



Promoting the Benefits of Natura 2000

Border section of the Mur River with the Gamlitz and Gnas
Streams in Styria

AT2213000
Austria





Introduction

Natura 2000 represents the most ambitious initiative yet, in the history of European nature conservation. The aim is to create a European network of biodiversity excellence to ensure the long-term protection of endangered plant and animal species, and threatened natural habitats.

Natura 2000 finds its legal base in the 1979 Birds Directive and the 1992 Habitats Directive, which have to be implemented by the EU Member States as well as all candidate countries.

In addition to protecting biodiversity, Natura 2000 designation may also provide opportunities for the region's economy and local communities. To promote the socio-economic benefits of Natura 2000 and to support better implementation of Natura 2000, IEEP and WWF are running a joint project in 2002. The project is being co-funded by the European Commission, and includes preparation of six local case studies, including this study on the Border section of the Mur

river with the Gamlitz and Gnas Streams. Together, the studies examine actual and potential benefits in proposed Natura 2000 sites in Austria, Belgium, Denmark and Spain, and in Latvia and Estonia. Each study was prepared by WWF national offices, in close partnership with local stakeholders.

The case study "Steirische Grenzmu" was prepared by E.C.O. – The Institute for Ecology, Klagenfurt. The results were discussed during two workshops with representatives from the relevant local authorities, NGOs, local landowners, and stakeholders from the wider local community. Their contributions have informed the case study process, and we would like to thank all participants for their time and thoughts. In particular, we are grateful to individuals that have provided valuable quotes for this report.

Summary

The Natura 2000 site, "Steirische Grenzmur mit Gamlitzbach und Gnasbach" in the lower Mur valley (Steiermark (Styria)/Austria) comprises valuable riverine habitats that are home to a rich flora and fauna. It is the start of a unique 1,000 km floodplain corridor of the Mur, Drava and Danube rivers. The area marks the border between Austria and Slovenia, and is of pan-European importance from an ecological point of view. Measures to conserve the area can only be effective if they involve cross-border cooperation.

Although there has been a strong increase in the number of available jobs, the region as a whole is presently considered "poorly developed". The proportion of commuters is high and employment opportunities are limited. However, sensitive tourism offers opportunities for future economic development. Health and recreational tourism, centred on the hot springs and regional cycling networks, already constitutes a significant source of revenue in the area, and visitor numbers have increased. The number of overnight stays in Bad Radkersburg and the surrounding area, for instance, rose from 8,400 in 1970 to over 400,000 in 2001. The Natura 2000 site offers an opportunity

to develop this niche market further, building on the growing demand for high-quality and sustainable tourism.

The case study confirms that the creation of a Natura 2000 site can be expected to have positive impacts on the economic development of the region. In addition to building on existing tourism activities, there is the possibility of attracting "external" funding into the area. For agriculture, forestry and fishing, the broader impacts will depend on the practical implementation of a management plan that is being drawn up on the basis of a regional partnership process. Similarly, the raw material extraction industry (gravel) may suffer economic losses, but associated measures and strategic planning should help to anticipate and minimise conflicts.

The positive impacts of Natura 2000 designation are mainly to be expected in the tourism and services sectors, and to a lesser extent in agriculture and forestry. The type of economic benefits associated with Natura 2000 will depend on how well the region succeeds in exploiting the opportunities offered. Calculations from other regions, such as the 'Waldviertel', show that it is notably in the poorly developed regions that a positive impetus from Natura 2000 in favour of a long-term sustainable development can be found.



Area map

Natura 2000 along the border section of the Mur River

Site Description

The Natura 2000 site, “*Steirische Grenzmur mit Gamlitzbach und Gnasbach*” is in the southwest of *Steiermark* (Styria). Over a distance of about 34 km, it forms the national border between Austria and Slovenia. In terms of surface area, the largest section along the Mur is in the Radkersburg district (6 municipalities); the two tributaries, Gnas and Gamlitz Stream, are in the Radkersburg, Leibnitz and Feldbach districts (7 municipalities). The Natura 2000 site covers 2,122 ha and includes the second largest stretch of alluvial forest in Austria, an extensive waterway system, as well as productive agricultural land.

