVER** – WWF-Adria achieved a major victory as permits for a new hydropower plant on the Veliki Rzav river were deemed null and void, safeguarding over 50km of the river from hydropower development.

**HYDROPOWER PLANT STOPPED BY SLOVAK SUPREME COURT**– After a lawsuit filed by local NGOs and WWF-Slovakia, the Supreme Court stopped the licensing of a small hydropower plant on the Hron river, setting a strong precedent and leading to the conservation of a large free-flowing section of the Hron. The landmark decision stated:

*“The public interest, which is the protection of the environment, takes precedence over private business interest.”*

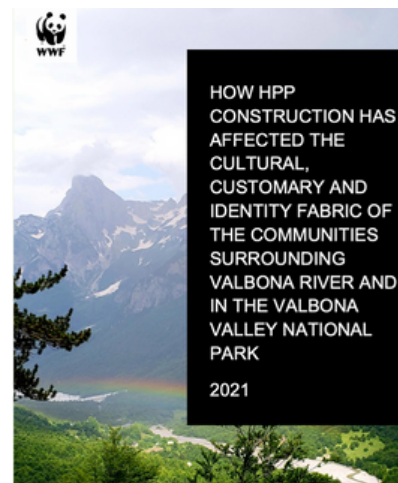




**LIGHTS OFF FOR HYDROPOWER PLANTS IN VALBONA** – In an unprecedented decision, the Supreme Court of Albania suspended the concession contracts for two hydropower plants in the Valbona Valley National Park, until final resolution of the case. This landmark decision will prevent further damage to the ecosystems and biodiversity, but most importantly offers real hope that the Court will eventually declare the two hydropower plants unlawful.

#### **SCALING UP SUPPORT FOR ACTIVISTS AND COMMUNITIES CAMPAIGNING TO HALT SMALL HYDROPOWER PLANTS IN VALBONA**

Lawyers for Rivers Initiative, launched in 2018 by EuroNatur, GEOTA, Riverwatch, Wetlands Int, and WWF-Adria produced a [legal toolkit](#) to help activists protect their rivers from hydropower projects. WWF-Adria also launched a [report](#) exploring the impact of small hydropower on people's identities and livelihoods in the Valbona area. Small hydropower is often viewed – mistakenly – as resulting in minimal impacts on people and nature. LER has worked to debunk this myth.



**NO MORE FEED-IN TARIFFS FOR HYDROPOWER IN MONTENEGRO** – Montenegro was the first country in the Balkan region to include a legal provision that it would stop awarding feed-in tariffs to hydropower after meeting its 2020 renewable energy target. This followed the massive advocacy and communication work done by WWF Adria and other NGOs involved in the the Save the Blue Heart of Europe campaign.



**AND NO MORE FEED-IN TARIFFS FOR HYDROPOWER IN ALBANIA EITHER** – Albania cancelled the feed-in tariff system of incentives for small hydropower, replacing it with a less lucrative market-premium system. It is expected that this will lead to fewer small hydropower plants. In addition, the overall energy development narrative in the country shifted from a focus on hydropower to promoting solar PV and wind – with two large-scale solar projects ongoing, and a number of wind projects on the cards.



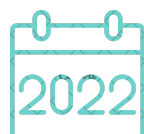


**SHINING A SPOTLIGHT ON RIVER DEGRADATION IN EAST TYROL** – WWF–Austria detailed the degradation of East Tyrol’s glacial rivers due to political arbitrariness, non-transparent deals, and questionable handling of legal regulations regarding hydropower plants on the Isel river.

**TWO CHEERS: STOPPING HARMFUL HYDROPOWER IN AUSTRIA** – Two destructive hydropower projects in Austria were stopped after the authorities revoked their permits in response to complaints by WWF–Austria and Ökobüro.

**PATH TO GREATER PROTECTION FOR FLOODPLAINS** – WWF–Germany opened a new floodplain trail in the Kühnauer Aue near Dessau in the Middle Elbe.

**WHAT FISH WANT!** – WWF–Austria supported this Ecotone film documenting the dramatic deterioration of the Inn River in Tyrol, and the silent disappearance of its innumerable fish. It accompanies committed fishermen and conservationists who are fighting for restoration of the river and the return of the fish.



**BRIEFING PAPER “REPOWER EU AND HYDROPOWER”** – EPO and other Brussels-based NGOs advocated for the European Parliament and Member States to exclude hydropower from specific areas for renewables given their negative impacts on rivers and biodiversity, during the revision of the Renewable Energy Directive.



**WATER RISKS TO HYDROPOWER PROJECTS** – The Freshwater Practice developed a report, using the WWF Water Risk Filter to analyse the rising water risks to hydropower projects in Europe due to climate change and river fragmentation. The report provided vital support to help shift the narrative by highlighting the fact that hydropower is no longer reliable or safe because of the worsening impacts of climate change.

**ADVOCATING FOR FREE-FLOWING RIVERS AT THE EUROPEAN RIVERS SUMMIT** – WWF–Germany presented key findings of a study at the 2nd European Rivers Summit, highlighting the urgent need to protect free-flowing rivers across the continent.





**CONCERT(ED) ACTION TO PROTECT AND RESTORE THE ISAR RIVER** – WWF-Germany ramped up efforts to safeguard and restore the wild Upper Isar riverscape with a report, “More Power for the Isar river”, and a concert with the Munich philharmonic orchestra.



**REDUCING INCENTIVES FOR HYDROPOWER IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA** – In February, the Republika Srpska Assembly adopted a new Renewable Energy Law, which finally brought its incentives scheme in line with EU state aid rules. It limits incentives for hydropower to plants below 150 kW and is in this respect the most progressive law in the region. This is also the result of the intense campaigning work by WWF Adria and other NGOs in the region.

**ALTERNATIVES TO NEW DAMS IN IBERIA** – Excellent webinar on the future of the most populous hydrographic basin on the Iberian Peninsula to discuss water resource management as an alternative to the construction of new dams. Coordinated by WWF-Portugal & WWF-Spain.



**ACTION PLAN FOR THE ODER** – With partners, WWF-Germany called for a comprehensive action plan to drive a significant and sustainable improvement in the health of the Oder river.



**CAMPAIGN TO STOP KAUNERTAL HYDROPOWER PROJECT IN AUSTRIA** – Campaign led by WWF-Austria to stop a gigantic hydropower plant in the Ötztaler Alpen to preserve a nearly untouched marshland and an entire river valley.



**FIRST PROTECTED AREA FOR A RIVER IN SLOVAKIA** – Thanks to collaboration between local communities, the municipality and WWF-Slovakia, a new protected area was declared to safeguard the Hron river. It is the first protected area of this type in Slovakia, which protects a river. The new designation prevents the construction of a planned hydropower plant, which was also opposed by local communities, and keeps saves the Hron river.

**RESTRICTIONS IMPOSED ON HYDROPOWER IN ROMANIA** – The use of infringement procedures to address the deterioration of water bodies related to hydropower led to operations being halted for many projects, the adoption of a legal framework on environmental-flows and the designation of no-go areas for hydropower.

## The future: not more hydropower

After several years working to halt new hydropower development in Europe, it became clear that the national circumstances are so diverse that a single European approach was extremely challenging. LER has helped to lay the foundations for effective efforts to safeguard free flowing rivers and prevent harmful new hydropower through its support for communications and advocacy campaigns, and its critical contributions to WWF's thought leadership around hydropower and connected rivers on the continent – which have definitely helped to shift the overall narrative away from 'hydropower is green' and to secure some significant policy and legal victories.

But the reality is that while rivers are still under threat from new hydropower projects in some parts of Europe (Balkans, Alpine region, Romania), in other parts of the continent the key challenge is the impact of existing plants, often built under old permitting regimes, which require few mitigation measures to limit environmental degradation.

After an internal evaluation, it was decided to leave advocacy work at the EU level in the hands of EPO – such as dealing with the revision of the Renewable Energy Directive and advocating for any incentives for hydropower to be channeled into refurbishment and removal rather than new plants – and to rely on national offices to lead specific work at the national level.

Some national offices (e.g. Austria, Germany, Romania) will continue to campaign against new hydropower projects, while others (Sweden and also Germany) are focusing on advocating for the transformation of existing hydropower plants. Several offices (Finland, Latvia) also also working with hydropower operators to remove obsolete or even sometimes still operational hydropower plants.



# Riverlution in Europe



**Removing dams and driving a continental movement for change**

## Removing dams, restoring rivers

Recognizing the immense benefits for both nature and people, the Dam Removal movement is rapidly gathering pace across Europe, evident in the increasing number of countries that are removing barriers and by the record number that were actually removed in 2022 – a whopping 325, which was considerably more than the previous record of 229 set in 2021.

Through the Living European Rivers Initiative, WWF is playing a key role in driving this movement and scaling up these efforts, with the ambitious objective of making barrier removal a widely accepted practice for river restoration by 2030. LER has been central to efforts to build an effective Dam Removal Europe coalition, transform the narrative around dams and river restoration, advocate for ambitious policy goals, leverage new sources of funding for removals, and collaborate with offices to remove barriers. Overall, more than 1,810km of rivers have already been opened up by WWF offices, with WWF–Finland leading the way with 51 dam removals.

There has been a huge increase in the number of European offices engaged in dam removals from implementation to communications and advocacy either directly or with partner organisations. The result has been a River Restoration Revolution. And one that is accelerating.



Over the past two years, WWF has successfully facilitated 30 barrier removals in 8 countries. An additional 17 new projects have been initiated in 13 countries. Dark green shows where WWF is active, light green where other organisations are.

WWF dam  
removals funded  
by European Open  
Rivers Programme

€1.3+ million

Barriers removed  
by WWF  
in 2021–2023

30

Countries where  
WWF is working  
on dam removals  
in 2023

24

## Progress and success



**CROWDFUNDING CAMPAIGN FOR 1ST DAM REMOVAL IN UKRAINE** – Successful campaign raised funds from over 400 donors across Europe to remove the first dams in Ukraine.

**AND FOR STURGEON RELEASE** – Not dam removal per se but WWF Sturgeon initiative used the Dam Removal Crowdfunding platform to raise the necessary funds to release 15,000 critically endangered sturgeon in the Danube. But dams are one of the major threats to migratory sturgeon so the overall messaging still contributed to goals of LER.

**IDENTIFYING PRIORITY DAMS FOR REMOVAL** – Thanks to the support from LER, WWF-NL and the Open Rivers Programme, WWF-Romania developed methodology to identify obsolete dams and prioritise their removal. The methodology was accepted by the water authority at a technical level – paving the way for future dam removals.

**INTERESTING MAJOR DONORS IN DAM REMOVALS** – WWF-NL organized two fundraising events for dam removals with major donors, highlighting the opportunities to invest in restoring rivers and the impact of dam removals on rivers, biodiversity and resilience.

**SUPPORTING DAM REMOVAL IN THE BALKANS** – WWF-Switzerland provided €25,000 to WWF-Adria to support dam removal efforts in Slovenia and Western Balkans in 2020.

