

Debating the Challenges to Restoring Europe's Rivers

On the 27th June, I joined representatives from the European Commission, Member States, NGOs and industry in a workshop debating the challenges to restoring Europe's rivers. The workshop took place on a boat on the River Scheldt and was organised by the UK River Restoration Centre. To promote discussion case studies were presented on the River Scheldt and River Danube.



River Scheldt's ScaldWIN project

The Flemish Environment Agency gave a presentation on the River Scheldt's ScaldWIN project, which is an 8.6million euros Interreg project that aims to achieve Water Framework Directive (WFD) objectives and realise a better quality of surface and groundwater bodies in the Scheldt International River Basin District.

Debating the challenges to restoring Europe's rivers, River Scheldt, Belgium

The scale of the project was impressive, with the Scheldt spanning three countries Belgium, France and Holland, having a catchment area of 36,000 km² and being

home to 12.8 million people. The challenges are considerable with a 100% of the Scheldt's water bodies in Belgium being heavily modified and many being in a poor state.

A number of exemplar projects have been delivered, which include: restoring a river reach through reconnecting old river meanders; overcoming barriers to fish migration; creating sediment ponds with the capacity to trap 6000m² silt; developing a transnational surveillance system and establishing a programme of WFD measures.

International Scheldt Week

In many ways the work mirrors what is being delivered across the UK however, I was particularly impressed by the Flemish Environment Agency (VMM) organising an International Scheldt Week between March 22 to April 1 2013 with Belgian, French and Dutch partners. Participants could choose from a range of activities to enjoy the Scheldt from its source to the sea and by all accounts it was a great success. This initiative was seen as crucial for gaining community and political support for the project. The project also highlighted how Europe's Interreg funding programme is highly suitable for such projects. For more information: <http://www.scaldwin.org/scaldwin-2>



All of the River Scheldt in Belgium is heavily modified

River Danube

On the River Danube considerable successes have been achieved, for example the Joint Danube Survey (JDS) is a superb example of close cooperation in an international river basin. During JDS2, three laboratory ships ensured a consistent approach to monitoring a wide range of parameters: water quality, fish, sediment etc; there was on-board analysis and massive media coverage with a website keeping people regularly updated and informed as the survey progressed: *JDS Logbook Watch Your Danube*. However there is no agreed system for monitoring the Black Sea, which reflects one of the challenges of international cooperation.



Community involvement is vital to gain political support

On the Danube there has been considerable variation in the standards of environmental protection between countries. In the Balkans, considerable money is now being invested to improve sewage treatment works. A whole catchment approach is essential to realise improvements. However to secure ongoing investment it is important that politicians see progress.

Flood protection, navigation and hydropower have a huge impact on the Danube. Cooperation and regulation of these sectors is helping however, principally with the main players. There is a concern that small hydropower schemes are “killing” smaller tributary rivers.

Having experienced recent significant flooding on the Danube, it was felt that now is the time to gain political commitment to giving more space for water and larger scale thinking. On the river’s final 1,000 km, Bulgaria, Moldova, Romania, and Ukraine in 2000 pledged to work together to establish a green corridor covering an area of 11,574 km². It was felt that now is a good time to push for a whole Danube green corridor. In order to do this public support will be needed. NGOs such as WWF have a key role to play in raising the public’s environmental awareness and pushing for such schemes.

Debate and food for thought

With Europe in recession, commitment to restoring our rivers needs to be made by emphasising economic benefits, jobs and ecosystem services. With more erratic weather patterns and climate change river restoration offers opportunities to build environmental resilience reducing flood risk, maintaining water supplies and supporting adaptation to climate change. A more integrated approach is needed. We need lower cost solutions. Land prices are rising rapidly as it’s seen as a safe investment, making river restoration harder to deliver. Industrial and agricultural sectors need to be engaged. The European Water Partnership has developed tools that are designed to deliver for business and the environment.

As you can see there was much food for thought with inspiring ideas coming forward from across Europe; and of course washed down with a Belgium beer!