The Mur has its source in the Hohen Tauern (Salzburg) and covers a distance of approximately 444 km. For the first 314 km, the river is intersected along its continuum by a total of 28 hydroelectric power stations. At Spielfeld, however, a section of more than 1,000 km stretching via the Drava down to the Danube in Rumania, is free of power stations. This transnational floodplain corridor is of pan-European importance ecologically, and fulfils an important function as a migration path for many threatened animal and plant species.

“The good state of conservation of the site is the result of sustained management by the local population.”
(Franz AUER, Environment Consultant at the Institute for Rural Education, Styria)

Due to continuous interference with the river since the end of the 19th century, the original character of the waters of the *Grenzmur* has

almost completely disappeared. The meandering river, originally 75 to 200 m wide, has been straightened, and diverging ‘branches’ cut off. Since the 1970s, the riverbed has been deepened by as much as 1.2 m. River dredging is part of an ongoing scheme to improve conditions, notably for power stations in the upper and middle reaches of the Mur. This has caused *inter alia* a fall in the water table in the lower Mur Valley, with adverse consequences for the entire alluvial forest ecosystem. Future conservation work in the region will be aimed at halting this process, in order to secure the long-term ecological integrity of the river and its floodplains.

History

The nature conservation authorities in *Steiermark* (Styria) have long been trying to encourage protective measures in the area. As early as 1981, the floodplains of the Mur along the Slovenian border were designated a Rural Conservation Area. They were subsequently also declared a Biogenetic Park under Council of Europe designation.

Given the international importance of the river Mur, a range of designations has been, or is due to be, assigned to the region. Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, Hungary and Serbia are promoting the establishment of a transnational “Mura-Drava-Danube Biosphere Reserve”. The *Steirische Grenzmur* area and adjoining floodplains on the Slovenian side have been designated Important Bird Areas (IBA), and the Slovenian authorities are planning the designation of “Regijski park Mura” Regional Park. Natura 2000 designation is also to be expected

in Slovenia, following EU accession.

Initial discussions about a possible Natura 2000 site on the *Steirische Grenzmur* commenced as early as 1995, following Austria's entry into the EU. However, regional representatives were highly sceptical about a European site. Apart from basic objections to excessive nature protection measures, the authorities were particularly concerned that Natura 2000 would not solve the prevalent problems of the region. As a consequence, the site was not nominated for Natura 2000 designation until 2001, following a prolonged consultation process. Since then, however, the implementation of conservation measures and the involvement of landowners in the preparation of a management plan have led to a change of attitude.

Site Projects

During the 1994 to 1999 period, a comprehensive EU funded (Interreg IIa) project on the ecology of the riverine ecosystems was successfully completed. The "*Lower Mur Valley Habitat*" project had been initiated prior to Natura 2000 nomination. Key conservation measures and management priorities for the restoration of the ecological functionality of the river and its floodplain forests were drawn up in close cooperation with project partners in Slovenia.

During the current programming period (2000 to 2006), the basic management proposals are being implemented in a follow-up Interreg project, entitled the "Lower Mur Valley Actions".

Site Context

The river Mur and the adjacent floodplains are key features of the border region. In addition to the popular hot spring resort of Bad Radkersburg, the landscape and its natural wealth form the basis for growth in tourism in the area.

The Mur is also vital for the region's water resources. High-quality ground water reserves are an essential resource, not just for the local area.

Until the 1990s, the *Grenzmur* separated two fundamentally different political systems. The border has since become politically less important and cross-border cooperation with Slovenia is gaining in significance. The "Standing Austrian-Slovenian Commission for the Mur" is working towards the transnational harmonisation of water resource strategies. Importantly, it has been recognized that the impact of river dredging and associated threats to ground water supplies and alluvial forests can only be solved if the two countries co-operate closely.