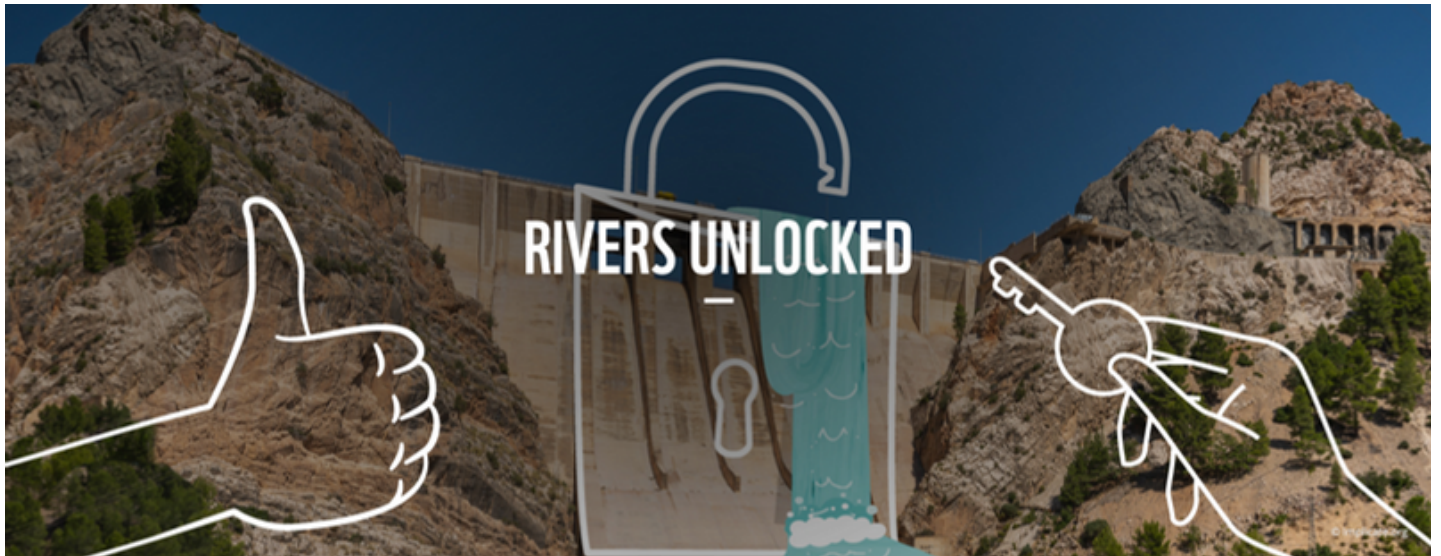
**LET THE RIVERS RUN THEIR COURSE** – WWF-Germany issued a briefing on the state of rivers and barriers in Bavaria as a prelude to dam removals.

**DEVELOPING CAPACITY TO FUNDRAISE FOR DAM REMOVALS** – LER core team hosted a webinar to raise the awareness of WWF fundraisers on the opportunities to secure resources for dam removals and river restoration and how this could enlarge their donor base. The training was also designed to build their capacity to make use of crowdfunding campaigns.

<p>Afgesloten</p> <p>BIG JUMP</p> <p>#RiversUnlocked</p>	<p>WWF Switzerland support to WWF Adria for dam removal in 2020</p> <p>€25,000</p>	<p>Afgesloten</p> <p>BIG JUMP</p> <p>#RiversUnlocked</p>
<p>GERMANY - Leucherhofwehr - Baunach River</p> <p>€ 36.675 Opgehaald (104%)</p>		<p>UK - Rothley Weir - Rothley Brook, Leicestershire</p> <p>€ 12.360 Opgehaald (105%)</p>



**RIVERS UNLOCKED CAMPAIGN** – In 2021, the LER core team initiated and coordinated the influential Rivers Unlocked communications campaign, with support from all WWF offices across Europe and partners in the Dam Removal Europe coalition. The innovative approach provided a big boost to the movement, raising awareness of the benefits of free flowing rivers and the importance of removing the obsolete dams littering Europe’s rivers.

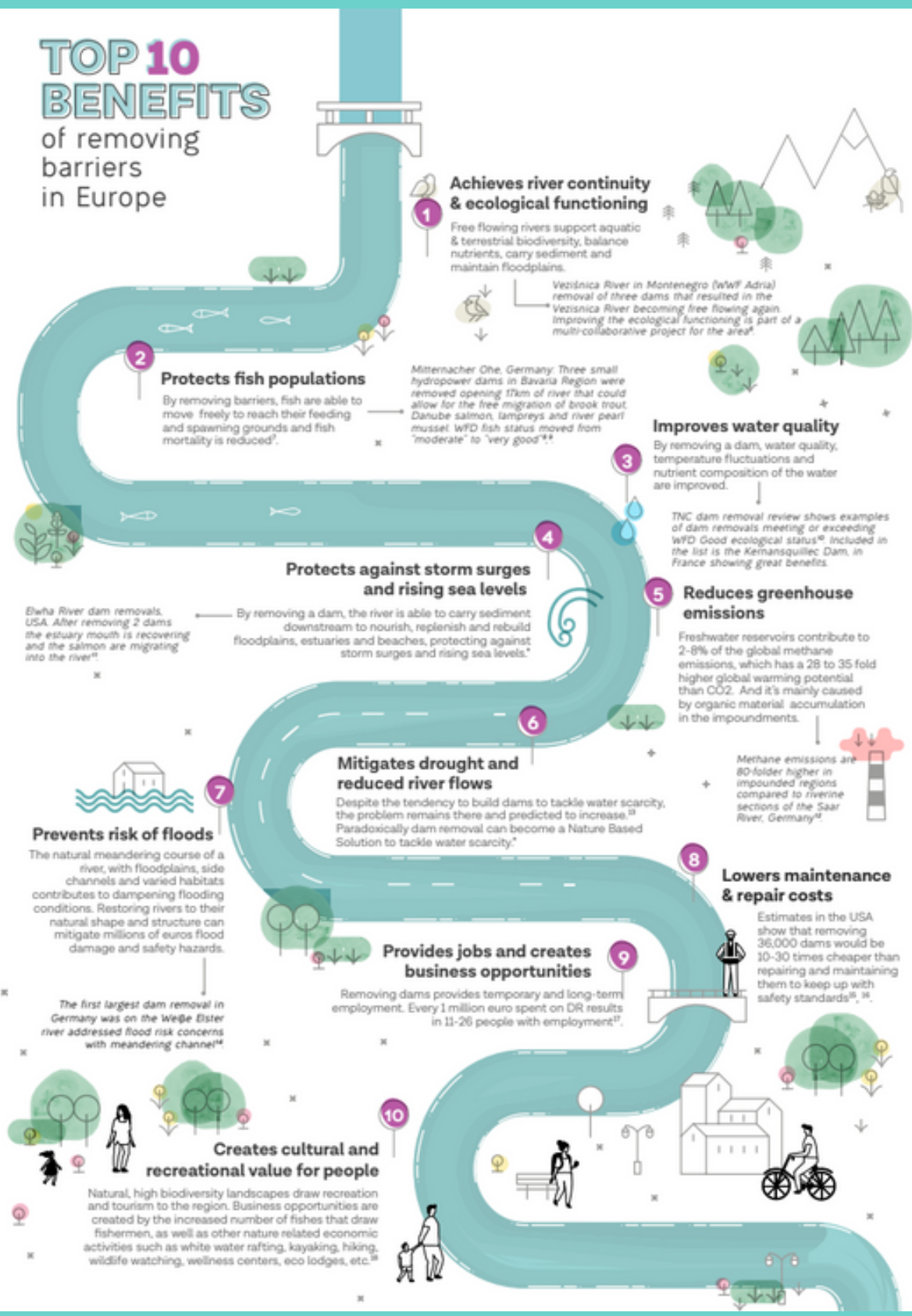


The multi-faceted campaign included social media videos, a colourful factsheet of challenges and solutions, an infographic about the journey of a female salmon, a crowdfunding campaign, and a dam removal-themed Big Jump event. All of these activities were designed to showcase dam removals as a proven tool for reconnecting Europe’s fragmented riverine ecosystems and remind partners, donors, authorities and the public of the growing dam removal movement in Europe – and how they could be a part of it too.

**Content from the #RiversUnlocked campaign**

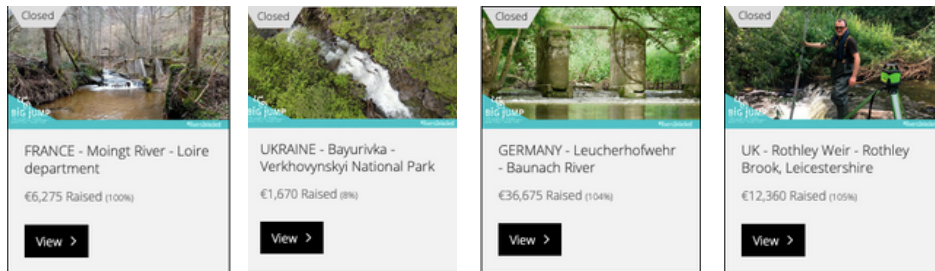


# TOP 10 BENEFITS of removing barriers in Europe





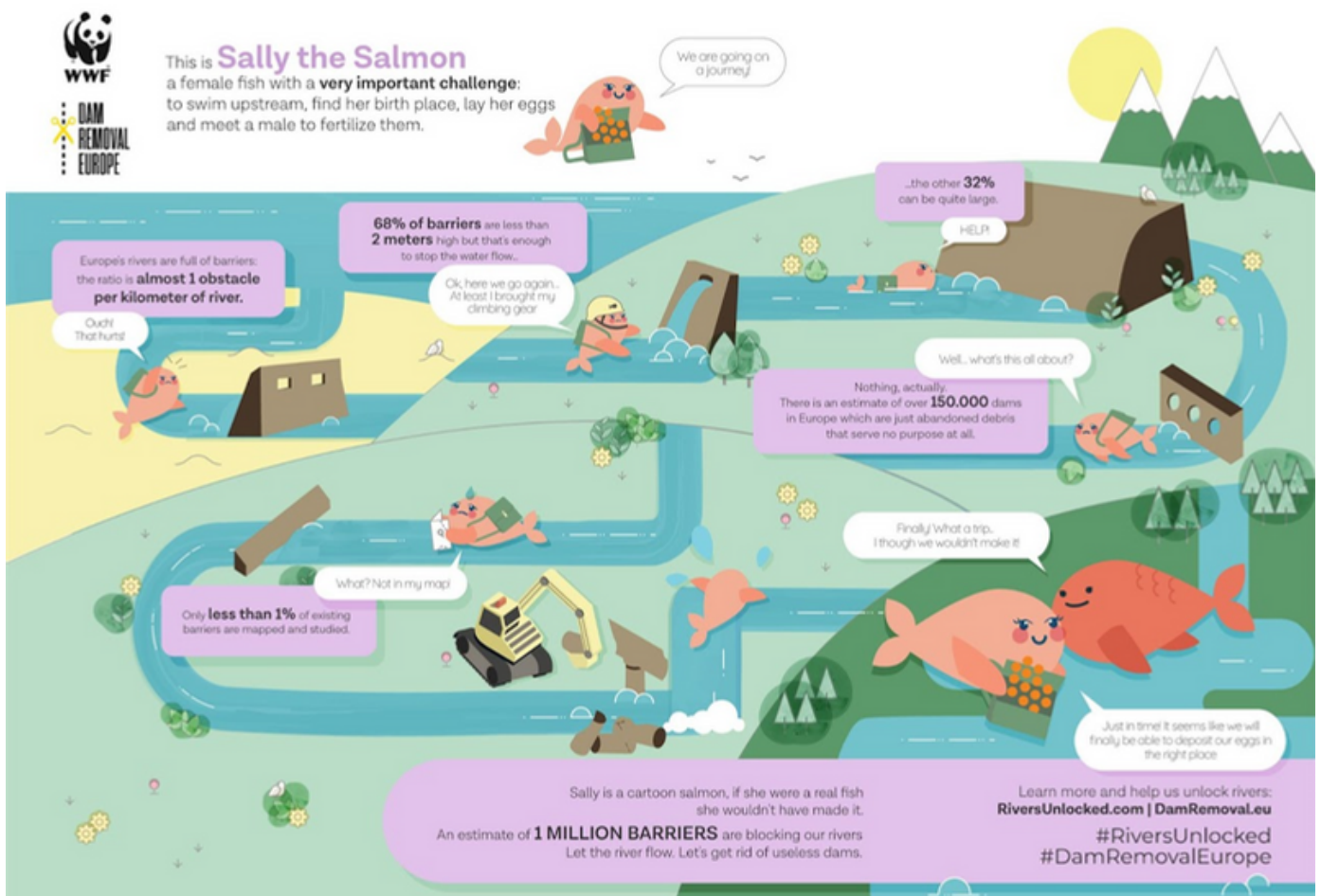
**CROWDING IN ENOUGH FUNDS FOR FOUR DAM REMOVALS** – As part of the Rivers Unlocked campaign, the LER core team and offices raised sufficient funds to remove 4 dams in France, Germany, Italy and Ukraine. The crowdfunding website secured support from 229 donors, while additional resources were secured from corporate and institutional donors.



