

Slovakians restore wetlands despite WWF obstruction

by Alexander Hartmann

In 1977, the governments of Hungary and Czechoslovakia agreed to build a lateral canal 40 kilometers in length and two power plants on the Danube River at Gabčíkovo, Slovakia, and Nagymaros, Hungary. Nine years later, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF, now the World Wide Fund for Nature) launched a campaign against “the destruction of the last floodplain wetlands in Central Europe,” instigating resistance against the project, especially in Hungary.

According to the time-honored imperial principle of “divide and rule,” the WWF, whose head is Britain’s Prince Philip, has sought to inflame this controversy between Slovakia and Hungary, rather than permit a solution that would be in the interest of the economic development of both nations.

In 1989—before the Iron Curtain came down—the Hungarian Parliament decided to abrogate the treaty with Czechoslovakia, claiming that the environmental damage the project would cause entitled Hungary to terminate it, despite the fact that the treaty had a clause stating it could be terminated only by agreement of the governments involved. At that point, the construction projects needed for the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros plan on Slovak territory had already been 95% completed.

After negotiations had broken down, Czechoslovakia decided to provisionally complete the projects on its territory unilaterally, which meant a change in its design to avoid the use of Hungarian territory. On Oct. 24, 1992, Prague blocked ship traffic on the Danube River near Bratislava. A weir in the river was hastily erected near Cunovo (see map with *Documentation*). A few days later, ship traffic was directed into the canal, and the huge water power plant at Gabčíkovo became

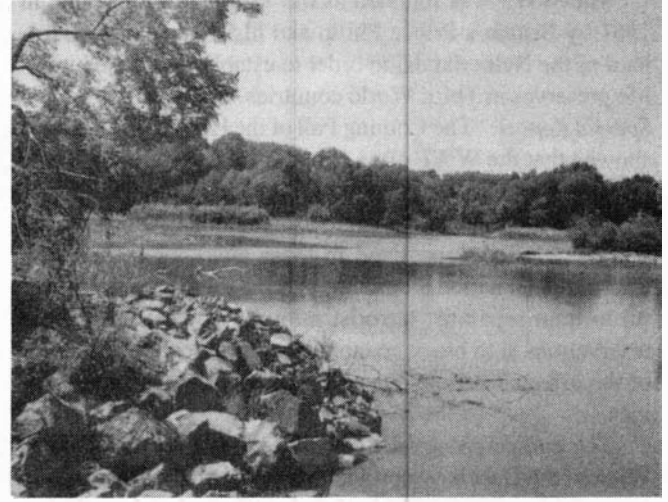
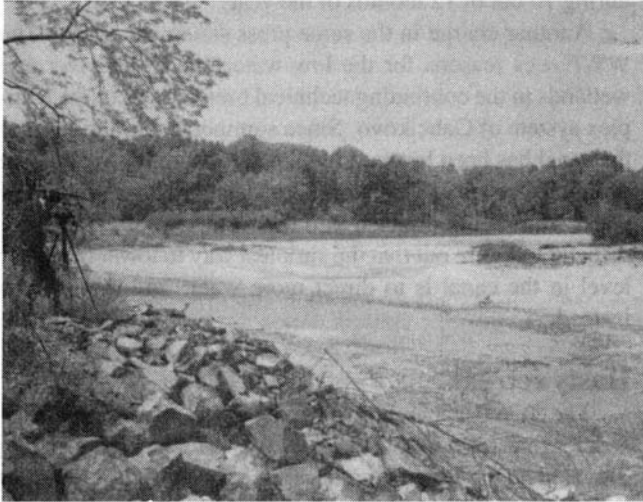
operational, producing 10% of Slovakia’s electricity.

Protests rained in from international “environmental organizations,” most prominently the WWF, which deplored the “destruction of the invaluable Danube wetlands.” The Hungarian government charged Slovakia with “stealing Hungary’s water.”