"For the conservation of the cross-border wildlife corridor 'Mur', close cooperation between the Slovenian and Austrian nature conservation authorities is desirable "
(Simona KALIGARIC, Slovenian Nature Conservation Authority representative)

Overview of site diversity

Nature

The system of waterways and the priority alder and ash alluvial forests of the river Mur provide a valuable retreat for a large number of threatened animal and plant species. These include the kingfisher, black stork and Eurasian otter. As part of the transnational Mur-Drava-Danube floodplain complex, the riverine landscape of the *Grenzmur*, makes an essential contribution to maintaining this situation in the long term.

Environment

The riverine ecosystem of the *Grenzmur* is important for the management of water resources in the entire region, especially in terms of flood protection and the long-term security of ground water resources. This is key to guaranteeing supplies of freshwater for drinking and irrigation. Dredging of the Mur's riverbed thus has widespread negative impacts. Ecologically sound, structural changes to the *Grenzmur* would benefit the riverine and floodplain forest ecosystem and would be likely to secure quality ground water resources.

Site usage

Existing land uses in the area include agriculture, forestry, hunting and fishing, as well as "sensitive" tourism. The creation of the Natura 2000 site will support practices which are in agreement with local habitats. The preservation of the alluvial forests, for instance, will protect the quality of the landscape as a basis for tourism in the region.

Local employment

Despite an increase in tourism activity, the region remains an economically less advantaged

area. Natura 2000 can be expected to have small, yet clearly positive, impacts on regional wealth creation, and thus on employment. Natura 2000 may therefore help to stabilise existing job opportunities.

Participation

The complex challenges of the *Grenzmur* region require close co-operation between all relevant specialist disciplines and the participation of a wide range of interested parties, notably the Slovenian neighbours. Such co-operation is increasingly common, and has for instance been demonstrated in the "Lower Mur Valley Habitat" project. In addition, the activities of the "Standing Austrian-Slovenian Commission for the Mur" promote cross-border initiatives in accordance with the "Basic Concept for the *Grenzmur* Water Resource". The drawing up of a management plan offers another opportunity to involve landowners and managers more closely, and requires communication and cooperation with the Slovenia authorities.

Activities on the Steirische Grenzmur

The area of alluvial forest is mainly used for extensive forestry, hunting and fishing; the economic importance of these sectors is minor. In contrast, gravel extraction is an important source of income for the region. However, gravel mining is commonly thought to conflict with the objectives of Natura 2000, notably in relation to the enlargement or opening of gravel pits. Possible ways of anticipating and solving conflicts need to be developed and assessed in pilot studies.

Recently, agricultural practices in the *Grenzmur* region have

undergone significant changes, given the greater specialisation and intensification of the sector. Favourable production conditions allow intensive maize and cereal cultivation, pig and chicken farming, viticulture and vegetable cropping (pumpkin). Maize cultivation in particular has increased considerably in recent decades (see Fig. 1), causing environmental problems locally. Often, intensively farmed land runs alongside sensitive habitats and adjacent to the Natura 2000 site. In some instances, productive agricultural land even lies within the Natura 2000 site.



Fig. 1: The strong increase in maize cultivation in recent decades has had far-reaching ecological consequences. (Radkersburg district: change in maize-planted areas between 1969 and 1999).

Apart from agriculture, tourism plays a particularly important role in the region. Past investments in the tourism sector have proven to be effective: in 1970 for example 8,400 overnight stays were recorded in the municipalities of Bad Radkersburg and the surrounding area; in 1999 this increased to 260,200. By 2001, this figure had grown forty-fold, to over 400,000 (see Fig. 2). The local hot springs, the natural beauty of the landscape, the network of cycle paths and the variety of leisure facilities (e.g. the ship mill at Mureck and canoe tours), as well as the well-developed range of catering facilities form the basis for this growth.