**BIG LEAP FORWARD FOR DAM REMOVALS** – For the first time ever, Europe's biannual freshwater event, the Big Jump, was focused on dam removals. It brought together more than 400 big and small environmental organizations, including many WWF offices, and citizens who jumped to free their rivers from obsolete dams and barriers, and posted their pictures on social media from all over the continent.

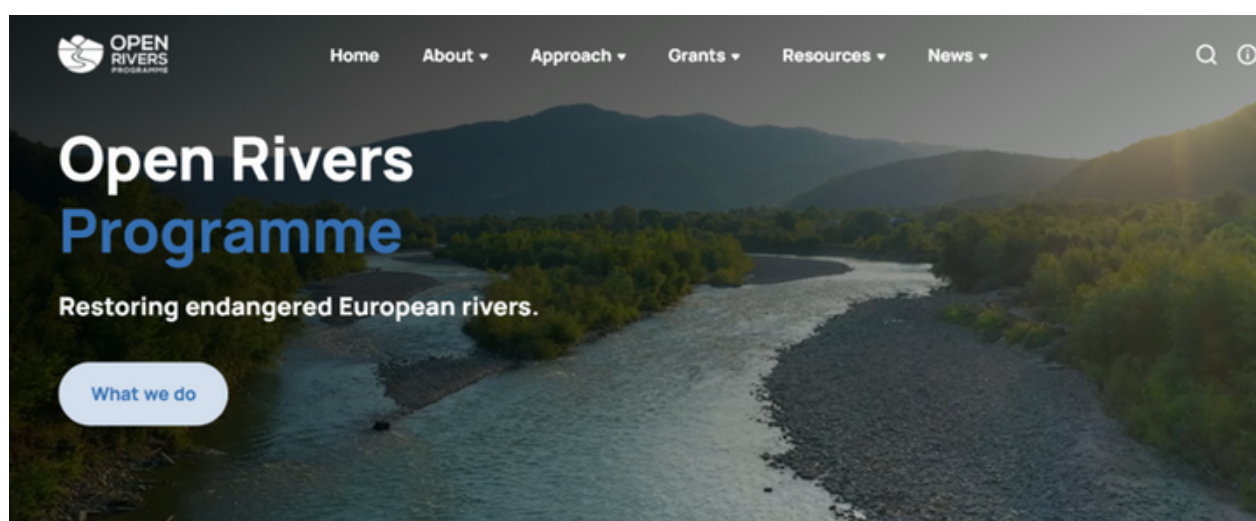


**COMMUNICATING FOR IMPACT** – The LER core team prepared an substantial pack of innovative and compelling content for offices to use to promote dam removals and drive interest in the crowdfunding site. The communications pack and WWF office engagement showed what could be achieved with collective action on dam removals.





**OPENING THE FUNDING FLOODGATES** – With the support of LER, WWF-NL and the Dam Removal Europe coalition, the game-changing Open Rivers Programme (ORP) was launched. The new private fund is dedicated to accelerating river restoration through dam removals across Europe – and has a whopping €42.5 million to spend in the first phase. The ORP funds actual dam removals, feasibility studies, assessments and prioritization, and advocacy and communications to drive the dam removal movement.



**HOW GREAT IS THE POTENTIAL FOR BARRIER REMOVAL IN EUROPE** – The answer is in a report by EPO – The potential of barrier removal to reconnect Europe's rivers. The report identified 858 barriers with high reconnection potential in large and medium-sized rivers, which would reconnect about 14,400 km of rivers. In the EU27, this figure was 732 barriers with high reconnection potential, which would reconnect 11,500 km of rivers.

**WWF Slovakia Barrier Removal Campaign** – Raised funds via a rapid crowdfunding campaign to conduct the first ever dam removal operation on the Hučava river in Slovakia.





**DAM REMOVALS GATHERING PACE IN FINLAND** – Seven dams and barriers were removed with the involvement of WWF-Finland, including the first of 3 big dams on the Hiitolanjoki river. Overall, this will be the largest dam removal in Finland’s history and involves collaboration between the government, WWF, companies & communities.



**FIRST DAM REMOVAL IN WESTERN BALKANS** – Three dams were removed on the Vezišnica River in Montenegro, restoring its free-flowing status. After its involvement in the first successful removal in the Western Balkans, WWF-Adria immediately began working towards similar landmark removals in Croatia and Slovenia.

### REMOVING BARRIERS TO RIVER RESILIENCE IN UKRAINE

In the Carpathians, WWF-Ukraine successfully removed 6 dams and weirs, restoring connectivity to 504 km of rivers, enabling the return of Danube salmon and trout.

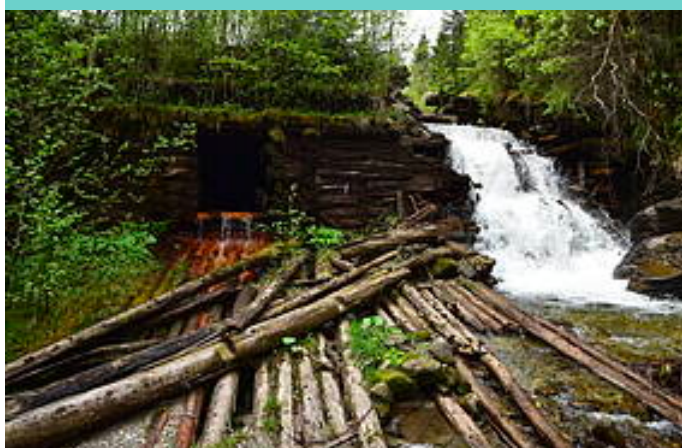


**DAM REMOVAL GOES ALPS AS WWF-GERMANY JOINS THE MOVEMENT** – With a variety of partners, WWF-Germany, Switzerland and Austria organised the successful “Dam Removal goes Alps” virtual river conference with several hundred participants from 55 countries. Later, WWF-Germany conducted a pilot dam removal by taking down the Leucherhof weir on the Baunach river – and demonstrating the potential for removals across Germany.

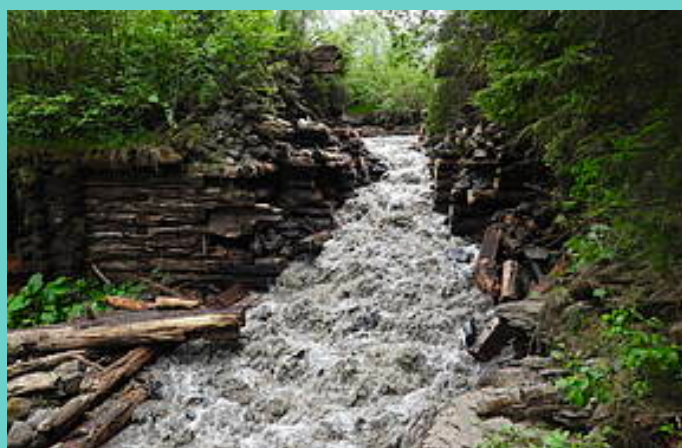


**RESTORING RIVERS AS WAR RAGES** – Despite the war, WWF-Ukraine managed to successfully remove the Bayurivka dam, which had been blocking the river for 120 years. Funded by ORP, the remarkable removal opened up 531 km of river to migratory fish for the first time in over a century. The dismantling of the clogged and abandoned Bayurivka dam close to the border with Romania also removed the risk of the ancient barrier failing.

Before

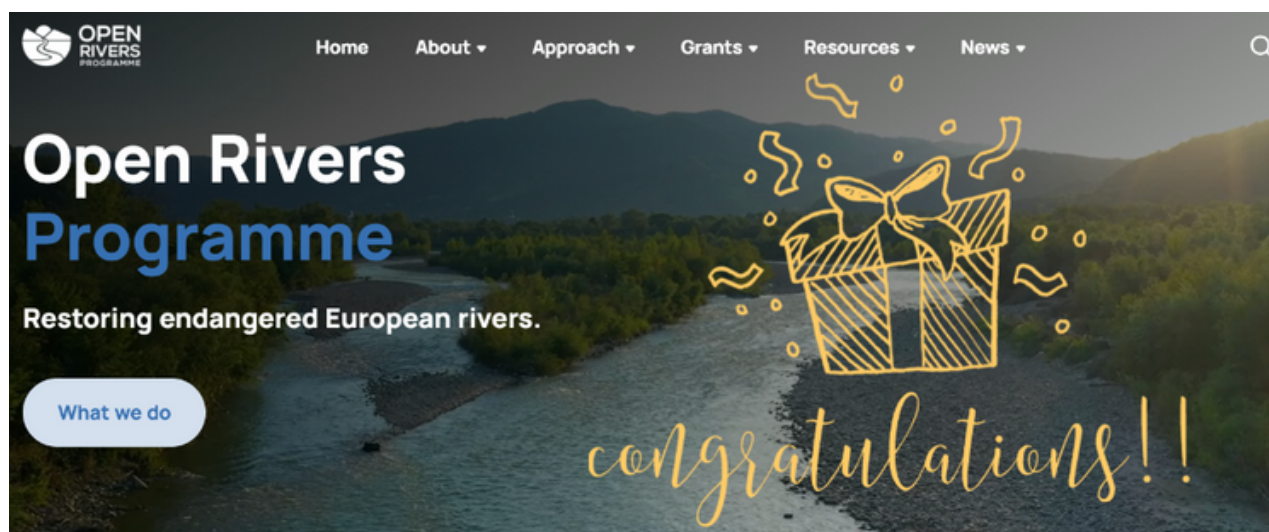


After





**100% SCORE FOR OPEN RIVERS PROGRAMME GRANTS** – With support from the LER core team, WWF offices achieved a 100% rate on applications to the Open Rivers Programme. Grants were secured for 12 dam removals in different European countries –showing that the concept of dam removals was gaining more and more traction within WWF and in the outside world, traction that was turning into action.



