

## **Award presentation for Roberto Epple – Speech of Christel Schroeder, President of EuroNatur**

10 October 2018

With this year's award presentation we turn our attention to rivers.

Human societies used to live with and from rivers, they owed their mobility to them and in their settlements they were threatened by them. They had the utmost respect for them. Rivers and river spirits became part of mythology. The cultural and historical significance of rivers is vividly expressed through their metaphorical content: lifeblood!

Ladies and Gentlemen, you are all familiar with the phrase: "You cannot step into the same river twice," which is attributed to Heraclitus. Around 2500 years ago he used this analogy to illustrate his belief that the world is constantly changing.

Nature poetry, landscape painting and song compositions all use river themes to move us in ways we will never forget as long as we live: "On the bed of the Moldau the stones are stirring...". This song is deeply rooted within us. The lyrics come from Bertolt Brecht, and the conformity to Bedrich Smetana's symphonic poem can be recognised in Hanns Eisler's musical arrangement.

However, despite their cultural-historical and spiritual significance, rivers have not remained sacrosanct.

Economic man did not want to settle for making the best of the "wilfulness of nature as he found it" - as Siegfried Lenz puts it. "He transformed (nature) according to his needs, using his own means - always eager to gain something from it. Frequently this was in order to achieve better health. But there have also been attempts to use landscape as a means to unsettle people, to make them small and submissive. Oppressed by monstrous proportions, intimidated by cold emptiness, man has been directed, according to the will of the powerful, to fulfil one single purpose, that of usefulness." So said Siegfried Lenz during his closing speech on the 23rd German Nature Conservation Day in Hamburg in 1996.

Rivers, in particular, have long been beset by deliberate and controlling interventions. Everything seeming technically feasible has been tried without attention being paid to the long-term consequences for these dynamic habitats. Rivers have been and are being changed beyond recognition by gigantic dam walls. In Central Europe, interference in river systems goes back over 200 years. Meanwhile we have become aware of the dramatic consequences. Today, we repeatedly hear the same sanctimonious justification for dams: the production of renewable energy. However, in reality, it is about investment, profits and - particularly in South East Europe - money laundering.

Rivers are being destroyed through the abuse of power and the trading of property rights. When rivers or stretches of river are traded, massive profits are made. The result is usually serious damage to ecosystems. This destruction now shows us that a river cannot belong to an individual or to a group; it is a public asset. The very essence of a river is its dynamism, a river constantly renews itself. When this dynamism and self-purifying capability is lost, the result is not just ecological catastrophe. Society as a whole is deprived of a valuable asset, as are future generations, who also have a right to the river.

Today we are honouring Roberto Epple - a river conservationist who, for many years, has fought with body and soul against the destruction of rivers. Back in the 1970s he organised campaigns against power plant construction on rivers in the Swiss Alps. His 1987 documentary "Widerstand am Strom", showing protests against power plant construction on the Danube, attracted significant attention. Roberto Epple gained great popularity through his commitment to the rescue of the French Loire, where he prevented the construction of four large dams and achieved the decommissioning of a further two.

Roberto Epple's dedication to Central Europe's river landscapes serves as a model for our nature conservation work. It supports the work of the EuroNatur Foundation and its partner organisations in the fight against the hydropower lobby in the Balkans. Attacks on intact rivers which aim to augment the wealth of individuals or groups are currently seeing a dramatic increase in South East Europe. Dubious approval procedures and corrupt political structures are facilitating the rapid generation of wealth. People living near rivers are fighting together with nature conservation organisations against this ruthless exploitation. Europe-wide attention and transnational campaigns are our way of exerting pressure at all levels to counter this injustice.

Time after time, Roberto Epple has succeeded, through his creative initiatives, in raising awareness and in mobilising people for the protection of rivers. At the Big Jump event which he instigated, people from all over Europe meet at their local rivers – and go swimming at the same time. Young and old celebrate European River Swimming Day by jumping into the water together and demanding clean, unspoilt rivers. Roberto Epple encourages us not to give up, even in the face of strong opposition. With his unswerving love for rivers he is an inspiring example for all of us. This is particularly true for our many local partners in the Balkans, who are currently fighting to preserve their public assets. We are grateful to Roberto Epple for this and are delighted to be able to honour him with this award.