The general trend towards short breaks and the increasing importance of health and recreational tourism indicate a continuation of this positive trend.



Fig. 2: In the last few years, municipalities - especially those close to the border - have recorded a positive growth in tourism. (Radkersburg District: Growth in the number of overnight stays between 1970 and 1999).

“The health offering and the beautiful landscape are the prime reasons for spending a holiday in the region”
(CIMA Stadtmarketing, visitors’ poll 2002)

Ecological Benefits

The Natura 2000 site, “*Steirische Grenzmur mit Gamlitzbach und Gnasbach*”, makes a significant contribution to the conservation of the following Annex I habitat types of European importance (as listed in the Habitats Directive):

- Alluvial forests with alder and ash (91E0), priority habitats
- Hardwood alluvial forests with common oak, elm and ash (91F0)
- Common oak or oak-hornbeam forests (9160)
- Oligotrophic to mesotrophic standing waters with vegetation of the *Littorelletea* (3130)
- Naturally eutrophic lakes with riparian vegetation (3150)

- Infertile lowland/hay meadows (6510)
- *Molinia* meadows on calcareous, peaty or clayey-silt-laden soils (6410)
- Rivers with muddy banks (3270)

In addition, the area has an important function as a breeding ground, feeding habitat and transit area for numerous specially protected animal species:

- 13 Annex I species of the Birds Directive, e.g. Little bittern (*Ixobrychus minutus*), Black stork (*Ciconia nigra*), White stork (*Ciconia ciconia*), kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*), middle spotted woodpecker (*Picoides medius*), red-backed shrike (*Lanius collurio*);
- 26 animal species listed in Annex II of the Habitats Directive
- 6 mammalian species, e.g. Greater horseshoe bat (*Rhinolophus ferrum-equinum*) and Eurasian otter (*Lutra lutra*)
- 3 amphibian species, including the Alpine crested newt (*Triturus cristatus*) and the Yellow-bellied toad (*Bombina orientalis*);
- 14 fish species, e.g. Ukrainian brook lamprey (*Eudontomyzon mariae*), Danube salmon (*Hucho hucho*), Pigo (*Rutilus rutilus*), Loach (*Misgurnus fossilis*)
- 3 invertebrates, including the Common river mussel (*Unio crassus*) and Stag beetle (*Lucanus cervus*)



The Eurasian otter also uses the course of the river Mur as a natural migration path (H.Glader/WWF-A)

Ecosystem Services

In addition to harbouring significant biodiversity, the Mur floodplains provide a number of key ecological functions. The riverine ecosystems play a vital role in supporting regional water

supplies – influencing hydrology beyond national borders. The Lower Mur Valley represents one of the few catchment areas in Steiermark where ground water stocks still provide freshwater supplies of a sufficiently high quality and quantity to be of

importance beyond the local area. The filtration and replenishment of freshwater supplies is facilitated by an intact alluvial forest and floodplain ecosystem.

In addition to the long-term preservation of ground water stocks for the provision of drinking water and freshwater for irrigation, the floodplains constitute a significant natural flood prevention and control system. By absorbing water resources quickly and releasing excess water slowly, the alluvial forests can act as a natural buffer. These ecosystem services can help to minimise expenditure on water purification and supply, irrigation systems and flood prevention systems. Floodplains and alluvial forests also influence local and regional climate patterns. Their ability to 'absorb' seasonal temperature changes as well as their capacity to affect local humidity has significant consequence amongst others for agriculture.

Maintaining the coherence and functionality of the ecological systems in the Mur Valley increasingly requires transnational co-operation between Austria and Slovenia. The "Standing Austrian-Slovenian Commission for the Mur", in accordance with the "Basic Concept for the Grenzmur Water Resource", is already taking this forward.

