



Austro-Slovak project endangers Morava wetlands?

The Lower Morava floodplains are renowned as an important intact wetland in the Danube Basin. Recent plans for a new motorway bridge connecting Vienna and Bratislava are developing into a serious environmental conflict

The Danube-Morava floodplain system is one of the last major wetlands in the entire Danube Basin. As such, it has received multiple protection status in both Austria and Slovakia, with parts of it being designated as a national park, nature reserve, Ramsar site, biosphere reserve, protected landscape and Natura 2000 site. It has also benefited from a number of model river and wetland restoration investments made by GEF, EU-Phare, EU-Life, etc. In August 2001, the environment ministries of Austria, Slovakia and the Czech Republic signed a Memorandum of Understanding to establish in the floodplain system a trilateral Ramsar site to be jointly and sustainably protected. This innovative agreement even received the Ramsar Wetland Conservation Award 2002, honouring the stimulating role that NGOs played in this process. This remote area of pristine nature along the former Iron Curtain has been attracting a growing number of visitors who enjoy unique bird watching, wet meadow trails and jungle-like forests.

However, the lack of any important transport line north of the Danube has since 1990 bothered traffic planners and triggered them to plan a new high-capacity transport infrastructure in the area. Today, there is only a ferry at Angern-Záhorská Ves and a railway bridge at Marchegg used by only a few trains. In 1998, Austrian government experts and environmentalists recommended that the ferry at the Angern border crossing be replaced by a road bridge, which they thought would little affect the valuable wetland. Similarly, the plans to upgrade the Marchegg railway bridge to make it suitable for pedestrians and bikers were supported as ecologically acceptable.

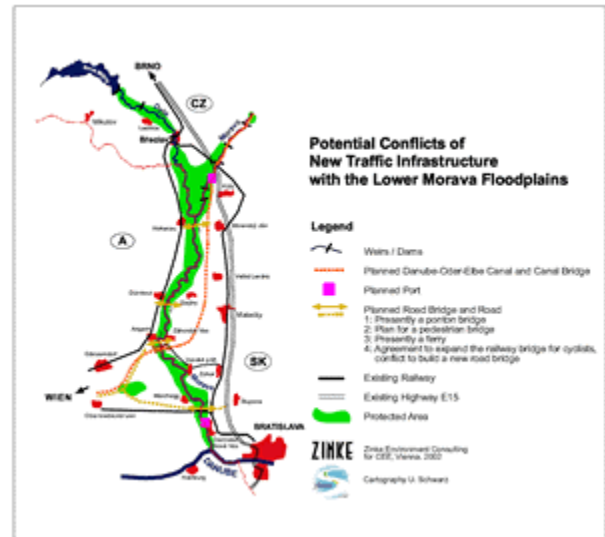
The upcoming EU accession, however, has inspired economic development planners to demand north of the Danube Floodplains National Park a completely new, four-lane highway running up to the Marchegg bridge and to rebuild the bridge to carry heavy trucks. A new industry park is planned at Marchegg and should be linked with the new industry plants north of Bratislava.

While the re-building of the existing bridge would seem to bring about no major change at first sight, the far-reaching direct effects such as pollution and noise, and indirect effects known from similar areas all over Europe spell disastrous prospects for the wetlands; such a big new route would not only attract local, inter-city and international traffic from Poland, Ukraine, Hungary and Germany,

but would also trigger the building of new transport service and commercial facilities.

A fast connection to both cities would stimulate new housing, shopping and entertainment projects in the surrounding area of Marchegg in Austria and Devinska Nova Ves in Slovakia. As a result, the currently peaceful back country would within years turn into an "industry and fast-food suburb" that white storks, beavers and nature tourists would be pushed out of.

Even the Austrian Auditor's General Office in late January 2004 expressed its serious concern to the Lower Austrian provincial parliament, concluding that this road and bridge as well as the Danube- Oder-Elbe navigation canal would destroy the Morava wetlands. The Ramsar site would deteriorate, as roads and bridges are not compatible with the "wise use" concept to which all governments have committed themselves.



At a meeting with Lower Austrian traffic planners in mid-January 2004, local citizen initiatives declared their strong opposition to the plan and won the support of all major Austrian and Slovak NGOs such as WWF, Greenpeace, Global 2000, Daphne and BROZ. They demand that a strategic environment assessment of the entire region be carried out to allow more alternatives to be compared. The Marchegg bridge, they agree, should be used for more railway transport (including industry) but a road connection should rather be built around Angern.

NGOs have already started contacting the EU institutions in Brussels. The Morava road bridge is a test case that will show whether the enlarged European Union will, indeed, give priority to transport development over environment protection. Should this prove to be the case, the conflict may be further heating up in 2004.

Article by Alexander Zinke

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