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World Wetlands Day -- Danube wetland work ahead but not enough

(February 2, 2007. Vienna, Austria) Danube NGOs (non-governmental organisations) are doing good projects that help protect and restore valuable wetlands in the Danube River Basin. But more wetland projects are needed to make better use of wetlands as pollution removers, says Peter Whalley of the UNDP/GEF Danube Regional Project (DRP).

'Wetlands' are places where water and land naturally cooperate to protect water, animals, plants and humans. Besides absorbing pollution, wetlands provide numerous other valuable services such as reducing the impacts from floods and providing homes for fish and plant species.

Unfortunately, some 80% of the Danube Basin's wetlands and floodplains have been lost due to past human activities over the last 150 years, from river channelling to making room for more farmland.

"Danube countries are missing an excellent opportunity to use wetlands to reduce water pollution, especially from nutrients," says Whalley. Nutrient pollution is a serious problem in the Danube Basin and one that countries need to address before they can meet EU water legislation, the 'Water Framework Directive', by 2015. "More attention to wetlands should make meeting this law easier for Danube countries."

A recent survey, funded through the DRP, asked wetland and water managers throughout the basin about what they perceived to be most important about wetlands. The result was that most found wetlands beneficial for habitat protection, flood control and recreational purposes (68%), but only 9% found them useful for nutrient pollution control.

"The results prove that the case for using wetlands for nutrient pollution needs to be better promoted on Wetlands Day and every day," says Whalley. To better encourage the importance of Danube wetlands, the DRP is developing a guidance document for wetland managers that includes case studies where wetlands have improved water quality.

The DRP has also funded numerous wetland pollution-reduction projects implemented by Danube NGOs. Examples include a project in Veresegyház, Hungary where local NGO Tavirozsa restocked a lake with original wetland plants and removed alien fish species that eat wetland plants -- to reduce the lake's nutrient pollution problem.

In Slovakia, the NGO BROZ cooperated with Slovak State Forests to introduce nature-oriented forestry in the 1,500 ha Rusovce floodplain near

Bratislava. The new management will remove alien trees and plant native tree species such as elm, oak and wild pear. In addition, BROZ together with the State Nature Conservancy submitted proposals for three new protected wetland sites of nearly 1,400 ha along the Danube.

In south Moravia, Czech Republic, local NGO Sagittaria prepared and helped implement a new local management plan to increase the capacity of a damaged fish pond. The goal was to naturally reduce excessive nutrient pollution from agriculture and communal sewage. A green buffer strip was set up, fish stocks improved, valuable wetland plants were grown in a special lake enclosure and a public campaign helped build local support.

Notes to Editors:

What is World Wetlands Day? February 2 each year marks the date of the signing of the Ramsar International Convention on Wetlands in 1971. Since then, each year, government agencies, non-governmental organizations and groups of citizens at all levels have taken advantage of the opportunity to undertake actions aimed at raising public awareness of wetland values and benefits and the Ramsar Convention.

What is the Danube Regional Project? The overall goal of the UNDP/GEF Danube Regional Project (DRP) is to improve the environment of the Danube River Basin, protect its waters and sustainably manage its natural resources for the benefit of nature and people. The DRP helps 13 Danube countries implement the Danube River Protection Convention primarily through reducing nutrient and toxic pollution and strengthening trans-boundary cooperation in the most international river basin in the world. Through its partnerships with governments, industry, NGOs and local communities, the DRP provides both technical and financial support. It also ensures, through sophisticated public participation and communications activities, that all Danube stakeholders are aware of relevant issues and can put their concerns into action.

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See more on Danube wetlands on the DRP website:
www.undp-drp.org/drp/themes_wetlands