"The rehabilitation of the ecological functions in the Border Mura is the best guarantee for the long term protection and security of ground water stocks and the continued quality and quantity of these valuable fresh water resources"
(Alexander MAJCAN, Director of the Radkersburg's Water Supplier Association)

Ecosystem services are, however, being compromised in a number of ways.

Threats

- The river Mur forms a natural backbone in the rich alluvial landscape. Due to human intervention, however, the course of the river has been subjected to considerable change. Large-scale interference with the river's natural flow and the disruption of sedimentation patterns by power stations, have had significant negative ecological effects. The continued dredging of the riverbed changes the dynamics of the alluvial forest habitats by reducing the frequency of flooding, by reducing the amount of floodplain waters, and by causing a drop in water levels. Regulation of the river's currents causes a loss of key riverine habitats, such as gravel banks and oxbows. This further prevents the natural regeneration of alluvial forests.

"The unique alluvial forest habitats suffer from a drop in ground water table! Conservation measures are urgently needed."
(Andreas Buchberger, Forest official of the Authority of Radkersburg)

- Due to inappropriate forest management, notably the thinning and re-forestation of existing habitats with spruce or hybrid poplar, many alluvial forest habitats have suffered significant change.
- Agriculture, some of which has been intensive (esp. maize

cultivation) using pesticides and fertilisers, has led to pollution of ground and surface water.

- Fishing adversely affects aquatic ecosystems, notably through the artificial damming and dredging of the oxbows
- The pressure to extend and add to existing gravel pits is high in many areas.

It is therefore, and as a matter of urgency, important to introduce appropriate management measures.



Opportunities for Nature

Designation as a Natura 2000 site can do much for the long-term preservation and improvement of the area's characteristic habitats and species, and its ecological functions.

- Measures aimed at improving the river's structural integrity should be a priority for the site. For the preservation of a near-natural alluvial forest ecosystem, a more natural water flow is a prerequisite. This is where European nature conservation interests coincide most closely with regional requirements. A number of small pilot projects aimed at improving the ground water resources of the alluvial landscape have already been implemented under the "Lower Mur Valley" project (Interreg IIa) (e.g. shaping of the Mühl Stream between Mureck and Bad Radkersburg). Larger-scale ecologically orientated structural implementation steps for the river are planned, particularly under the "Lower Mur Actions" project (Interreg IIIa). Measures include the widening of the river to stabilise the riverbed, improving natural sedimentation patterns and structural integrity, and the interlinking of waterways.
- In addition to these proposed ecological improvements, the main focus, notably of the future management plan, is on securing and promoting land uses that are appropriate for the habitat:
- Alluvial forest: preservation and promotion of a good diversity of endemic tree species, enabling the regeneration of a near-natural ecosystem.
- Agricultural land: preservation of traditional farming practices (meadows) and development of extensive farming areas.

- Waterways: facilitation of a more natural hydrological system and ecologically sustainable stocking measures for fisheries.
- Gravel extraction: ensuring that extraction in sensitive areas is in accordance with the protection objectives of Natura 2000. This applies to the opening of new gravel pits and to the extension of existing ones.

area, using targeted information material.

“The management plan provides an important opportunity to set sustainable targets for the improvement of the alluvial habitats of the Mur; and to do so in consultation with local landowners.”
 (Andrea KRAPF-NOGRASEK,
 Representative of the Styrian nature conservation authority)

The drafting of the management plan is to begin before the end of 2002. The process should ensure co-operation with landowners, users and other stakeholder representatives. Moreover, it is important to promote the European importance of the floodplain landscape amongst the local population and visitors to the



Rehabilitated: This could become the view of the *Steirische Grenzmur* once more. Natural section of the river Mur on the Slovenian-Croatian border (© A. Mohl/WWF-A)

