



DECLARATION OF THE SAVE THE RIVERS COALITION (KRR)

Poland's rivers and natural water resources have been the objects of increasingly intensive exploitation and transformation. Reports have been coming in for years from Poland's individual regions and the entire country about harmful activities and investments causing a deterioration of the status of Poland's waters. In some places the situation is disastrous. All this has been happening despite the pledges by successive national and local governments to improve the situation, and despite Poland's commitments under the EU Water Framework Directive.

Little has changed in the domain of water policy and sometimes things changed for the worse while the water policy makers continued to turn a deaf ear to the appeals by environmental non-governmental organisations which have been calling for an end to harmful practices such as river-training, river-bed development, dam construction and drainage works drying out the river valleys. Often even proposals of alternative solutions or different technologies, which could mitigate damage to the environment, have been ignored.

Facing such hostile attitudes towards the protection of waters, noting the systematic devastation of successive sections of Poland's rivers, and concerned about the plans for further investments with negative impacts, we decided to join ranks and establish **the Save the Rivers Coalition. The Coalition brings together organisations which protect Poland's rivers, streams and wetlands, as well as academic experts, organisations, individuals, local governments and institutions who care about the fate of rivers and water-dependent ecosystems in Poland.**

We hope that our single voice will be better heard and that we can manage to persuade those in charge to stop degrading Poland's water resources. We also hope that by acting jointly we can reach a wider audience with our analysis of the local and national problems and draw adequate attention to our suggestions of legal, design or technological change. Unfortunately, for now an outdated approach prevails, which treats water and water-dependent ecosystems as space for exploitation and development. We want to change this because we do not accept a continuation of the harmful model of water management. It is in the best interest of the citizens and the state to leave sufficient room to the rivers and re-create space for natural retention. It matters because of the need to alleviate the impacts of floods and droughts, mitigate the costs of building and maintaining hydro-technical infrastructures, and preserve the natural heritage which constitutes our country's wealth.

We have set out to work together for:

1. Effective and systemic conservation of the rivers' natural environment and natural retention

Ensuring the conservation of wetlands and river valleys, and promoting permanent grasslands and floodplain and wetland forests, are effective, environmentally friendly and low-cost ways to mitigate the impacts of climate change, also by reducing the risk of floods and droughts, which simultaneously help prevent climate change by preserving the wetlands as carbon sinks. Systemic promotion of natural retention is not only a way to deliver on the commitments under the Water Framework Directive, but also a priority under the Directive on the assessment and management of flood risks.

2. Evidence-based water and stream management practices, including potential river-training, which respect contemporary knowledge about the geo-ecosystems of rivers; as well as large-scale re-naturalisation of rivers and streams

Conventionally understood maintenance works which facilitate and accelerate the flow of water, such as dredging of rivers and streams, straightening of river-beds, removal of vegetation or wood debris, are ineffective because they ignore state-of-the-art knowledge about rivers and their valleys and seek to counter the natural dynamics of water courses. They often lead to a lowering of ground water levels and steppification of fields and amplify the negative impacts of droughts while at the same time increasing the risk of floods further downstream. They also impose a heavy burden on the river ecosystems by degrading the natural and landscape properties of water courses and their valleys. It is necessary to modernise the practice of water course maintenance so that it is based on 'co-operation' with the natural processes of river dynamics; that should also include a considerable scaling down of maintenance works. Likewise, river training, if any, should use solutions which better take into account the hydraulic, geo-morphological and natural conditions of the river, and water courses regulated in line with the old concepts need to be renaturalised on a large scale. Renaturalising the rivers and streams which were transformed in the past (or, in some cases, simply allowing such rivers to renaturalise themselves through natural processes) will reinstate their characteristic species and habitats, slow down the discharge of water from the river basin, and increase river valley retention which is so important for climate change adaptation.

3. Conservation and restoration of the continuity of wildlife corridors

Rivers, streams and their valleys are important wildlife corridors. They enable short-distance movements and long-distance migration various animal species. The status of many populations of species associated with river valleys, such as diadromous (migrating) fish, will depend on measures to end the fragmentation of their habitats and to restore continuity where it has been lost as a result of human action. Such measures should effectively improve the conditions for migrations of all the species associated with the river and go hand in hand with the conservation of good status of habitats to which the animals migrate.

4. Inland navigation plans conforming with the character of the rivers

Poland's rivers have great environmental value, and at the same time highly variable rates of flow and water levels (with frequent high-water events and long periods of low water). They remain mostly not canalised, with wide river beds and valleys and high dynamics of bed sediment movement. This environmental and hydrologic potential offers good conditions for the development of water tourism and low-scale, local navigation, but not transportation of large and continuous cargo streams. Transforming Poland's rivers into international waterways would require ensuring a constant minimum transit depth of 2.8 metres, which is not feasible, even with major infrastructural investments, because in dryer periods, water would still need to be fed into the rivers. Large investments to transform Poland's rivers into higher-class waterways would irreversibly destroy the environmental value of the rivers and their valleys, with no possibility of compensatory

measures, and permanently impair the ecosystem services provided by the rivers, such as water purification or mitigation of extreme weather conditions. Moreover, the plans to build enormous hydro-technical systems for mass inland navigation not only disregard the fact that Poland does not have enough water for such systems, but also ignore the fact that a competitive railway system already exists and has been developing, while state-of-the-art-logistics requires fast door-to-door transportation. Moving goods using barges takes much longer than transport by railways and requires extra re-loading operations, which calls into question the purposefulness of promoting water transport. For these reasons, the concepts of inland navigation development should conform with the character of Poland's rivers, focus on local needs and prioritise river tourism.

5. Economic development plans that conform with the character of the rivers

The economy in Poland should also conform with the character of the country's rivers and streams, the dynamics of their flow and patterns of water levels, and should take into account the weather patterns resulting from climate change. All economic sectors in Poland, including energy and agriculture, should implement zero- or low-water-consuming solutions. That would not only help preserve the environmental value of water and water-dependent ecosystems, but also be in line with Poland's national interest, as the country has dramatically scarce clean water resources and needs to start respecting them for its own sake – to be able to meet its elementary life needs. Such solutions will also be in line with the Europe 2020 strategy with regard to efficient resource use. All sectors of the economy should also implement solutions that contribute to slowing down the discharge of water and put an end to the degradation of wetlands and pollution of surface and ground water, in a manner which reflect a responsible approach to the quality of the environment and the people's quality of life.