**FINLAND STILL AT THE FOREFRONT OF THE DAM REMOVAL MOVEMENT** – Another year, another 5 removals involving WWF in Finland including the 2nd major hydropower dam on the Hiitolanjoki river. And the removal of the Virtaankoski hydropower plant on the Tainio stream, an important spawning river for endangered trout. Removing the dam brought migratory fish back to the country's second largest lake for the first time in 70 years.

**DAM REMOVALS PICKING UP STEAM IN SWITZERLAND TOO** – The obsolete St. Barthelemy weir on the Talent river was removed thanks to collaboration between the provincial government, WWF–Switzerland and its partner, Aqua Viva. The removal opened up more of the river to endangered species.

**AND THE DAM REMOVAL PRIZE GOES TO...SPAIN** – AEMS/Ríos con Vida was able to remove Molino Del Cabrillas and Bajo weirs thanks to support from WWF–Spain and the Open Rivers Programme. The Cabrillas project even ended up securing the coveted Dam Removal Europe Award for 2022. WWF–Spain helped to communicate this success with a wonderful video.

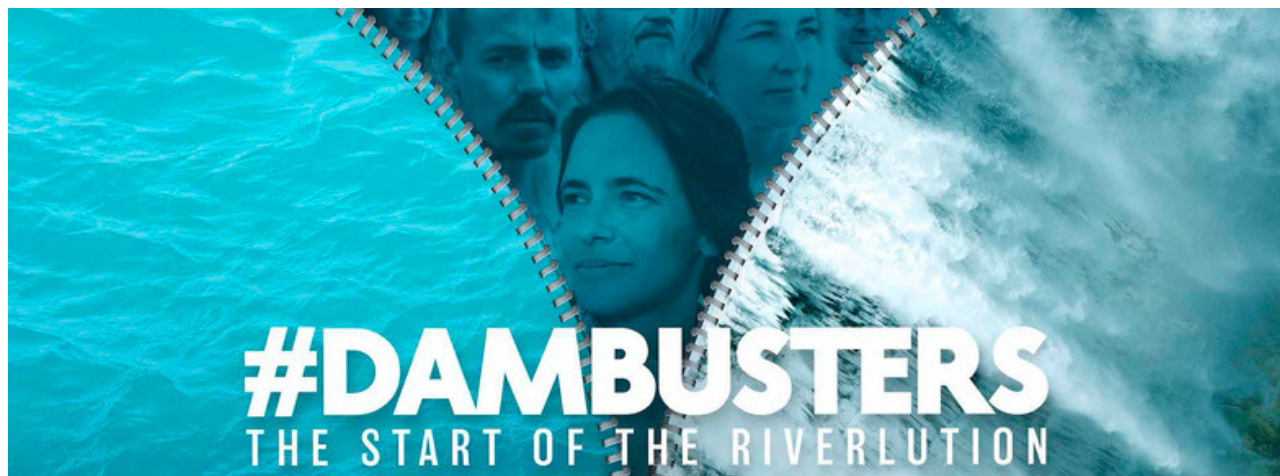
The Dam Removal Europe Award 2022  
goes to...





## LOTTERY WIN NETS WWF–GERMANY €1.5 MILLION FOR DAM REMOVAL

Big boost for WWF–Germany’s work on dam removals thanks to €1.5 million grant from the Postcode lottery, which will fund a 4–year Living Rivers programme, highlighting the increasing interest in restoring rivers through removing barriers – and the funds that are becoming available.



**“DAMBUSTERS”: FILM OF EUROPE’S DAM REMOVAL HEROES** – The LER core team and WWF–NL co-produced the film "Dam Busters", which featured some of Europe’s dam removal champions, including WWF–Finland’s Sampsa Vilhunen. The film was screened at numerous public events, including some organised by WWF offices. It was also translated into German by WWF–Germany. It is available free to stream on WaterBear.



**OVER 21,000 VIEWS OF WWF ADVOCACY VIDEO ON DAM REMOVALS** – The LER core team and WWF–NL wanted to maximise the impact of the Dambusters material so they produced a second 13–minute advocacy film called "Removing Dams, Restoring Rivers". Using footage from the longer film, this version was aimed at decision makers – adding facts, figures and messaging that would resonate with the target audience. It proved to be a powerful tool for advocacy, fundraising, and raising awareness – being shown in the EU and seen over 21,000 views on WWF’s youtube channel.

**BARRIER REMOVAL EXHIBITION** – WWF–Slovakia hosted an exhibition during the European Youth Olympic Festival, including photos and other content, in Slovak and English obtained from WWF offices.





**OPEN RIVERS PROGRAMME APPROVES 100% OF WWF APPLICATIONS** – WWF secured approval for 100% of their dam removal applications from Open Rivers Programme, which amounted in FY2023 to €1 million for 10 projects.

**FIRST EVER EUROPEAN DAM REMOVAL LEADERSHIP COURSE** – Together with the World Fish Migration Foundation, TNC, WWF-NL & other partners, the LER core team organised, the first European-wide course for dam removal practitioners. 16 participants from 14 countries gathered in France to learn about best practices to enable dam removal, and witnessed the results of the massive hydropower dam removals on the Selune river. They all applied learnings to further develop their own roadmaps for the coming year.



**€1.17 MILLION TO UPSCALE DAM REMOVAL IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE** – This key ORP-funded initiative will enable WWF offices (NL, Slovakia and Adria) and 5 partner organisations to build the dam removal movement and drive river restoration projects in Southeastern Europe – starting in Croatia, Greece, Romania, and Slovakia before expanding across the region. The aim will be to identify at least 100 barriers to be removed in the next 3 years, which can be submitted for ORP funding. The project will also focus on developing supportive policies, providing new expertise and tools, and generating support from stakeholders and public.



**FINLAND FREES 1,200 KM OF RIVERS** – By 2023, WWF-Finland had helped remove 51 dams and open 1200km of rivers, building resilience and boosting migratory fish and biodiversity. The latest huge success was the removal of the Ritakoski dam – the 3rd and final dam in the biggest dam removal project in Finland, which freed the Hiitolanjoki river of hydropower.

**FIRST CIVIL SOCIETY REMOVAL IN PORTUGAL** – Led by WWF-Portugal, the demolition of the Galaxes weir was the first civil society-driven removal of an obsolete river barrier in Portugal.

**FISH MOTEL PROMOTION IN PORTUGAL** – The first ever Fish Motel promoted dam removal and river restoration in places across Portugal.



**WWF-PORTUGAL PETITIONS FOR THE REMOVAL OBSOLETE BARRIERS** – Following the first successful civil society-led dam removal in the country, WWF-Portugal began scouting for more obsolete barriers to remove and building more momentum, including encouraging people to sign a petition calling for the urgent removal of obsolete barriers and a firm commitment to river restoration in Portugal.



**FIRST DAM REMOVAL IN LATVIA** – Pasaules Dabas Fonds (otherwise known as WWF-Latvia) led the first ever dam removal in the country, dismantling the obsolete Beja dam and freeing up the whole of the Alūksne river. This will restore the river's natural flow, bringing back migratory fish and biodiversity, and building more resilience.

**AND MORE MONEY FOR FUTURE DAM REMOVALS IN LATVIA** – WWF-Latvia successfully pushed for new legislation to scale up dam removals and even managed to get €2 million for removals in the for DR included in EMFAF funding.

**AND THE REMOVAL OF THE FIRST CULVERT IN THE COUNTRY** – WWF-Latvia also turned its attention to culverts – removing the first one ever in the country in the Gauja basin. Needless to say, they are not stopping there: they are now working on another ORP project, where they are mapping impassable culverts in the Gauja basin, with the aim of reconstructing them.



## The future... is full of dam removals

In collaboration with Dam Removal Europe partners, WWF's Living European Rivers initiative aims to build on the growing momentum and seize the opportunities offered by a number of significant developments, such as the funding that is now flowing out of the European Open Rivers programme and increasing interest across the continent, to **directly contribute to achieving the target of restoring 25,000 km of rivers through dam removals that is incorporate in the EU Nature Restoration Law.**

There are 19 projects planned and underway in Europe – including some where WWF offices are driving the first removals in their countries. WWF Italy, Ukraine, and Romania are mapping barriers to be removed, while WWF Latvia is identifying unpassable culverts for reconstruction. In Spain, Slovakia, Slovenia and Kosovo, WWF offices are preparing for removals, while in early 2024, we will see removals in Portugal, Slovenia, Croatia and Finland.

WWF Netherlands, Slovakia and Adria are working with partners to build the dam removal movement in South Eastern Europe. The €1.17 million project supported by ORP will scale up dam removal projects with the intention of identifying 100 dams for removal by 2026, developing know-how for those implementing projects in the region, and strengthening advocacy.

But LER is committed to achieving more than this. We will continue to scale up WWF's work on dam removals. By 2024, our ambition is that all WWF offices in Europe are working on dam removal, either directly or through partner organisations. **And critically, LER will collaborate with offices to ensure that they have make full use of the €42.5 million funding from ORP since this can be used to leverage support for another 6 years from Arcadia.**

As the removal of dams and other river barriers has become more mainstream, new forms of opposition are growing, especially as climate change is hitting communities and countries with ever more extreme floods and droughts – and dams are perceived as the only solution to these worsening water challenges. To overcome this, LER is enhancing its support and integrating the dam removal work into its wider Nature-based Solutions work, so it is perceived as one more way of restoring the functionality of a river and building its resilience to climate impacts. And of course, LER is continuing to communicate about the benefits of removing barriers and continuing to shift the narrative away from 'dams are the answer' and 'dams are forever' towards 'let's make our rivers flow free' and 'let's restore more rivers to build resilience'.



# Nature-based Solutions

A scenic landscape featuring a river flowing through a lush green area with trees and a rocky foreground. The river is the central focus, reflecting the sky and surrounding greenery. The banks are lined with various trees, some with vibrant autumn foliage. In the foreground, there are large, dark rocks and patches of green grass. The sky is a clear, bright blue with a few wispy clouds. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and natural.

**Working with nature to build resilience**

## Ensuring NbS is at the heart of building resilience

The Living European Rivers initiative has been central to transforming the narrative around rivers, wetlands and resilience in Europe, collaborating with EPO, WWF offices and partners to highlight the central role of healthy freshwater ecosystems in climate action – and the need to invest in large scale Nature-based Solutions (NbS). Over the years, LER has laid the foundation for upscaling river restoration efforts through NbS as a way to bring new allies on board and tap into sources of funding that had not previously been used for conservation: such as funds for climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction.

LER has worked with WWF offices and external stakeholders to develop a more holistic strategic vision for NbS – one that focuses on **tackling societal challenges** rather than concentrating solely on conservation. LER has been instrumental in building capacity, investing in the development of upscaling mechanisms, collaborating with the most respected experts and **mobilizing sectoral partners and finance institutions, which were previously difficult for individual offices to access and influence.**

Critically, LER has worked to **build the economic case for NbS**, by supporting action on the ground by WWF–Romania and WWF–Greece, and drawing on that work to develop a report with Deltares on the opportunity to invest in NbS. The influential report even sparked a new research line at Wageningen University on NbS Cost–Benefit Analysis.

