

Planned hydroelectric power plants on Balkan rivers pose a deadly threat to the survival of the Mladica, known as the Balkan salmon, the NGO Riverwatch says.

The future of a large freshwater fish known as the Mladica - in English as the Huchen, or Danube Salmon - is threatened by planned hydroelectric power plants on Balkan rivers, a green NGO has warned.

The Austrian-based environmental NGO Riverwatch raised the alarm about the biggest trout species in the world at a press conference in Slovenian capital Ljubljana on Thursday. Riverwatch has conducted an extensive research, including 18 scientists from seven countries, on stocks of the fish in rivers running from Slovenia on the north to Montenegro in the south.

This shows that 65 per cent of all Huchen live in 43 rivers, the bigger ones being Sava, Kupa, Una, Sana, Drina and Lim, covering a total length of 1,840 kilometres, flowing through Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro.

Riverwatch has meanwhile identified plans to build 93 dams for producing electricity on rivers that form the natural habitat of the Huchen. If these projects go ahead, a large percentage of the fish will perish.

The Huchen population has already declined by two-thirds since the late 19th century, the NGO, says, while the study claims that another 60 to 70 per cent of the fish in the Balkans would go as a result of the planned power plant projects.

At the press conference, the co-author of the study, Steven Weiss, a professor at the University of Graz, emphasized the scale of the threat to the Huchen's survival.

"Balkan rivers are paramount for the survival of the Huchen. If these dams are constructed, we predict that about 70 percent of the Balkan population would be lost," Weiss said.

He added that this would endanger the remaining population in Balkan rivers, since this remainder would be too small for sustainability in the long run.

Experts included in the study say the survival of the Huchen and of some other endangered species is incompatible with hydropower development on such a scale.

The international coordinator of Riverwatch's campaign "Save the Blue Heart of Europe", Ulrich Eichelmann, said politicians in the region were hiding behind "green" energy projects.

"Disguised as a green form of energy generation, the last habitats of one of the most endangered species in Europe are to be destroyed. We want to stop the damming of these rivers. All the Huchen stretches must be designated as protected areas," he concluded.

The study on the Huchen fish is just one part of Riverwatch's "Save the Blue Heart of Europe" campaign, which is tackling 2,000 projected dams on Balkan river flows, stretching

from Slovenia to Albania.
Source; BIRN