

Memorandum of Cooperation of the “Danube Canyons”, to foster the cooperation among Break-through Valleys along the Danube

1. Background

Considering that:

- the Danube River is a green lifeline for biodiversity;
- the Danube Protected Areas preserve the most valuable sites and are crucial sites for the long-term preservation of the rich biodiversity and natural heritage in this region;
- since 10 years, DANUBE PARKS - The Danube River Network of Protected Areas, works for a harmonized and concerted approach for nature conservation along the Danube – with the Danube Canyons as important partners within this Network since many years;
- the **Danube break-through valleys and gorges** – in the following **Danube Canyons** - are of specific beauty and value, sharing specific challenges and requirements in their management, partially different in their focus comparing to Protected Areas working for floodplain areas;
- Danube canyons stand for the need of cross-border cooperation as they are often shared between countries and regions; they should not stand for separation but cooperation
- the long-term experience in each of the Danube Canyons administrations on the field of habitat management and restoration, conservation, sustainable development, nature tourism and nature education forms a pool of know-how and good practice;
- the intention to share this know-how and good practice resulted in a shared project activity in the frame of DANUBEparksCONNECTED, a Danube-wide project on the field of ecological networks, co-funded by the EU Interreg Danube Transnational Programme.

This Memorandum of Cooperation is now the final step after the intense discussion process within DANUBEparksCONNECTED, and a statement for the continuation of this cooperation among the Danube Canyons.

2. Approach of Danube Canyons protected areas’ and habitat management

The signing parties represent some of the most impressive break-through valleys along the Danube. These sites are of specific beauty and host valuable habitat types and species. There is **high importance of these sites in particular for dry and semi-dry habitats, rocky habitats, steep hillside and gorge forests**. Additionally, these sites often act as key areas for habitat connectivity **linking the Danube valley and the crossing, surrounding and passing mountainous and forest bioregions like the Carpathians, Dunkelsteinerwald forest, Börzsöny Hills and Pilis Hills**.

The Danube Canyon protected areas face this responsibility by wise use of these areas, by preserving and managing these valuable sites and by implementing projects to reach these goals.

Beside river management and restoration, floodplain forest conservation, wetland restoration and species conservation, for the Danube Canyons in particular the following aspects were in the focus of previous and current projects, which makes these protected areas unique in the Network of Danube Protected Areas:

- conservation of dry grasslands (e.g. LIFE12 NAT/HU/001028, LIFE03 NAT/AT/000009), conservation of steppic and pannonic woods and meadows (LIFE 03 NAT/HU/000167, LIFE06 NAT/HU/000098)
- Volunteers initiatives on the field of dry grassland management (Wachau Volunteer)
- conservation of hillside and gorge forests (e.g. LIFE04 NAT/AT/000003)
- habitat connectivity for mountain regions, with the Danube Protected Areas as a link between mountain and river (e.g. BIOREGIO ETC-SEE).

3. Common goals and objectives

Due to their locations and habitat structures, the focus in the day-by-day management differs from the protected areas located in floodplain areas. As a characteristic feature, all the Danube canyons manage dry habitats like grasslands and rock-fields, typical habitats of these steep slopes. In the frame of DANUBEPARKSCONNECTED, a closer cooperation among the represented Danube Protected Areas has been initiated: experience exchange, know-how transfer, development of joint activities and joint future projects.