And LER was key in leveraging significant new funds into NbS for restoration by playing a key role in the creation and implementation of a major Horizon 2020 project – MERLIN aka *Mainstreaming Ecological Restoration of freshwater-related ecosystems in a Landscape context: INnovation, upscaling, and transformation*. Indeed, LER leads on the pillar of MERLIN that seeks to **engage different sectors to become promoters and implementers of NbS** as a response to their climate risk. This €22 million project has also ensured that WWF and partners have a better European-wide understanding of vital sectors for NbS upscaling, including agriculture, water supply and sanitation, insurance, inland navigation, hydropower and peat extraction.



## Driving real progress on NbS in key river basins

LER has collaborated with internal and external experts to share knowledge, skills and tools with WWF offices with the aim of launching or strengthening 6 large scale NbS programmes in rivers across the continent. Significant progress has been achieved in each of these basins:

- 🌿 **Tisza basin:** Grants from LER/WWF-NL together with participation in large European projects, such as MERLIN, have facilitated the development of relevant pilots to explore NbS opportunities and acceptance by communities.
- 🌿 **Lower Danube–Danube Delta:** Through funding and expertise, LER played a key role in designing and implementing NbS projects in this iconic landscape, promoting restoration efforts and finding synergies with the work funded by Coca-Cola.
- 🌿 **Mura–Drava–Danube:** LER support for large scale fundraising helped to ensure NbS became a key component of the restoration of this iconic region, right after its declaration as a UNESCO transboundary Biosphere Reserve.
- 🌿 **Thessaly plains:** LER supported WWF–Greece to develop their national NbS strategy, which enabled them to start working in Thessaly, and launching a very fruitful cooperation with the EIB.
- 🌿 **Po river:** LER’s technical support and links to the European network enabled WWF–Italy to launch an NbS pilot, which is continuing to expand.
- 🌿 **Guadalquivir estuary:** Thanks to LER, WWF–Spain was able to shift the traditional restoration approach towards NbS and deepen stakeholder engagement in the area.

The biggest NbS challenges remain in rural areas but LER is determined not to miss the chance to use the **communications potential of urban NbS**, particularly as WWF–CEE has built up an impressive programme, including Bratislava (Slovakia), Érd (Hungary), Kyiv (Ukraine), Sombor (Serbia), Ruse & Sofia (Bulgaria) and Tulcea (Romania), involving 6 WWF–CEE & Adria offices.

## Advocating for a strong Nature Restoration Law

Showcasing NbS **provided additional arguments in favour of the EU Nature Restoration Law, which in return will enable NbS upscaling**. LER has actively contributed to the advocacy work led by EPO to secure passage of a strong Nature Restoration Law.

By collaborating with EPO on advocacy and campaigns, LER helped to raise awareness about the importance of the law by engaging offices and citizens, and backing innovative EPO communications activities, such as [#RestoreWater](#) and [#SaveOtisandSophie](#). While these actions focused on the law’s approval, [Rivers2Restore](#) is a new European-wide action to encourage Member States to implement the law in freshwater habitats.



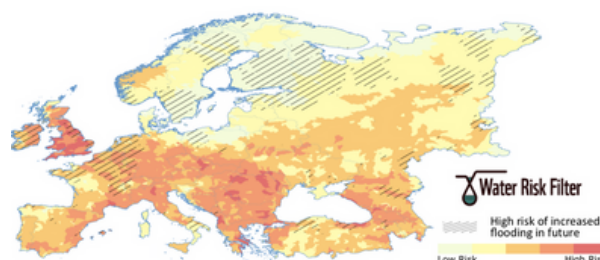
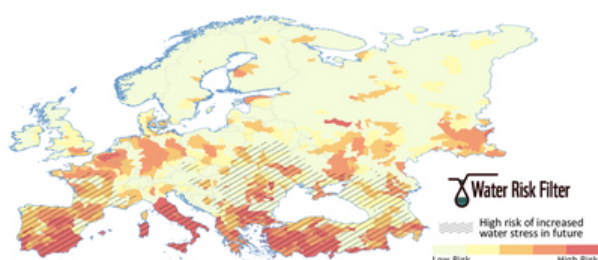
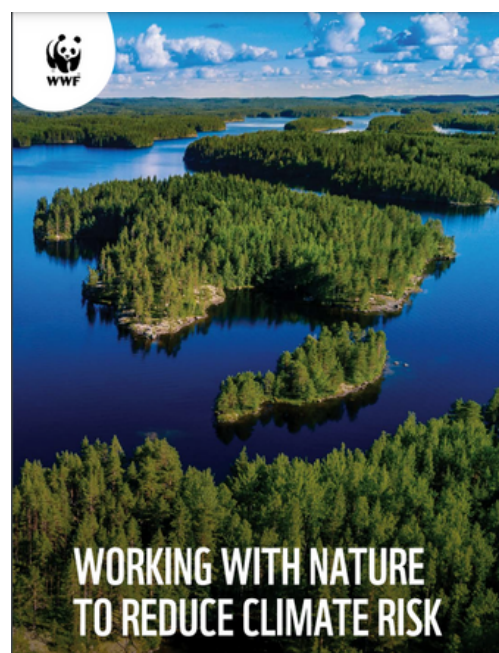
## Activities and achievements



### WORKING WITH NATURE TO REDUCE CLIMATE RISK

Together with the Freshwater Practice Core team, LER produced this key report outlining how investing in NbS can build resilience in the face of increasing water risks across the continent. The report focused on NbS for river, coastal and urban flooding as well as water scarcity and quality. It was published at Climate COP 25 in Madrid, sparking increased debate about the importance of NbS for adaptation.

**BUILDING BANKABLE CAPACITY** – Working with the Bankable Water Solutions team in WWF–NL, the LER core team hosted a webinar and workshop on landscape finance and bankable solutions in Romania to build capacity and start exploring freshwater bankable projects in Europe.



**SEARCHING FOR BANKABLE PROJECTS** – Together with the BWS team in WWF–NL meetings were held with different offices to scope for potential bankable projects. Results were summarised in a report, and the most promising case continued to be developed.

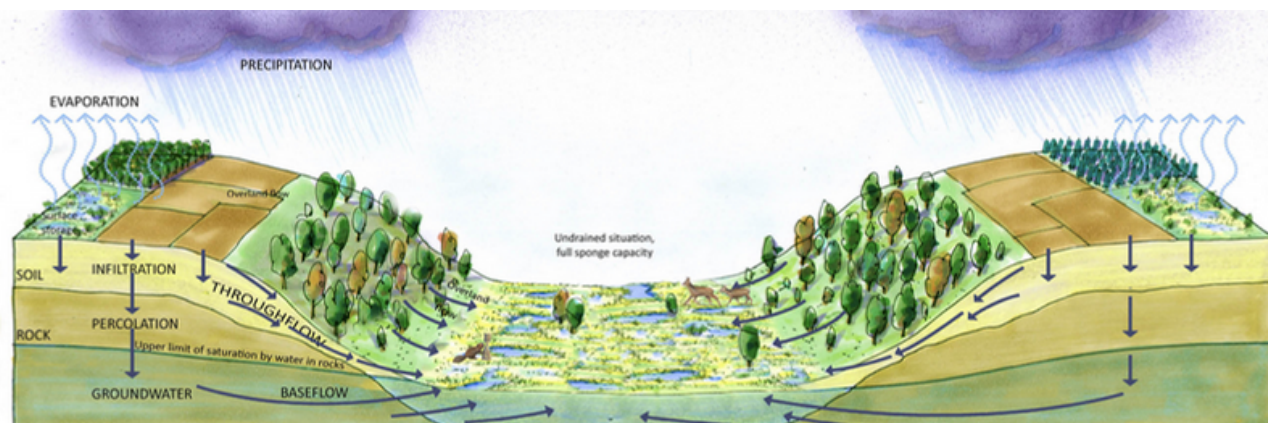
**FUNDING FRIENDLY FLOODPLAIN MANAGEMENT IN HUNGARY** – Thanks to WWF–CH support, WWF–Hungary received a grant to contribute to the long-term goal of introducing a friendly floodplain management system on at least 150,000 hectares in the Tisza region, which included water retention measures for drought mitigation.

**SPANISH STUDY ON ILLEGAL WATER USE** – WWF–Spain analyzed the impacts of unsustainable water use on the health of aquifers – a critical component in a resilient water system – and highlighted the need for improved water management practices & governance.

**RESTORATION INCLUDED IN ROMANIA'S NATIONAL PLANS** – Key sites that WWF–Romania identified as critical for restoration were included in the country's flood risk management plan for implementation (as NbS). The national strategy and action plan also included river restoration as an important measure/national programme to be implemented.



**DUTCH DRIVING INNOVATIVE NBS** – After the success of the ‘Room for the River’ programme in The Netherlands, which aimed to reduce the impact of floods by moving dykes and restoring natural floodplains, the WWF–NL office started working on 3 innovative new NbS restoration projects: ‘double dykes’, ‘natural sponges’ and ‘room for middle discharge’. LER has been especially active on “sponges” together with Wetlands International and Stroming.



**PLANTING WATER IN PORTUGAL** – WWF–Portugal launched a new NbS restoration project, ‘Plantar Água’, with The Coca-Cola Foundation to increase water availability.

**STUDYING IBERIA’S LARGEST RIVER BASIN** – WWF–Portugal published a landmark report on the health of the Douro river basin, the largest on the Iberian peninsula.

**WHAT WATER DOES A HABITAT NEED** – WWF–Spain hosted a seminar on ecological flows and the water needs of habitats.



**MAJOR PROJECT TO RECONNECT WATER BODIES TO THE ELBE** – In collaboration with the NABU Foundation, WWF–Germany launched the major Krautsand conservation project to reconnect isolated water bodies to the tidal activity of the Elbe.

**PARTNERSHIP OF THE YEAR GOES TO LIVING DANUBE** – The Living Danube work developed by WWF–CEE in partnership with Coca-Cola and the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River over the previous decade was a key inspiration for LER and has been intrinsically linked to it. Fantastic to see its innovative and collective approach recognised with a prestigious Reuters Responsible Business award.





**MERLIN: A MAGIC MOMENT FOR NBS IN EUROPE** – The landmark Horizon 2020 project, Mainstreaming Ecological Restoration of freshwater-related ecosystems in a Landscape context: INnovation, upscaling and transformation (MERLIIN), was launched in October with a €21 million budget for coalition partners to restore Europe's freshwater habitats through NbS. The LER core team was instrumental in securing the funds and will be directly involved along with offices in implementing the NbS across the continent.