Opportunities for the Economy

General effects

The Natura 2000 designation has positive implications for the development of the regional economy. The impacts of conservation measures are generally over-estimated. The range of concerns, including optimistic to pessimistic views, was investigated as part of this study. An opportunities and risks model, as shown in Fig. 3, emerged from the discussions, basic research and expert knowledge. Three scenarios emerged:

- Only positive impacts are possible: In tourism, by “tapping” into promotional opportunities or by creating the technical basis and materials for PR work; all activities related to Natura 2000 have positive impacts on the regional economy.
- Both positive and negative impacts are possible: In agriculture and forestry, and in fishing, minor economic impacts are to be expected. They depend on the actions and compensatory measures taken, but the overall outcome will be slightly positive.
- At best no impacts: There might be economic losses in the gravel extraction industry, but they can be avoided if

associated measures are introduced and if conflicts are avoided through strategic planning.

Because the potential for positive impacts is larger than the potential for negative impacts, it is anticipated that Natura 2000 designation will have a small but overall positive influence on the growth of the regional economy. This tallies with the estimations from other Natura 2000 sites in Austria. It is also evident that active regional participation can reinforce the positive impacts and mitigate any negative effects. The following points should be respected:

- Inclusion of the Natura 2000 Conservation site in local and regional models, development strategies and planning.
- Involvement of local firms in planning, supervising and implementing the actions to be undertaken.
- Transparent systems for participation and information of all interested parties.

*“Natura 2000 provides opportunities, which have to be seized by the Region.”
(Josef PINTERITSCH, Mayor of Bad Radkersburg district)*