The above mentioned demonstrates that the Danube Canyons are interested in the creation of a subsidiary network under the umbrella of DANUBEPARKS and wish to cooperate for a better synergy and efficiency in the realisation of this network in order to:

- ensure the transfer of the existing know-how;
- further develop and further raise the efficiency of local management actions by built capacity through Danube-wide cooperation;
- develop a joint perspective for Danube break-through valleys;
- raise the awareness for the importance of conservation actions on local, regional and transnational level by harmonized communication, nature education and awareness raising measures;
- foster cross-border approach in gorges shared among different countries and regions, as it is often the case;
- contribute to the goals of the DANUBEPARKS network for ecological connectivity in the Danube region by linking the Danube region with mountains and forest complexes passed through;
- respond to the loss of biodiversity, especially in times of climate change, by fostering the migration of autochthonous species between habitats specifically protected by the Danube Canyons;
- act as catalyst for the enlargement of the DANUBEPARKS partnership by cooperation with additional Canyons (not always represented by protected area administrations), and boosting a closer cooperation with canyons and gorges along the tributary rivers;
- involve relevant additional partners, in particular protected areas, which represent similar types of habitats outside Danube Canyons (e.g. Biosphärenpark Wienerwald at the Wiener Pforte; Donau-Auen National Park and Dunajsky luhý Protected Landscape Area at the Hainburger Pforte), National Park Fruska Gora);

4. Activities

The following activities will lead to the achievement of the above defined objectives:

- creation of a **forum for exchange** of results, knowledge and know-how in the field of the management of break-through valleys;
- exchange of information on activities about the management practice, in order to harmonize ongoing activities and projects and their approach as well as to optimize their impact on common goals;
- capacity building and educational activities for professionals in the relevant Danube protected areas;
- definition of pilot activities to demonstrate good practice;
- communication activities with the public and stakeholders, including environmental education institutions, with a view to raise the awareness for the beauty and value of the Danube break-through valleys;
- cross-border networking with neighbouring canyons, inviting additional Danube Canyons to join this subsidiary network, strengthening the contact with canyons at the tributary rivers (potential lead: Nature Park Rusenski Lom);
- considering “hilly locations” close to the Danube protected areas (e.g. Batina hills, Hainburger Pforte, Devinska Kobyla) in the future protected areas management;
- act as good practice for other larger European rivers and share experiences with those sites;
- if feasible, development of joint project proposals to enable an ensure an active cooperation and the implementation of concrete measures;
- identification of financial resources on different levels, for the implementation of joint projects and initiatives;

5. Organisation

The effectiveness of the Danube Canyons cooperation will be ensured by a regular exchange of information and reporting of activities in the frame of the DANUBEPARKS Network.

The activities from all partners will be reported in the available media of the DANUBEPARKS networks and the cooperation initiative will be particularly stressed in order to highlight this cooperation in favour of biodiversity conservation in the Danube region.

One meeting per year should be organised, e.g. in the frame of the General Assembly of the DANUBEPARKS Association, deciding about new project developments, lobbying and communication activities. Additional formal or informal meetings are foreseen to tackle specific fields of intervention.

The steering committee of this cooperation initiative is ensured by the involvement of the DANUBEPARKS Management Board in the communication and cooperation and by embedding the subsidiary network in the DANUBEPARKS Association. No new structure should be created.

Financial support for this cooperation and for the implementation of joint activities will be requested from the DANUBEPARKS Association and additionally, will be requested from competent national institutions and/or the European Commission or from individual public or private programs.

To ensure the implementation of this Memorandum of Cooperation, concrete actions have to be developed and need to be revised every 5 years.

6. Final disposals

The partner protected areas and partner institutions of the Danube Canyons should be in a continuous and permanent informal contact and included into information loops in order to be well informed about ongoing procedures and cooperation needs.

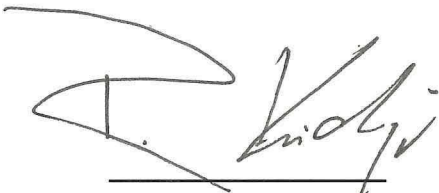
Effectiveness:

This Cooperation Initiative will take effect upon signature from all sides. Its duration is unlimited but each signatory may terminate it by informing the other signatories in writing with a prior delay of 1 year in order not to endanger ongoing projects.

Amendments:

The signatories may, by mutual consent and in writing, review and amend this Memorandum of Cooperation on the basis of the experience gained in implementing it.

Vienna, December 11th 2018



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