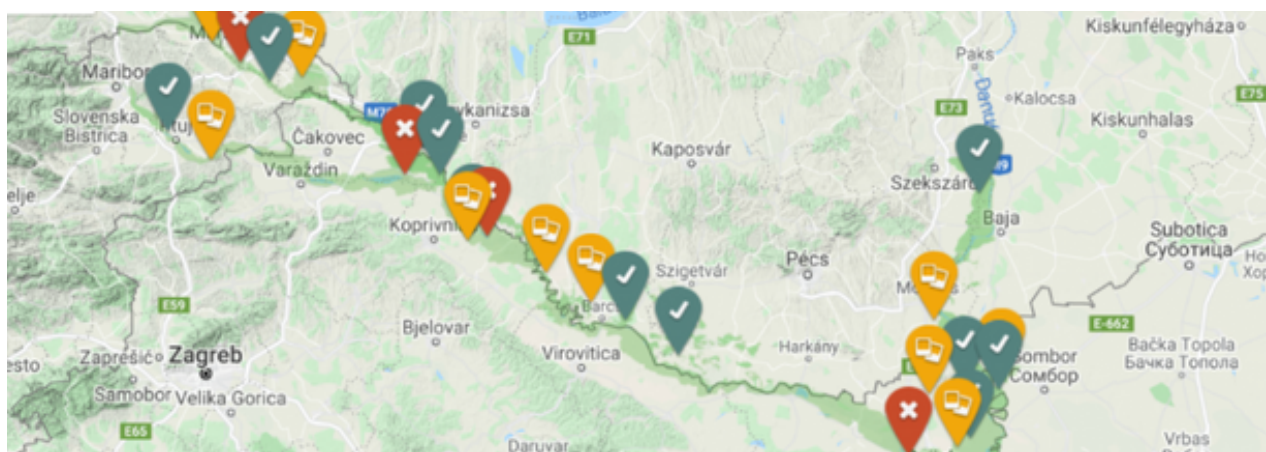
#### DETAILING THE ECONOMIC RATIONALE FOR NBS

Launched after the dramatic floods in Germany, Belgium and Turkey, this WWF-NL report produced by Deltares, showed how NbS can help reduce the impact of such disasters across Europe. The study found that restoring rivers' natural characteristics and dynamics increase flood resilience in a more sustainable way and more cost-effectively than traditional engineering solutions – highlighting how critical NbS will be to climate adaptation. An advocacy briefing was also published and shared.



**INNOVATION FUNDED ANALYSIS** – The fund enabled WWF-Romania to develop a model to analyze the macroeconomic impact of NbS interventions in different economic sectors.

**WORLD'S FIRST 5 NATION BIOSPHERE RESERVE COVERING MURA-DRAVA-DANUBE** – WWF drove the project that achieved the historic designation of the Mura-Drava-Danube Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO. WWF-Adria, Austria and Hungary led the way, securing not just the Biosphere Reserve but also the largest riverine protected area in Europe, covering 700 km of rivers across Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, Hungary, and Serbia and 1 million hectares, which will provide irreplaceable benefits for 900,000 inhabitants and incredible biodiversity.





**HUGE RESTORATION PROJECT PROPOSED FOR THE PO** – WWF Italy and the Italian aggregates association partnered with the Po river basin authority to include a huge restoration project for Italy's most economically important river in the country's National Recovery and Resilience Plan, which was submitted to the EU for funding. The €357 million project aims to restore 44 large areas in the middle reaches of the river and the delta to enhance the overall health of the basin and strengthen climate adaptation in northern Italy.



**ENHANCING THE HEALTH OF THE ESSINO RIVER** – WWF-Italy also promoted the River Contract for the Essino, engaging 24 municipalities and 20 other entities in better river basin management.

**CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACTS IN IBERIA** – WWF-Spain and Portugal produced a key report on the worsening impacts of climate change on freshwater ecosystems in Iberia. The report assessed current impacts, and future risks as well as potential solutions, including NbS.

**FORECASTING THE FUTURE OF THE DOURO RIVER** – WWF-Spain and Portugal organized an influential webinar on the future of the Douro River and its tributaries, which promoted nature restoration and dam removal.



## WEBINAR IBÉRICO:

Alternativas a novas  
barragens na bacia  
hidrográfica do Douro



## DRIVING A NEW APPROACH TO FLOODS IN GREECE & A PARTNERSHIP WITH EIB ON NBS

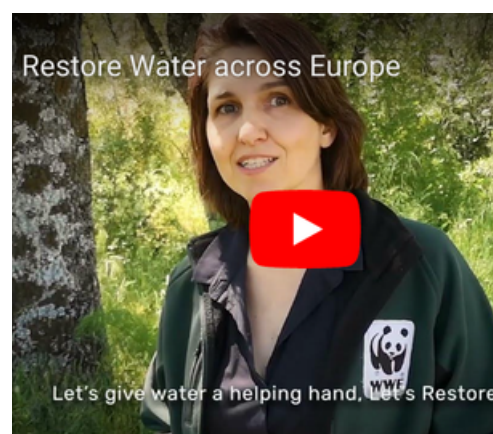
Together with Global Infrastructure Basel, WWF-Greece launched an innovative NbS approach to adaptation in the Greek region of Thessaly, which had been hardest hit by the country's devastating floods. The approach not only engaged regional authorities on NbS but also kickstarted a longer term collaboration with the European Investment Bank.

**RIGHT (SMALL CHECK) DAMS IN THE RIGHT PLACES IN GREECE** – To improve aquifer quality, reduce flood risk and provide small ponds for biodiversity, WWF-Greece launched a project to construct 33 small check dams in an ephemeral stream on Panos island.

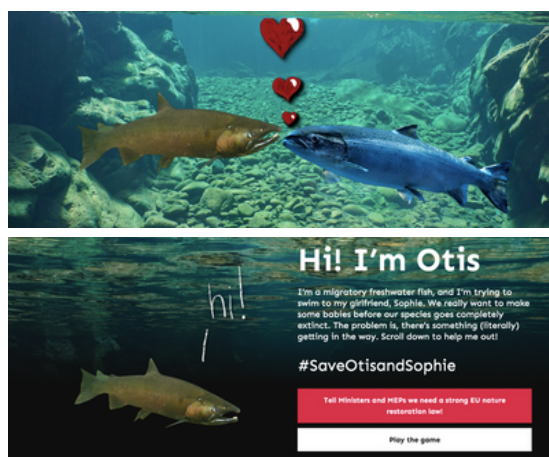


**DRAFT NATURE RESTORATION LAW INCLUDES 25,000 KM OF FREE FLOWING RIVERS** – The advocacy work led by EPO in coordination with LER, offices and other practice, resulted in the European Commission’s proposal to incorporate an obligation to restore 25,000 km of free flowing rivers by 2030. This would never have happened without years of dam removal communications, advocacy and implementation led by LER.

**RESTORE WATER CAMPAIGN KEY TO AMBITIOUS RIVER RESTORATION TARGET** – Securing the target of 25,000km of restored rivers was due to concerted and collective action, including LER’s influential #RestoreWater campaign, which included videos and social media material featuring governments, international organizations and WWF CEOs from across Europe calling for an ambitious nature restoration law to ensure water security and resilience.



**FISH SEX ALSO SELLS AS #SAVEOTISANDSOPHIE CAMPAIGN PROVED** – Sometimes the best way to get the message across is to try something different – like the successful campaign around helping Otis and Sophie turn their salmon dating into salmon mating. Involving LER, EPO, WWF offices across Europe and partners, the campaign advocated for free-flowing river restoration and ambitious targets for it in the Nature Restoration Law with a brilliant video, website, message to ministers and social content.



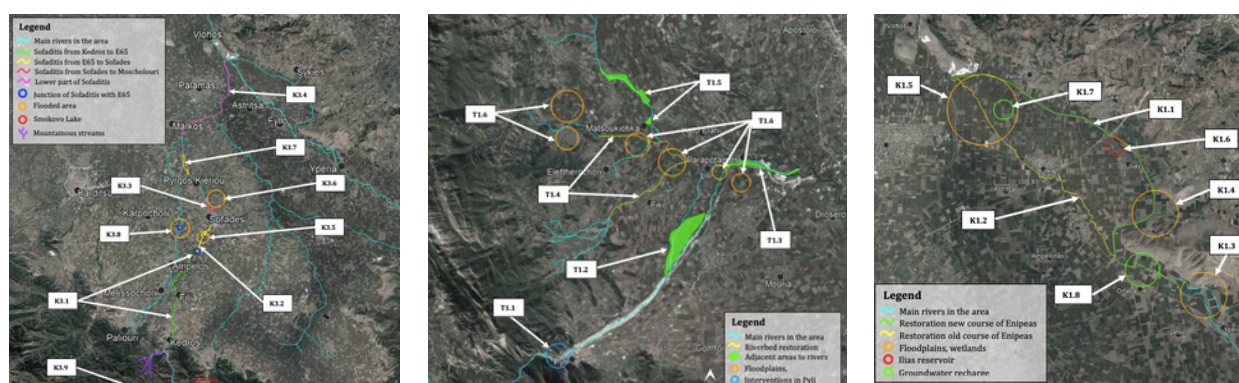


**PORTFOLIO OF POTENTIAL NBS ACROSS EUROPE** – Developed a portfolio of potential NbS across six European basins, highlighting environmental and societal values and challenges, mapping areas with current projects and possible future intervention at scale as a tool to engage new partners and donors.

**NEED TO WORK WITH NATURE TO AVOID MORE FLOOD DISASTERS IN GERMANY** – WWF-Germany used the 20th anniversary of the Elbe floods and 1st anniversary of the Ahr flood to call for investment in ecological flood prevention and keeping water in the landscape.

**MERLIN SECTORAL ROUNDTABLES AND BRIEFINGS** – WWF-Hungary and LER core team were involved in organising the first roundtables with sectors, and publishing a briefing detailing how sectors relate to river restoration and NbS, and identifying potential cooperation points with them. The framework for restoration monitoring was also in place, while cases went through IUCN’s NbS Self Assessment Tool.

**PROPOSING SOLUTIONS TO REDUCE FLOOD RISK IN THESSALY** – WWF-Greece produced a 100-page report in collaboration with the EIB, SwissRe, Global Infrastructure Basel, TNC, Icatelist and NTUA, outlining potential NbS to reduce flood risk in 7 sub-basins of Western Thessaly. The pre-feasibility report provided a variety of possible solutions.



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FACULTY OF CIVIL ENGINEERING  
DEPARTMENT OF WATER RESOURCES  
& ENVIRONMENTAL ENGINEERING

**INNOVATION FUND GRANT FOR NBS TRAINING IN GREECE** – An online training for civil servants in 4 regions in Greece to understand the concept and potential of NbS.

**INNOVATION FUND TO INSPIRE INSURANCE INDUSTRY TO WORK ON SPONGE NBS** – After the floods in the summer of 2021 in the Netherlands, Germany and Belgium, this analysis explored the potential of working with insurance to promote the “landscape sponge” approach, which WWF NL had been working on with Wetlands International and Strooming.



**MERLIN KEEPS ON DELIVERING** – The Merlin project went from strength to strength, delivering a series of key activities. WWF-Hungary and the LER core team were involved in the second set of Roundtables with sectors, further detailing the potential for cooperation with them. A briefing paper on policy opportunities for NbS was released, while case studies drafted Regional Scalability Plans. Restoration maps for Europe were developed.