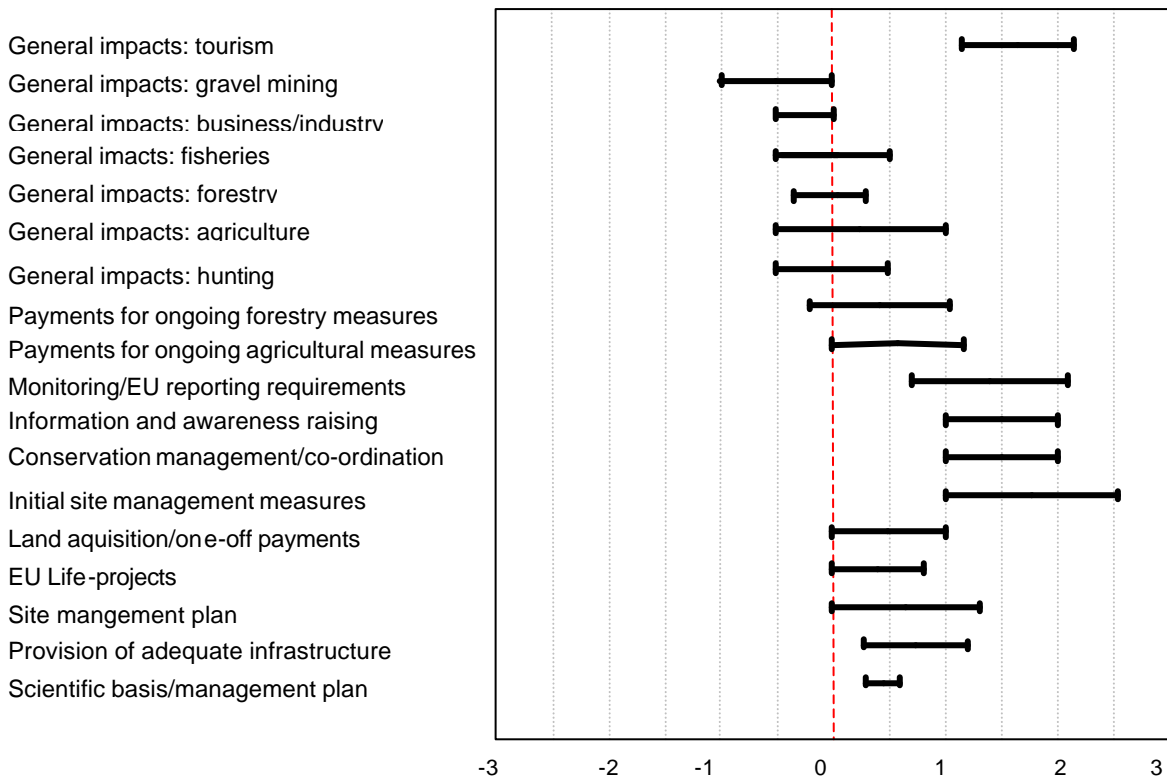


Fig. 3: Some of the opportunities and risks associated with Natura 2000 designation of the *Grenzmur*. The bars represent the range of impacts Natura 2000 is expected to exert on the regional economy - from very negative (-3), to neutral (0) and very positive (+3).

Direct benefits for tourism

The region is already being marketed successfully as a place for rural relaxation and health tourism. Designation as a European conservation site does not conflict with these objectives. Rather, additional tourism facilities (information centres, nature trails, exhibitions etc) can be developed and made accessible to people who visit the region for the hot springs, walking or cycling. Moreover, these facilities can promote cross-border initiatives in the context of the transnational biosphere reserve "Mur-Drau-Donau" (e.g. the transnational cycling path Mur-Drau, and cross-border initiatives and culture-trails promoting cultural exchange). Given the region's national importance for white stork populations, it may be feasible to combine species and tourism interests. One possibility, for instance, is branding the region as an "Important White Stork Area",

attracting additional visitors with a specialised interest and raising awareness at local "stork festivals", etc.

Indirectly, initiatives to support experience and learning can entice visitors to the region and thus help increase wealth creation.

*"For the tourism sector and and lokal marketing Natura 2000 is expected to provide benefits".
(Josef SOMMER, Director 'Parktherme Bad Radkersburg')*

Direct benefits through incentives

The EU is making a considerable amount of funding available to support nature conservation (e.g. through LIFE funding). In Austria, €60 million have been made available in the last five years for LIFE projects. In addition, the Structural Funds, agricultural support (e.g. the "Nature

Conservation Plan” under ÖPUL – the Austrian agri-environment programme) or the development of cross-border co-operation initiatives (Interreg) all offer significant funding opportunities.

Interreg III is highly compatible with Natura 2000 (one of its priorities is nature conservation), but eligibility is not dependent on Natura 2000 designation. An Interreg IIa project was successfully concluded in the Mur region – the “Lower Mur Valley Habitat” project. The project had a total budget of approximately €2.6 million. It was aimed at the development of a set of basic principles, developed in 17 individual projects involving habitat and land use mapping, forest mapping, fish ecology investigations, etc.

Associated measures in the Slovenian border region were financed under PHARE Cross Border Co-operation (CBC).

A follow-up project running until 2006, “Lower Mur Actions” (Interreg IIIa), is aimed at the implementation of measures for the improvement of the ecological integrity of the riverine landscapes. Approximately €3.2 million is being spent on measures in the alluvial forests and on measures to improve the structural integrity of the Mur, its tributaries and neighbouring water bodies (Spielfelder Mühlkanal, Rinnensystem, Grabenlandbäche). A further €400,000 is being allocated to the development of a Natura 2000 site management plan and its initial implementation. The “Oak Galleries” and “Extensive Meadows” projects have already been funded under contractual nature conservation agreements.

“Natura 2000 offers the possibility to attract additional EU project funding“.
(Andreas BREUSS, land owner in the Natura 2000 site)

Indirect benefits

The designation and/or creation of a Natura 2000 site, “*Steirische Grenzmur*”, can also be expected to have indirect impacts on the growth of the regional economy. They are difficult to quantify, but should not be ignored.

