

Wild Rivers – Policy Module



1. Aim of this module

Inform participants about the possibilities for the protection of wild rivers in Europe.

2. Module instruction

Make the short text on the next page available to your group. Reading requires about 15-20 minutes. Once everyone has read the text, discuss the following questions.

1. Of the four options discussed in the text, which one do you prefer?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of this option compared to the other options?
3. Do you have other ideas of what should and can be done to protect wild rivers?

3. Communication

Let us know about your idea for protecting wild rivers in Europe [info@bigjumpchallenge.net or post it to the big jump challenge facebook].

4. Further resources

- More about the wild and scenic river act in the US: www.wildandscenicrivers50.us
- About the wild river label: <http://www.ern.org/en/wild-rivers/>
- About Yasuni ITT: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yasun%C3%AD-ITT_Initiative

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Wild rivers & politics

Wild rivers are rare – and so is policy to protect them. The most important water protection policy in Europe is the European Water Framework Directive. It aims at good ecological and chemical status of rivers in Europe. But it does not say anything specific about the protection of *wild* rivers. Yet wild rivers are under threat due to industrialization, and especially hydropower development. So what can be done?

One option is **policy import**. There is specific legislation to protect wild rivers in other countries. So as to complement its hydropower policy, the United States established in 1968 a “wild and scenic rivers act”. It seeks to protect wild, scenic and recreational rivers. A wild river, according to this act, flows in a natural condition without impoundment, diversion, straightening, rip-rapping, or other modification of the waterway. Rivers get designated as wild and scenic by Congress. In addition, rivers can be protected for outstanding scenic, recreational and related values. Currently about 1% - or about 200 rivers - are protected in this way in the United States. Could such a law also be devised in Europe?

Another option is **bottom up action**: a label for wild rivers. In 2010, the WWF and the European Rivers Network started an initiative for a wild rivers label. Based on a set of 47 criteria for wild rivers, local communities can have their river (or river segment) tested. If it meets the criteria, and a local actions plan is established, it receives the “Wild Rivers Site” label after an independent, technical audit. The label communicates that there is a precious river in the area. It might be valuable for ecological tourism, and more generally for putting the values of the river onto the map. In 2014, la Valserine, a 48 km long river in the French Jura, became the first river to receive this recognition. As of February 2017, 9 rivers received the Label in France, and about 20 more are candidates in 2017-2018. They contribute to an emerging Wild Rivers Network that shares experiences and collective power in the face of threats.

A further option is **not doing anything – with the help of others!** Some years ago, civil society in Ecuador had a revolutionary idea: let’s keep the oil in the ground (in an oil- and biodiversity-rich area of the Amazon basin). This will protect the river, the rainforest, the indigenous peoples who live there, and finally the climate as oil that does not get extracted will not cause CO₂-emissions. But as Ecuador is not an affluent country, the proposal was made to the international community to create a fund – called Yasuni ITT – to cover at least some of the foregone revenue due to not exploiting the oil. In Europe, the last big wild river, the Vjosa, flows through Albania – one of the poorest countries of Europe. So why should Albania not benefit from the hydropower? If Europe wants to protect at least one big, wild river – what about a “Vjosa ITT” for this or further remaining European rivers? It would be the first truly European National (River Solidarity) Park!

Finally, **existing law** deserves a second look. The Water Framework Directive does not specifically mention wild rivers. But it includes a so-called non-deterioration clause. This clause demands not to worsen the condition of rivers. So, in principle, it should not be possible to worsen the condition of a free-flowing river. However, while the Water Framework Directive was supposed to be implemented by 2015, so far not even 50% implementation of this directive has been achieved. Without public debate and scrutiny, the Directive and its implementation might simply come too late.

Acknowledgments

This module has been prepared by Rafael Ziegler (GETIDOS) and Lucie Galland (SOS Loire Vivante/European Rivers Network).