

The Campaign to Save the Danube River

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Greeting you on behalf of the Duna Kör I'd like to cite a story more than two and half hundred years old which had happened to Gulliver's host in Lagado: "He had a very convenient mill turned by a current from a large river, and sufficient for his own family as well as a great number of his tenants. That about seven years ago a club of projectors came to aim with proposals to destroy this mill, and build another on the side of that mountain, on the long ridge whereof a long canal must be cut for a repository of water, to be conveyed up by pipes and engines to supply the mill... The water descending down a declivity would turn the mill with half the current of a river whose course is more upon a level. He sad, that being then not very well with the court, and pressed by many of his friends, he complied with the proposal; and after employing an hundred men for two years, the work miscarried, the projectors went off, laying the blame entirely upon him, railing at him ever since, and putting others upon the same experiment, with equal assurance of success, as well as equal disappointment."

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Since that time zealous projectors have been diligently transforming nature; their marks can be found on the rivers Volga, the Nile and the Tennessee as well as on the Waitaki River in New-Zealand. There are several serious consequences, for example the Caspian Sea in the USSR is shrinking irresistibly, the schistosomiasis spread in Egypt and fish population decreased at the mouth of the Nile, the land alongside the Rhine in Baden province has dried out.

The matter of the projectors and their high protectors is going to be more and more difficult: they encounter people living alongside the rivers, who strongly defend the values of their homelands.

Still their defence remains usually unsuccessful. The indebted Brash has wasted billions of dollars on the Itaipu Dam, the reservoir of which will be silted up within a reasonable time. The Victoria Dam in Sri Lanka is under construction with British financial "help", destroying 7000 acres of fertile land only for 210 megawatts. Bavaria is to complete the construction of the Rhine-Main-Danube Canal at any price.

On the other hand the Chico Dam project in the Philippines was suspended after massive local resistance to protect tribal lands. In the USSR, Zaligin, a Russian writer and engineer, has successfully initiated the prevention of constructing a useless and

harmful barrage on the lower section of the River Ob. Moreover, Austrian environmentalists recently defended the Danubian forests at Hamburg with their own bodies in the full sense of the word.

In order to protect Danubian environment and its benefits, our group, the Duna Kör participates in the opposition against a large hydroelectric power plant system Gabcikovo Nagymaros. This project consists a 60 k storage lake, a 30 km long concrete covered lateral canal rising up 18 meters over the ground at a peak power station of Gabcikovo and an additional river power plant of Nagymaros, in the lovely Danube-bend.

The project would essentially change the hydraulic, physical chemical and biological conditions of a nearly two hundred kilometer long section of the river itself and also of the surrounding groundwater. These changes also that would be harmful to drinking water supply, the quality of river and ground water, agriculture, forests, fish as well as the picturesque landscape. The project has been planned some decades ago only to produce maximum energy and to increase excessively waterway capacity, unrequired by the heaviest traffic imaginable on this section of the river. In addition this would be relatively the most expensive electric power plant built in Hungary, and twice as much energy could be saved at the same price if money were spent on rationalizing energy consumption. The project has become a perfect nonsense taking its harmful ecological consequences into consideration. The question of drinking water supply has enormous importance because of its generally serious situation in Hungary and also in Slovakia.

Of Hungary's 3,500 settlements 1,500 have no potable water. Two and a half million people living in these regions get their drinking water supply in plastic bags or tank carts or short of these some have to make up with contaminated water.

By diversion of 97.5 per cent of mean flow rate of the river to the sealed side canal Czechoslovakia and Hungary will lose per definitionem essential bank filtered water resources of estimated 2.5 million m³/day capacity and that of excellent quality. A significant part of this resource is officially registered in Hungary as a long-range reserve enough to supply three million people at least. Furthermore the estimated 13 km³ potable water stored in the deep alluvial sediment would be gradually polluted as of the diversion of the river terminates the continuous supply of this treated underground reservoir by large amounts of filtered Danube waters which dilutes and removes polluting materials originating from agriculture, industry and households. In the reach of the other barrage of Nagymaros the bank filtered water resources would be endangered by the up silt of the river bed. Austrian and Yugoslav experiences of Danubia barrages suggest the deterioration of water quality as well as significant decrease in water producing capacity. The enclosed materials give more detailed information on these symptoms.

Unfortunately these and similar other aspects have been completely omitted from the decision passed on building this hydroelectric power plant system. One explanation for this may be historical. The political and technical archetype of the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros project is the so-called Grand Alsatian Canal on the border section of the Rhine between France and Germany. It has to be noted that due to the environmental damages France gave up her exceptional rights to this canal included in the Versailles Peace Treaty. The construction of the canal had been stopped in the fifties half way between Basel and Strasbourg.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we regard the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros project to be a historical mistake from political and social politics of view and last but not least from the aspect of the ecological, role the Danube plays. We regard decisive Austrian participants whereby they would according to plans receive energy at the cost of harming the environment of neighbouring countries to be yet another historical mistake.

The Duna Kör agrees with the opinion of the Presidency of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences which in 1983 proposed to stop the project. We also agree with the 1985 proposal of the Academy to carry out the economical analysis before the final decision-making. Its environmental consequences first of all on drinking water resources should be considered of course.

The Duna Kör will continue its work to protect the Danube. This Award will effectively help us, since we are going to spend the money on support environmental studies on the issue. For the time being we shall not draw the sum since the Duna Kör has not yet got guarantees to spend it in its own name. We shall naturally provide information on the outcome of discussions to this end.

Thank you.

János Vargha

Source: János Vargha, "Speech at the Right Livelihood Awards," speech, December 9, 1985, Right Livelihood Foundation, <http://www.rightlivelihood.org> (accessed June 15, 2007).