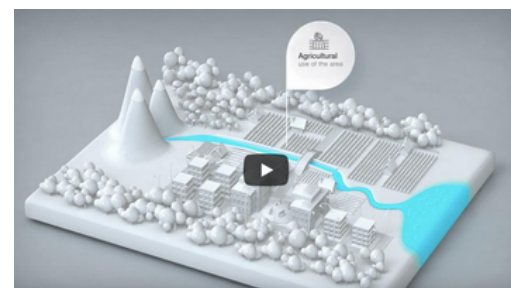


**COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS OF NBS IN THESSALY** – Following the SAVi methodology from IISD, and together with GIB and EIB, this WWF-Greece report compared NbS vs business-as-usual practices like dykes to address flood risk in the Thessaly region.



### FANTASTIC VIDEO ON NBS TO REDUCE FLOOD RISK

Produced by WWF-Greece with a grant from the Innovation Fund in 2022, this superb animation shows how NbS in a river basin can reduce flood risks to people and bring co-benefits for biodiversity. It was translated into English and is available for any office to translate and use as Bulgaria and Spain plan to do.



**GUIDANCE ON NBS BIODIVERSITY INDICATORS** – Following the IUCN Global Standards for NbS, WWF-Greece prepared a guidance document for monitoring biodiversity impacts of NbS for flood risk reduction in Western Thessaly..

**SMALL CHECK DAMS TO PROVIDE MULTIPLE BENEFITS ON IOS ISLAND** – Focusing on improving the health of aquifers, reducing flood risk and creating small ponds for biodiversity, WWF-Greece and partners launched a project to plan and construct 50 small check dams in an ephemeral stream and its tributaries on the island of Ios. The project includes pre- and post monitoring of biotic and abiotic parameters.

**RESTORATION OF MORONIS ESTUARY** – Following the successful restoration of 1 hectare of coastal wetlands in 2010, WWF-Greece supported the Municipality of Chania to invest in NbS to restore the remaining 3 hectares of the Moronis estuary by removing 30,000 m<sup>3</sup> of debris.



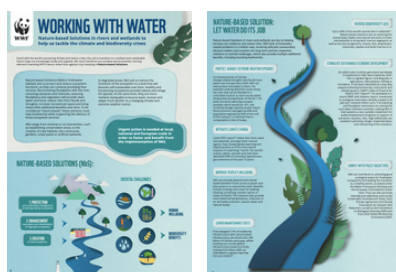


**FLOODING FINLAND WITH WETLANDS** – From 2018–2023, WWF–Finland led NbS projects in a variety of catchment areas. In co-operation with private landowners, the projects have constructed 22 wetlands, including one in the shape of a panda, 7 two-stage channels and bottom weir chains as well as restored stream sections.

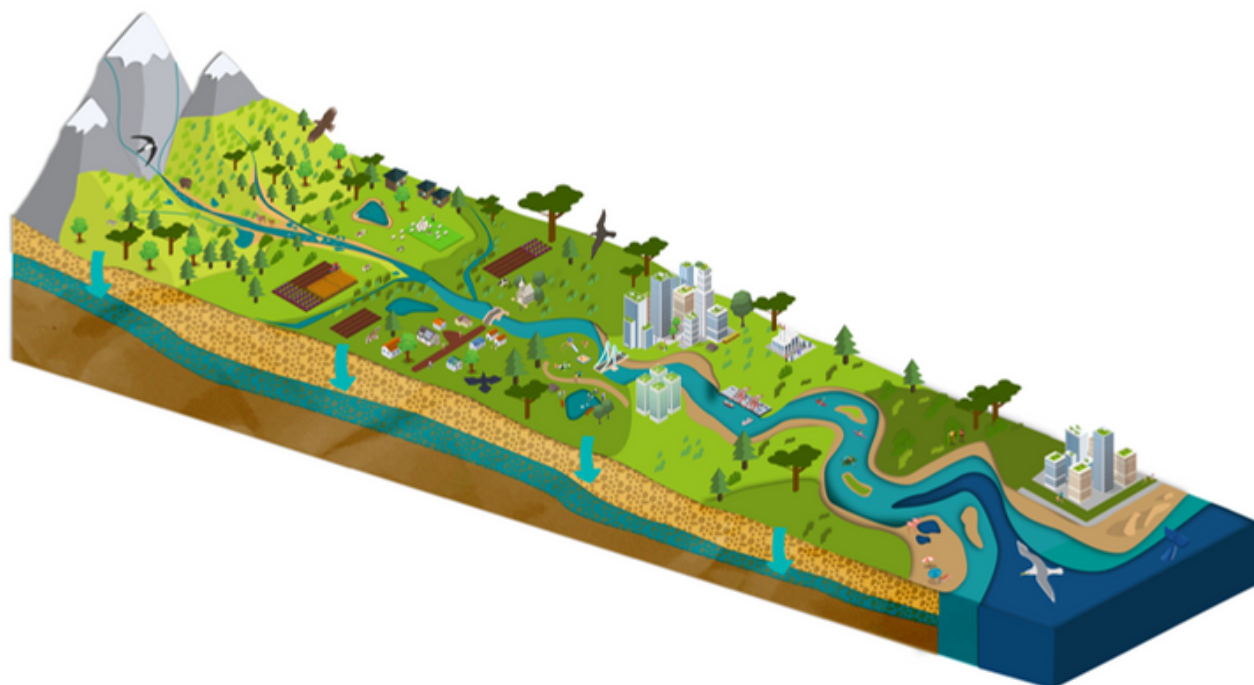


**TRANSFORMING A DEGRADED AUSTRIAN WATERWAY BACK INTO A RIVER** – Via Donau, the entity managing Danube waterways in Austria, received approval from the government to transform an old inland waterway in Morava back into a real river. This is a great opportunity to reconnect the Morava with its floodplain in a protected area owned by WWF–Austria since the 1970s, the Marchegg floodplain reserve.

**RESTORING NATURE TO ADAPT TO INCREASING WATER SCARCITY** – EPO dived into NbS for water security in its report "Water for nature, water for life – Adapting to Europe's water scarcity challenge". The report looks into four country cases, which make it clear that Europe needs a new climate adaptation agenda that prioritises NbS to address climate impacts.

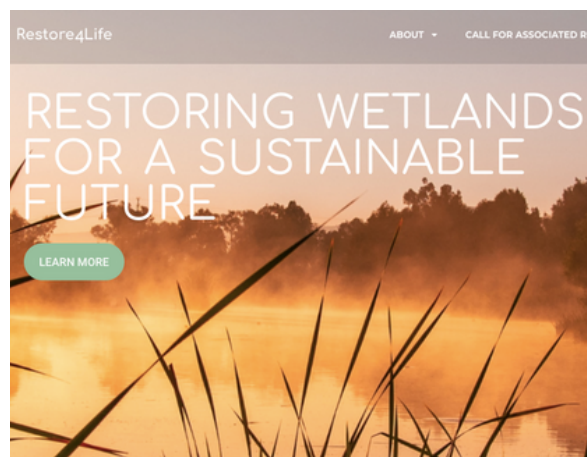


**COMMUNICATING NBS FOR MAXIMUM IMPACT** – With the participation of WWF–Italy, Greece and Spain, the LER core team produced a beautiful infographic and short animation on riverine NbS for climate adaptation and resilience. They also created a colourful 7-page factsheet on the current situation in Europe, cases studies, and challenges and opportunities for NbS in rivers and wetlands.





**ENSURING WWF OFFICES ARE PART OF MAJOR NBS PROJECTS IN EUROPE** – LER contacts and finance, depending on the case, facilitated access for WWF offices to participate in four major Horizon Europe projects and one Interreg initiative:



**Interreg  
Europe**



European Union | European Regional Development Fund

**DANUBE4all (€8.5 million)** – An EU ‘Lighthouse Initiative’, this project takes a multi-sectoral approach to addressing the diverse environmental challenges facing the Danube River Basin, seeking to show the economic and social benefits of restored ecosystems to SMEs and local communities – thus increasing societal support for longer-term restoration efforts. The project has a budget of almost €8.5 million and benefits WWF-Hungary and WWF-Romania.

**NATALIE (€16 million)** – This project focuses on NbS for adaptation and aims to develop 25 innovative solutions, including financing and public commitments, technical innovations, modelling and IT solutions, and recommendations for governance and policy at EU and regional levels. With a budget of €16 million, the project includes WWF Greece as a partner.

**SPONGESCAPES (€2.6 million)** – This innovative project aims to improve resilience against extreme weather events, such as floods and droughts. It focusses on the use of natural water retention measures for improving groundwater, soil, and surface water retention throughout Europe. It will assess the functioning of different ‘sponge solutions’ and methods to define overarching ‘sponge strategies’. WWF-Greece benefits from a share of the €2.6 million budget, which will fund its monitoring of small – hybrid NbS – check dams on Paros island.

**RESTORE4LIFE (€8.5 million)** – This project will show how to enhance crucial ecosystem services by reinstating lateral connectivity in riverine corridors in the Danube basin. The project reveals the synergies that arise from these improvements, opening doors for sustainable businesses and investments. It includes a *Restore4Life Wetland Reconstruction Accelerator*. With a budget of almost €8.5 million, the project benefits WWF-Romania.

**RESTORIVER (€2.5 million)** – Part of the Interreg Danube Region Program, this project increases climate adaptation capacities of riverside and riparian areas by connecting water management, climate adaptation and flood protection with local interventions, serving transnational water and climate adaptation systems and stakeholder networks. WWF-Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Ukraine and Adria are all part of this €2.5 million project.

## The future is definitely NbS

While there is a clear opportunity and evidence-based case for river-related Nature-based Solutions to strengthen climate adaptation and increase resilience, there is still a lack of large scale projects. LER will continue to work to **build a pipeline of large scale NbS projects and programmes**, both bankable and non-bankable, combined with other projects in the riverscape and landscape that can ensure their social and economic sustainability. For this purpose we will prioritize efforts to **attract funds for the early stages of NbS project development**, while continuing to provide technical support to European offices and searching for new partners in different sectors, particularly agriculture and insurance, including via the MERLIN project.

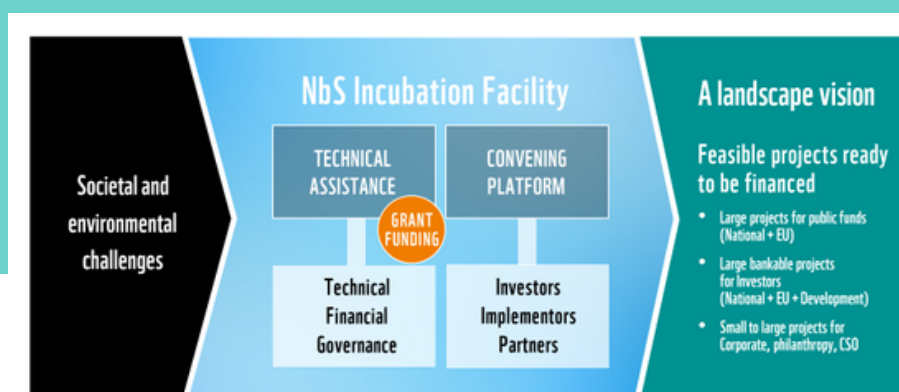
A key tool will be the **NbS Incubation Facility**, developed with support from WWF-NL and the Finance Practice, and based on the experience of NOs on the ground. The Facility will serve as an entry point for large financial institutions and, along with helping to develop new projects, it will serve as a convening platform to attract project implementers, donors and investors.