- Multiplier effects from major investments and ongoing funding: Through Natura 2000, funds come into the region “from outside”. They can be fed into the regional treasury, at least to a certain extent, and thus improve regional wealth creation. These possibilities are far from exhausted in the case of the “*Steirische Grenzmur*” site.
- Synergies with tourism strategies: in the *Grenzmur* region, an official “Natural Area of European Importance” fits in well with the plans for tourism. It will therefore be possible to improve the degree of recognition of the region and its range of facilities in the longer term.
- Synergies with agricultural direct marketing and regional labelling: There are many examples where the fact that a product comes from an ecologically valuable area is seen as positive by the consumer. The Natura 2000 site might therefore also provide support for the development and marketing of regional products (e.g. pumpkin).

Costs

The costs of setting up and maintaining the Natura 2000 site cannot be fully estimated at present. However, the first investments are already foreseeable.

Structural alterations to the river (Interreg IIIa)	€ 3,200,000
Management plan and initial implementation (Interreg IIIa)	€ 400,000
Routine measures, nature conservation under the agreement	Not yet decided

Future economic development

For decades, the region was characterised by its peripheral position along the national border. This border is losing its significance and the region is now moving in a new direction. It is no accident that sustainable development of the river area is one of the first tasks to be tackled jointly by the two countries.

Employment effects

The unemployment rate in the Radkersburg district is approximately 7%. The main characteristics of the labour market are its strong seasonality, high youth unemployment and a marked decrease in civil service jobs. The proportion of commuters in the region is considerable.

Direct benefits

Only slight direct employment opportunities are to be expected from the creation of the Natura 2000 site, although it might be possible to create a post for coordination, information and project development.

Indirect benefits

If regional wealth creation is improved by Natura 2000 (see above), positive employment effects can be expected. It is most likely that these will come from the tourism and service sectors, in connection with ecotourism leisure facilities for

instance (Mill on the Mur at Mureck, canoe tours, etc.). Positive impacts are also possible in relation to agriculture and forestry.

Rural and Regional Growth Benefits

Site context

A strong increase (60%) in jobs has been recorded in the region in the last few years – especially in tourism based on the hot springs and associated health tourism. Nonetheless, the region as a whole must be described as “poorly developed”: A high proportion of jobs are in agriculture and forestry, there are few employees in the service sector and generally a poor job supply. One third of all employees commute out of the area; the number is on the increase. There are poor connections with public transport. The “migration” of civil service posts (Post Office, Ministry of Finance, etc.) is causing difficulties in the area.

“Tourism accompanied by trade” is considered a source of optimism. In the longer term, a new centre for economic activities and innovations is to be developed by the twin towns of Bad Radkersburg and Gornja Radgona. The Natura 2000 site is essentially limited to the river area and carries little potential for conflict with this forward-looking plan.

Contributing to sustainable growth

Growth is sustainable when it takes into account long-term ecological, economic and social needs. The future management of the Natura 2000 site is capable of becoming the backbone of a lasting or sustainable development of the region.

Existing and future benefits
A study, funded by the Austrian National Bank, showed that Natura 2000 is capable of triggering, or at

least supporting, positive economic development, especially in “peripheral” poorly-developed areas. Natura 2000 could have long-term economic benefits for the region “Steirische Grenzmuur“, in the following ways:

- Attracting public funding to the region;
- Creating synergy with key economic objectives, especially relating to tourism;
- Providing a focal point for cross-border cooperation;
- Stimulating organic farming and the marketing of agricultural products through the use of Natura 2000 branding;
- Safeguarding water resources for the whole region; and
- Preservation and development of a functioning landscape and natural area of European importance.

“Natural alluvial forests, reintegrated oxbows, a diversity of islands and gravel banks, rich fisheries, a bird paradise, bathing people along the river banks, regional organic produce, secured freshwater supplies, greater connectivity and integrity – this could be a reality for the Grenzmuur under Natura 2000”.
(Günther LUTSCHINGER, Director WWF Austria)

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