A new by-law, requiring that enough water is left in rivers to sustain ecosystems, was passed in Montenegro recently (Official Gazette RCG 2/2016 -14.01.2016). The result follows years of work with the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, under the leadership of the NGO Green Home and WWF.

The law concerns the “ecologically acceptable surface water flow”, which is the amount of water left in an aquatic ecosystem, or released into it, for the specific purpose of maintaining or achieving a good ecological condition. “The concept of ecologically acceptable surface water flow is a way of including nature itself as a user of water. This is to secure the services that those ecosystems usually provide for free and that are often neglected, like water purification and flood protection”, said Nataša Kovačević, NGO Green Home executive director.

To establish the best methodology for Montenegro and develop a ‘Rulebook’ – a series of rules and regulations – Green Home and WWF engaged a multidisciplinary team of experts. They developed a general procedure and methodology for ecologically acceptable flow assessment which was later transformed into a by-law proposal.

“The previous water law prescribed a ‘biological minimum’, which required releasing 10% of the average minimum water flow of the total water amount downstream of water barriers. This approach did not take into account seasonal flow variations, and the real needs of downstream biocenosis and fish species”, said Francesca Antonelli, freshwater manager for WWF Mediterranean.

The new Rulebook prescribes the adoption of two different approaches depending on the importance of the water body. For rivers of no or little significance from a biodiversity point of view the requirement is less stringent, while for wetlands or other water bodies which are of national ecological importance the requirements are more demanding.

“The Ramsar Secretariat congratulates the Government of Montenegro for adopting this new forward-looking law, which
directly contributes to implementing the goal of the Resolution 12 on ´protecting the water requirements of wetlands for the present and the future´ adopted by the 12th Ramsar Conference held last year in Uruguay. Other Ramsar Contracting Parties should follow the example of Montenegro, one of the first countries together with Mexico (the proponent of this Resolution) to legally protect and promote the water requirements of wetlands by law. This ecosystems-based approach enhances the sustainability of water management at a national level, and should be extended not only to Ramsar sites which are Wetlands of International Importance, and to nationally protected areas, but also to major artificially created wetland ecosystems which are not yet protected, such as the Ulcinj Saltpans”, said Ania Grobicki, Acting Secretary General of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands.

“The methodology and the Rulebook adopted by the Parliament are adjusted to Montenegrin river conditions. This new regulation will contribute significantly to achieving good ecological status, which is prescribed by the EU Water law also adopted in Montenegro”, added Nataša Kovačević

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