The EU Nature Restoration Law offers a unique legal framework and mandate to enable NbS and river restoration to be adopted by governments. The **Rivers2Restore** campaign will **show countries a path to follow to restore freshwater habitats**, while simultaneously tackling climate challenges. To help build the necessary enabling environment, LER is working with MERLIN to identify policy and market mechanisms and designing a Route-map for mainstreaming NbS in Europe.

## The NbS Incubation Facility

This facility will identify and incubate viable NbS propositions at a large scale, reaching the stage of financial maturity. It shall close the gap of early stage NbS identification that no one else covers.

The NbS IF will invest in technical, governance and financial assessments and act as a convening platform for relevant stakeholders. The result will be a pipeline of NbS projects, bankable and non-bankable, linked to water, that can move forward with financial and implementation support from public and private donors and investors.



# Learning by Doing

10 key lessons from our first 6 years



# Top 10 LER lessons... so far

The first six years of the Living European Rivers initiative have seen many reasons to celebrate but we have also had our fair share of challenges and frustrations. However, we have learned a lot from both our successes and our failures. Here are our 10 key learnings:

## Focus pays off big time

While selecting a few key pillars was always a core component of the LER approach, we have grown even more focused – and it's clear that narrowing down our targets has resulted in even greater impact and also inspired many offices to focus more to align with the initiative.

## Together really is possible

LER's biggest achievements would have not been possible without collective effort. Saving the Water Framework Directive, scaling up the dam removal movement, winning major projects and leveraging tens of millions of Euros: we could not have done any of this alone.

## Flexibility is key to seizing opportunities in unstable times

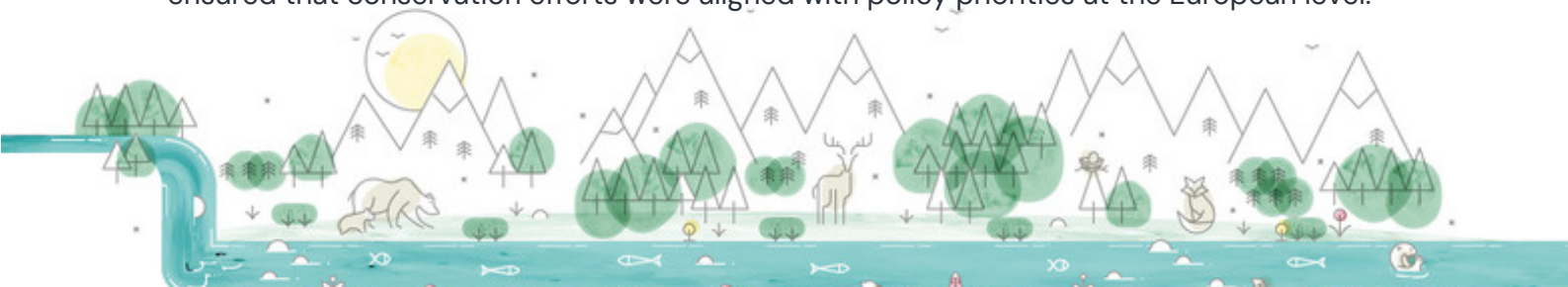
With climate change bringing ever greater instability, LER's focused but flexible strategy enables us to react to new challenges and seize new opportunities. LER has shown the capacity to pivot towards paths that promise the maximum impact and it will continue to do so: it's clear strategy sets the overall direction, but the exact route can change depending on circumstances, while participating offices are free to go at their own pace.

## Practice(s) makes perfect or certainly more impact

Breaking silos was always at the heart of LER. While the initiative lives within the Freshwater Practice, we had a focus on hydropower and energy and, of course, wildlife from the start. And we rapidly moved into the climate adaptation space once we saw the huge potential for upscaling river restoration as a way to build resilience, bring new allies on board and open up new funding sources. Increasingly we are working with the Finance Practice on systemic issues and opportunities, while making clearer links with Food, Forests and Oceans.

## Clear division of labour maximized policy and conservation impact

In the early days, there was a risk that LER could end up duplicating the work of EPO, which was already working on freshwater policy and advocacy in Europe. But an open dialogue led to clear definitions of our roles and responsibilities. This resulted in effective cooperation, which multiplied our collective effort, expertise and resources and led to much greater impact. Ensuring that EPO was an integral part of the LER Core Team and Steering group also ensured that conservation efforts were aligned with policy priorities at the European level.



## Collective success means working with offices one-by-one

LER provides an overall ambition and general direction, but it is the dedicated one-on-one work with WWF offices across Europe that makes the difference, allowing them to evolve, grow their activities, seize opportunities, and deploy their full potential. The result: greater conservation impact at national and regional levels.

## Co-designing content takes time but is well worth the extra effort

There is no point in pursuing a top-down approach to designing technical or communications materials: they need to be co-developed with the offices. As LER has shown with many actions and campaigns, one big splash together is more influential than multiple, different plops!

## Initiatives need ambassadors

WWF is a complicated network and LER needs support to succeed. Initiatives need strong offices backing them up just as much as they need individuals helping them have impact at national level. Support from conservation, communication and fundraising ambassadors makes a big difference to the way the initiative is perceived. Ambassadors are engaged 'organically' by working closely with them and collaborating to ensure that LER continues to add real value.

## Partnerships are a priority and a superpower of LER

LER has been very successful at partnering with diverse organisations and creating coalitions to drive greater freshwater conservation impact. WWF kickstarted and then helped to build the most influential coalitions on freshwater conservation in Europe: the [Living Rivers Europe coalition](#) and [Dam Removal Europe](#). And it has also broken out of its comfort zone and started building relationships with unusual sectors (insurance, agriculture) and financial institutions.

## We are a team - and love nothing more than getting together (for a photo!)

Ask our colleagues to rank the best things about LER and it's highly likely that our annual get-togethers will be high up the list. Face-to-face meetings are crucial for inspiration and alignment of strategies - and fostering the teamwork, camaraderie and collective spirit that has been so instrumental in our collective achievements over the past six years.



# Eyes on the Prize

Healthy and resilient waters across Europe



# Future of Living European Rivers initiative

The Living European Rivers initiative launched with its eyes firmly set on 2030. Almost half way to that pivotal year, LER has proven that it can deliver on its founding principles by inspiring and supporting WWF offices to innovate and scale up their freshwater work, transforming narratives around rivers and restoration, leveraging new sources of public and private funding, building strong partnerships and coalitions, and driving greater collective impact across Europe's rivers and wetlands. The investments made to date – not only financial, but also in terms of capacity and knowledge – have yielded significant results but there is so much more still to be done.

While the days of the Green Deal might be coming to an end, it seems as if water's time could finally be here: the climate crisis is a water crisis and adaptation linked to water and freshwater ecosystems is rising up political and business agenda; the Nature Restoration Law will soon be approved with ambitious targets for river and wetland restoration; and, the Freshwater Challenge has already been joined by numerous countries on the continent among the 44 worldwide. The time is ripe for WWF's Living European Rivers initiative and offices across Europe to maximize their collective impact by building a pipeline of large scale projects that are ready to be funded and implemented. LER is indeed *fit for purpose*: its strategy focused on two major opportunities: Nature-based Solutions for climate adaptation, and integrating dam removal as a key component of efforts to restore rivers and ecosystem functionality.

And our goals are clear: by 2030, the Living European Rivers initiative will have launched 5 large-scale NbS programmes in 5 European river basins, as flagship interventions to be replicated across the continent's riverscapes and landscapes. All European offices will be working on removing dams and other river barriers, directly or through partner organisations, and together we will have been directly involved in the removal of at least 50 weirs or dams and set the path to free 12,500 km of rivers. This will not only translate into a significant shift of investments towards greener measures, but also a transformation in the water paradigm: rivers will no longer be "just pipes", but living entities whose healthy functioning is critical to people, nature and climate resilience.

The foundations are in place to achieve these ambitious and transformational goals. But we need to ensure that LER continues driving greater impact. The initiative is facing its own challenges. After being hosted by WWF-NL, it has now been transferred to WWF-CEE with a budget that only covers this Financial Year. While waiting for LER's new fundraising efforts to bear fruit – including targeting philanthropic sources, PSP funds, financial institutions and corporates – we must provide immediate funding to cover at least its minimum operating costs. LER has proven the difference that an ambitious initiative can make by helping to make the impact of WWF European offices on freshwater much greater than the sum of its parts. With sufficient support, it will continue to do so, driving greater impact at scale and benefiting offices across the continent. We are sure the opportunities LER will bring to WWF offices is worth their financial support.

# Living European Rivers is a great investment



## Stuart Orr

Freshwater Practice Leader

Six years on from the creation of WWF's Freshwater Initiatives is the perfect time to take stock and re-assess where we stand. While all our initiatives have driven change and secured some real successes, none of them can quite match LER from the perspective of delivery, innovation, fundraising and impact. Talk about WWF's mantra of 'together possible': LER has inspired European offices to come together around freshwater, collaborating on key topics and themes, leveraging new sources of funding, scaling up our collective work on restoration, and securing a series of significant wins.

Over these years, the outside world has changed, bringing greater instability and challenges, but also opportunities. LER has helped drive the growing momentum behind dam removals for river restoration and NbS for climate adaptation, as well as a wider societal understanding of the fact that climate change is water change. LER is now perfectly positioned to work with WWF offices and partners to address these issues across the continent and build off its impressive foundations. Far from slowing down, it's now time for us speed up LER's work – to scale up our NbS and dam removal ambitions.

It has been incredibly rewarding to watch LER move from strength to strength. With great leadership, office support and a solid strategy in place, now is the time to invest in LER to move forward together and demonstrate what conservation impact at scale in freshwater looks like.



## Eva Hernández

Living European Rivers Initiative Lead

Back in 2018, I jumped at the chance to lead the Living European Rivers initiative, excited about the idea of bringing our European network together to increase our collective impact on rivers (and wetlands!). We wanted to shift the paradigm of how water and freshwater ecosystems are perceived by people, how they are managed by governments, and what kind of investments they benefit (or suffer) from. We wanted to focus, innovate and, especially, 'go big' to bring life back to our dying European waters, rebuild resilience, and, yes, bend the biodiversity curve.

Back then we knew there would be challenges, but none of us could have predicted a pandemic, a war at the heart of Europe, increasing political turbulence, or the worsening impacts of climate change across the continent – from historic floods to devastating droughts.

Despite all the odds, LER has continued to move forward and deliver. Thanks to our amazing European network and partners, we have managed to keep good laws in place and enact new ones, leverage funds, innovate, build capacity, attract partners, and think on an ambitious, large scale.

But our job is not done. We can't envision all the challenges ahead, but we are passionate and persistent, and have laid strong foundations. We will continue to transform Europe's rivers and landscapes, underpinning its societies and economies. Because Living Rivers = Resilient Europe.



Thank  
you

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The LER core team wishes to give a big thank you to all WWF offices across Europe that have aligned their priorities with LER's core work lines, and helped take our joint freshwater work on the continent to a new level. We also wish to congratulate each one of these offices for their many successes and the increasing impact that we know our common projects will have.

A big thank you as well to the Living Rivers Europe and Dam Removal Europe coalitions for their commitment, ideas, support and contribution to our joint goals.

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### LER Initiative Progress Report 2018–2023

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