

“By destroying rivers, we are exposing ourselves to an uncertain future. Not only are we losing biodiversity and natural habitats, but also basic living conditions. It is especially worrying when devastation occurs in protected areas, the purpose of which is to preserve nature and values and local communities’ benefit “, points out Petra Remeta, acting director of WWF Adria.

It can often be heard in informal conversations that “water is our wealth, the most valuable natural resource that is necessary to protect and preserve for the future.” However, experience shows that the behaviour of our institutions and the Government is far from that. This is confirmed by the latest study published in the scientific journal Conservation Letters, which reports that more than 500 dams are planned to be built around the world in protected areas, mostly for the needs of hydroelectric power plants.

Some of them are also planned in protected areas in Serbia, such as the construction of small hydro power plants (SHPPs) in the Kopaonik National Park, the Golija-Studenica Biosphere Reserve or in the Stara Planina Nature Park. The construction of these projects would irreversibly destroy the most precious natural resources, crucial for human health and nature, sustainable development, drinking water supply, as well as for the prevention of floods and droughts, and many other functions that would not be possible without them. The study also provides an overview of all the harmful effects of river infrastructure construction. Among others, they include the negative impact on local communities and their life activities, such as agriculture, livestock or tourism, on wild species and their habitats, and sediment flows that are crucial for the entire ecosystem, including humans. Knowing that the global population of freshwater vertebrate species has decreased by 83% since 1970 (for which the main causes are the construction of dams, hydroelectric power plants and other infrastructure), it is clear that we must stop harmful projects and strengthen the nature protection sector and international laws and regulations.

It is important to note that Serbia is one of the signatories of the Convention on Biological Diversity, thus committing itself to increasing the area of protected areas to 17%, compared to the current 7.66%. Although the Spatial Plan of the Republic of Serbia proposes areas for protection, it is still not clear what will happen to the proposed locations for the construction of SHPPs, which are within the area yet to come under protection, as well as areas currently in the process of scientific and professional research, such as the Valley of the Great Rzav. Perhaps the best example of these ambiguities are two realized projects in the Nature Park “Zlatibor” or three small hydro power plants built in the area of exceptional features “Kamena Gora”. In these cases, the protection occurred only after these projects were completed, and the extent of the stated damage will only be able to be determined

Preservation of water is a necessary precondition for the development of Serbia and any other country

later.

“Every law or political decision made for the purpose of nature protection must also have an emphasis on the conservation of free-flowing rivers. Protected areas whose role is precisely the conservation of biological diversity and natural habitats should play a crucial role in this, all for the purpose of protection. “We are witnessing that the destruction of nature contributes to losses in other fields, and especially negatively affects the health and safety of people. Therefore, it is important to insist on the application of nature protection laws and stop all projects that do not comply,” concludes Remeta.

Fortunately, there are alternatives that are more acceptable to nature, and are often cheaper than traditional projects such as hydropower. The Government of Serbia should invest more time, attention and funds for research of alternative sources of renewable energy, primarily sun and wind, while stopping incentives for the development of small hydropower plants and banning the implementation of all harmful projects. Only in this way can we protect the most valuable resource of our country - water - and direct the whole society towards a sustainable, greener future.

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