Persistent drop in water levels

The Czechoslovak government—and, after 1992, its successor in the Slovak Republic—argued that it is exactly the ongoing destruction of these wetlands, caused by a steady decrease of surface and groundwater levels, which makes it necessary to build “Gabčíkovo,” as the project became known. Since the 1950s, the average water level of the Danube has gone down by about 5 feet. One of the reasons was that the amount of sediments carried by the river decreased from 300-400,000 tons annually to 100,000 tons annually, after weirs and dams had been built on the Danube and its tributaries in Germany and Austria. Another reason for the sinking water levels was the regulation of the main branch of the river, straightening it and blocking the entrances to side branches in order to increase the water level in the main branch for ship traffic. This led to a greater velocity in the water flow, causing the river to dig more and more deeply into the ground. A third reason was that a lot of gravel had been dredged from the river bottom, both to ensure ship traffic and to obtain construction material.

In any case, the lowering of the water levels had to be stopped. In the Bratislava area, where the river had dug in deepest, the foundations of bridges and buildings close to the



Before and after: On the left, a branch of the Danube had almost completely dried up. A little more than a year after the Gabčíkovo project went into operation in 1992, the branch has refilled and remains filled year round. The main objections to a technological project to provide hydroelectric power and restore the Danube's inland delta come from Prince Philip's World Wide Fund for Nature.

waterfront were threatened. The Danube wetlands farther downstream suffered greatly from the lowered water levels.

The level of the groundwater decreased, affecting the drinking water supply. The two biggest side branches of the Danube—Moson Danube and Small Danube—carried more sewage than water for most of the year, when the water level in the main branch was too low to overflow the barriers safeguarding the shipping route.

The Gabčíkovo Commission's report

The Hungarian and Slovak governments agreed to leave the decision about what to do to the International Court at The Hague. A commission led by European Union experts was created to monitor developments in the wetlands and to recommend measures.

In December 1993, the commission issued a report documenting the following facts: At present, 400 m³/sec, or about 20% of the former amount of water, flows into the old river, while on the Moson Danube and the Small Danube, the water flow is now guaranteed year round and in greater volume than before the weir was constructed. At Bratislava, the water level has returned to the level of the 1950s, that is, 1-2 meters higher than before, while immediately downstream from the weir, it is now 2-4 meters lower. In May 1993, when special facilities became operational which directed water into the branch system of the Danube on the left (Slovak) bank of the old river, the mud covering the bottom of these branches was flushed away, enabling the water to filter into the groundwater much more easily. This is not the case on the right (Hungarian) bank of the old river, because the water flow into the side branches is insufficient.

After the weir was built, the groundwater level temporarily dropped for the first six months. It has now returned to the old level, and in some cases has risen more than 2 meters above the pre-construction level. Groundwater quality has not been affected measurably. Because the groundwater level rose over a large area, water use for irrigation could be decreased by 25% in these areas. The wetland forests on Slovak territory have recovered visibly.

The commission recommended doubling the amount of water directed into the main branch and the Moson and Small Danube, and constructing underwater weirs in the main branch of the river to increase the amount of water getting into the branch system of the interior delta on the Hungarian side. Technical measures were proposed to ensure free fish passage between the main and the side branches.

Thus, in general, the commission endorsed the proposals of the Slovakian engineers, and refuted the argument of the Hungarian government that the Gabčíkovo project would necessarily cause irreparable harm to the wetlands. In fact, the commission documented what the Slovak government had claimed all along: that the whole project was a boon to the environment and to the economy. Indeed, Vodohospodarska Vystavba, the Slovakian government-run company that constructed and operates the Gabčíkovo facility, after spending two years defending themselves against the charge that they had destroyed nature, can now rightly claim that they "saved the Danube wetlands."

The WWF responds

Of course, the WWF could not let this go unanswered. Since 1986, it had been active against the project. Now, all

its propaganda was demonstrated to be baseless.

The WWF was founded as the World Wildlife Fund in 1961 by Britain's Prince Philip and his friend Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands, in order to establish so-called wildlife preserves in Third World countries. *EIR's* Oct. 28, 1994 *Special Report*, "The Coming Fall of the House of Windsor," showed that the WWF often chooses areas as future wildlife preserves, not so much to protect plant or animal species living in the area, but in order to exert colonialist control over the natural resources found in these areas, or because the areas straddle national borders, making them especially useful to train separatist terrorist militias. The effect of these reservations is to block economic and political development of the affected nations, as an instrument of British geopolitics.

