

2019 EuroNatur prize awarded to the “brave women of Kruščica”

Lake Constance, Mainau Island, 10th October 2019

EuroNatur President Christel Schroeder’s address

Rivers, those lifelines of the landscape, are also a constant feature of our award ceremonies. On the one hand, this demonstrates how highly we value these most dynamic and sensitive habitats; on the other it is unfortunately a reflection of the fact that they are frequently threatened with destruction.

Today we turn our attention to the Balkans with its amazing watercourses: crystal clear streams, wild rivers with extensive gravel beds, unspoilt riparian forests, deep gorges and spectacular waterfalls. The rivers of the Balkans are not only breathtakingly beautiful; they are also amongst the most important centres of biodiversity in Europe.

Until now, these rivers have been public property for those who live along them. However now, on the pretext of producing green energy, the ownership of these rivers is being given away. Almost 3000 hydro-electric power stations are to be built in the Balkans over the next few years. This means building barrages in these river landscapes and destroying sensitive ecosystems. With favourable credit terms and public grants, investors see a chance to make short-term profits or even the opportunity for under-the-radar money laundering. Under these often corrupt governments and administrations, there are hardly any approval processes worth the name. It is usually necessary to establish the facts before opposition can be raised. What is left behind are degraded river landscapes and people robbed of their livelihood.

In condemning this ecologically damaging overdevelopment, we are not ignoring the energy needs of the Balkan Peninsula. We welcome sensible initiatives for producing renewable energy. In these sun-drenched countries, solutions such as fitting solar panels to roofs should be given serious consideration, although of course these are of little interest to major investors.

If those who live along these rivers were party to the decision-making about building these barrages, they would never agree to this destruction. These rivers provide them with clean drinking water, the wide variety of fish enhances their cuisine and the meadows make good pasture. And of course these people do not wish to be driven away from their land. They are beginning to fight back and are desperately seeking ways to preserve their homeland.

Today our award for nature conservation honours one campaign in this counter movement. To prevent the construction of two hydro-electric power plants, a group of women from the village of Kruščica occupied the bridge of the same name for over 500 days and nights. The EuroNatur prize is awarded to these women for their courageous and sustained campaign. This incredibly long battle is one of the most gripping stories in nature conservation that I have seen. Dr Anna Wöbse, a member of our board, will be recounting the fascinating details of the campaign in her laudatory speech.

But for now, I would like to draw your attention to the impressive strategic aspect of their resistance. The whole village, whose life revolved around the river, decided to blockade the bridge to prevent the destructive construction machinery from being deployed. In the hope that women would not be attacked and that the clashes that were bound to ensue should not be violent, only women would carry out the protest. They blocked the bridge over the river with their bodies.

This decision was in equal measure both clever and unorthodox. It is not only the courage of these women but also their willingness to empower themselves to defend their homeland that deserves our admiration. The decision of the village's male inhabitants to refrain from becoming involved in the conflict also deserves our unqualified respect.

Neither the attempts by the investor to intimidate the women nor the brutal intervention by the police were enough to make the women give up their defence of their river – and this over a considerable period. Every family member including children bore the brunt of the fear and had to endure the creeping desperation. I have the greatest respect for the courage and determination, for the perseverance and solidarity that this community demonstrated.

Today we are handing over the EuroNatur prize to the representatives of the visible side of this battle, but in so doing we would also like to include all those villagers in the background. Defending their homeland was more important to them than traditional role models and thinking, than fear of violence or concern about their nearest and dearest. The brave women of Kruscica have become a symbol for unflinching resistance.