

Improvements in efficiency instead of damage to the environment!

cc.alps: CIPRA's demands on the subject of water

The rivers of the Alps provide 170 million people with water. Climate change will greatly reduce the availability of water in the Alps and beyond, with less rain, longer dry periods in summer and greatly reduced snowfalls in winter among the predicted consequences. The demands made of this natural resource will increase accordingly, as will competition between the various user groups.

Today only about 10% of the rivers and streams of the Alps can be considered ecologically intact, i.e. they are neither polluted nor over-engineered nor compromised in terms of their flow regimes. The ecological quality of waterways and related habitats therefore calls for improvement, not further impairment. We cannot permit the last rivers to become engineered structures or depleted by the excessive abstraction of water. Together with other legal norms designed to protect the natural environment, such as the Habitats Directive and the Birds Directive, the EU's Water Framework Directive is a good instrument in support of the careful use of water, and the conservation and improvement of water ecosystems.

CIPRA's demands:

(1) Stop the hydropower madness: no "final capacity" development!

Several countries of the Alps have plans for developing hydropower instead of promoting energy efficiency and savings. Nuclear energy phase-outs are the current argument for permitting the last near-natural rivers and streams in the Alps to be depleted. Instead of "final capacity" development at the expense of the natural environment, CIPRA is calling for the modernisation of existing hydropower plants in combination with compensatory ecological measures. This would enable a 50% increase in energy efficiency to be achieved in the short term. There are even examples of refurbishment schemes that have resulted in a three-fold increase in power generation combined with an improvement to the ecological balance as a result of accompanying measures. In the case of all power plant rehabilitation projects, however, their environmental compatibility must always be thoroughly investigated and guaranteed, and where impacts are inevitable, they must be compensated in accordance with the Water Framework Directive and national legislation. The legal provisions relating to green energy must also be changed to promote improvements to existing power plants and

efficiency rather than the construction of new and environmentally harmful hydropower schemes.

(2) Small power plants, big problems! Small is not always beautiful.

In many places the uncoordinated boom in the construction of small hydropower plants is the product of an approach to promoting alternative sources of energy that is undifferentiated and unsustainable. The result is often large-scale ecological damage for relatively low energy gains. The contribution of small hydropower plants to total generation is limited: 75% of hydropower plants deliver just 4% of hydroelectricity in the Alps. Permits for new small hydropower plants must therefore be made subject to compliance with ecological standards, and financial support must be clearly based on considerations of sustainability and environmental compatibility.

(3) Water is not a private matter!

Water is not a commodity like any other; it is a part of our heritage that must be protected and treated accordingly. The resident population of the Alps and people living outside of the Alpine region who are dependent on its water resources have a right to an adequate supply of good-quality drinking water. Providing them with water is a fundamental duty of the public authorities, one which may not be jeopardised by privatisation.

(4) Good governance instead of parish-pump politics

Water resource management must be made more professional. The needs of all concerned are important. For that reason, sovereignty over water resources may not be relinquished to single decision-making bodies like local authorities but must be exercised at a higher level. A policy of cooperation at the level of the catchment area, as provided for by the Water Framework Directive, ensures participation of all concerned. The French water agencies show how it can be done and prove that it works.

(5) Restrict waste and luxury uses of water!

There are many ways of achieving savings in the use of water. Drip irrigation systems for high-grade agricultural produce like fruit or grapes, for example, can generate more additional income and consume less water than the wasteful irrigation of fields of cereals. Meaningful savings can also be made by private households, e.g through the use of rainwater to flush toilets and water gardens. And with regard to tourism, permits for new

facilities should only be issued where it can be shown that the extra water consumption is sustainable and will have no negative impacts on existing uses, while adjustment to climate change must take the form of a better distribution of tourism activities over the year and the development of sustainable alternatives to the skiing industry. In this context it should be stressed that the growing use of snow guns – in terms of both new installations and longer operating periods – runs counter to the goals of climate change mitigation because of the unacceptably high levels of water and energy consumption. For that reason, CIPRA is calling upon the authorities to ensure that no public funds are spent on promoting snowmaking installations.

(6) A strategy for the whole of the alpine region!

CIPRA is calling upon the parties to the Alpine Convention to agree on a common Alps-wide strategy for the sustainable use of water and related habitats. The strategy should include improvements to the efficiency of existing power plants and provisions to ensure that permits for upgrades are made subject to consideration of the needs of the environment. The strategy should also provide for alternatives to the construction of large reservoirs and restrictions on the uncoordinated construction of small power plants.

Effective implementation of the strategy will only be possible on the basis of an Alps-wide inventory of those stretches of rivers and streams that can still be considered ecologically functional (intact waterways in terms of biology and hydro-morphology) or have strong potential for regeneration. They must be treated as no-go-areas for all unsustainable impacts and facilities like power plants and for intensive uses of riverine landscapes, etc.

Schaan, December 2011