The campaign against Gabčíkovo fits into this pattern: Without the Gabčíkovo project, shipping on the Danube, the major infrastructure corridor between central and southeastern Europe, was increasingly endangered; Slovakia, which currently produces about 10% of its electricity from the Gabčíkovo power plant, would be dependent on far more expensive (and polluting) coal or oil, controlled by Anglo-American oil companies owned, in part, by the British Crown; there was even a potential border conflict between Slovakia and Hungary, since roughly 500,000 ethnic Hungarians live in Slovakia in the vicinity of the power plant. On the other hand, it was impossible to save the Danube wetlands, as long as ship traffic on the main branch of the Danube had to be safeguarded.

Now, the WWF had egg on its face. Slovakia had proven that the project had benefitted the wetlands. The WWF expressed its regret that in Hungary, voices favoring "short-term technical solutions to amend the situation," i.e., a compromise with Slovakia, were being raised. On Jan. 31, 1994, the WWF responded to the EU commission's report with its own a 20-page statement, "A New Solution for the Danube," charging that the EU's positive conclusions were unfounded. The Slovakian and Hungarian agencies had not provided complete data, complained the WWF, continuing that, in reality, groundwater quality had declined, and "the Danube diversion and operation of Gabčíkovo will inevitably result in detrimental alterations of the wetland and adjacent areas."

The WWF relies on western journalists who accept the WWF's claims without checking their facts. A press statement by the WWF-Austria reads: "Since even a cubic meter of water will return a profit for the operators of the power plant, these 4,000 hectares of wetland area are being degraded to an experimental field for minimal amounts of water." But if somebody says the WWF is misrepresenting facts, this is discounted as "inappropriate polemics."

In its press statement, the WWF claims that in the hot summers, only 20 m³/sec of water had been directed into the tributaries of the Danube. In fact, before 1992, exactly

0 m³/sec of water had been directed into these tributaries during 10 out of 12 months of the year!

Another charge in the same press statement reads: "The WWF sees reasons for the low waterflow in the river and wetlands in the continuing technical breakdowns of the complex system of Gabčíkovo. Since summer, the water level in the canal has been lowered by 2 meters, in order to carry out protracted repairs. This alone prevents a greater amount of water from being directed into the wetlands." It is not very difficult to figure out that the simplest way to lower the water level in the canal is to direct more water into the Danube instead.

Hasty retreat

The WWF apparently did not expect much more than a defensive response. But Prof. Igor Mucha, representing Slovakia on the expert commission, issued a 130-page report calling the WWF's bluff, refuting its charges point by point. Mucha stated that it was ridiculous for the WWF to first boast that it had fought for years "against the water construction lobby," and then to claim to represent an "independent" view of the matter. Mucha cited the WWF's statement that "especially along the Danube up- and downstream from Dobrohost, the groundwater level was not raised, but lowered by up to 2 meters due to the river diversion." He commented: "We are speechless. This is a complete negation of all measurements." He then proceeded to list a number of locations in the area named, where the higher water levels can be seen by anyone. Is one to believe that the WWF "accidentally" made this crass "mistake"?

The WWF decided to retreat until the dust had settled. Dr. Magnus Sylven, director of the WWF program for Europe and the Middle East, wrote to Mucha: "I would like to tell you how impressed I am with your work, and how embarrassed I personally feel about WWF's past involvement. . . . The director general of WWF-International, Dr. Claude Martin, [and I] have both agreed to immediately stop all further involvement with WWF-Austria. Dr. Martin will be sending a personal letter to Engineer Dominik Kocinger assuring him that there will be no future involvement from the WWF unless a formal request is received from the Slovak side, which, of course, we do not expect." The Slovaks wasted no time in widely publishing this disavowal.

Soon after, the WWF distanced itself from Dr. Sylven's statement. Alexander Zinke, a geologist working at WWF-Austria's headquarters, presented Sylven's statement as some kind of accident. Sylven, he told this author, had received an "internal beating" for it. On Oct. 4, 1994, the WWF-International responded publicly to Mucha's report: "We have looked carefully at Professor Mucha's report, but can find nothing in it to justify changing our position."

It remains to be seen whether the International Court at The Hague will listen to the WWF, or will take account of the facts.