

TOWARDS A GREEN EUROPE TO PROTECT EUROPEAN DELTAS

Manifesto for the protection of European Deltas

Dear Executive Vice-President Timmermans,
Dear Commissioner Sinkevičius,

February 2nd, 2021

There are around 10,000 deltas in the world, and some 339 million people live in them. Many of these deltas are extremely vulnerable to flooding, especially due to the effects of climate change and poor river basin management. Deltas are coastal systems formed by the contribution of water and sediments from rivers, which makes them vulnerable in double measure to climate change and other factors of global change in the territory. Its physical, ecological and socioeconomic integrity is threatened both by changes in the marine system (rise in sea level, increase in the frequency and intensity of sea storms, etc.) and by land uses and the management of their hydrographic basins (such as decrease in the river flows, reservoir sediments trapping, etc.).

In Europe there are deltas of high socio-economic and ecological relevance, such as those of the Danube, the Vistula, the Rhine, the Po, the Rhone or the Ebro, many of which are suffering increasing risks of erosion, subsidence, flooding and salinization. The effects that the Ebro Delta suffered after the storm Gloria are a clear example of this. In this context, **it is urgent that their effective conservation throughout Europe becomes a political priority for the European institutions if their survival is to be guaranteed**, in accordance with article 191 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU, according to which, the Union policy on the environment should contribute to the conservation, protection and improvement of ecosystems quality, the prudent and rational use of natural resources, and the promotion of measures at international level to deal with regional or global environmental problems, and in particular to combat climate change.

Within the European legal framework, there are several regulatory texts that, directly or indirectly, affect the conservation and management of deltas. The Birds and Habitats Directives formally protect their biodiversity, to a greater or lesser extent, since a great deal of protected species and habitats that are part of the Natura 2000 Network are to be found there. Furthermore, in many cases the European deltas also are considered as protected areas under different categories (such as National Park, Natural Park, Biosphere Reserve, etc.). The Water Framework Directive establishes rules to tackle the deterioration and achieve good ecological status of the fluvial, transitional and coastal water bodies, all of them present in the deltas. Other guidelines, such as the Groundwater Directive, or the Marine Strategy Framework Directive have a direct impact on the management and protection of deltas. Finally, the Floods Directive aims to reduce the possible consequences of floods through risk management supported by information related to dangerousness and risk.

However, **the regulatory framework established by the European Union Directives is not sufficient to guarantee the physical protection of the deltas**. Comprehensive management is necessary, since their survival does not depend exclusively on the actions that can be carried out in the deltaic

territory itself, but action must necessarily be taken in the hydrographic basins of the rivers that have formed, feed and maintain them. The protection or restoration of deltaic natural sites is often financed with European funds, and too often these sites end up disappearing due to coastal erosion or because of poor management strategies in the river basin upstream of the deltas that prevent, for example, the arrival of solid flows. The action taken by the European Union and its Member States in the coming years will be essential for the deltas' survival over the next decades. Hence, the need and importance of having a holistic vision and providing new measures to reverse the progressive disappearance of these European wetlands.

That is why **we call on the European Commission to increase efforts to conserve and restore European deltas, especially within the framework of the Water Framework Directive and its implementation in the Member States** through the Measures Programs, as well as of the other directives already mentioned (Floods, Birds, Habitats, etc.), and the European Green Deal together with the future actions that will accompany it, such as the deployment of the Biodiversity Strategy, the Farm to Fork Strategy or the Strategy for Adaptation to Climate Change.

For all these reasons, we ask the European Commission to promote a set of actions that we believe are unavoidable to significantly contribute to conserving deltas such as the Danube, the Rhine, the Rhone, the Po or the Ebro, to give some outstanding examples. All of them are very rich areas not only in terms of their biodiversity but also because of their socioeconomic, landscape and cultural values, which are in danger if urgent measures are not taken. For all this we ask for:

- **The improvement of the monitoring of the management plans of the river basins of Europe** so that they comply with the environmental objectives and the requirements of the European Union in terms of ecological flows and conservation of biodiversity, especially those that have vulnerable spaces such as deltas. This implies the adoption of effective actions in the Measurement Programs of the Basin Plans, with the priority of restoring the flow of sediments from the reservoirs and guaranteeing a regime of ecological water flows suitable for the adequate transport of said sediments.
- **The development of a specific orientation guide**, as part of the implementation of the Water Framework Directive, **on the comprehensive management of sediments at the river basin level** which complements the guides for determining ecological flows and takes into account the variables related to the sedimentary balance, including: sediment transport, the sustainability of coastal ecosystems, the hydrodynamic fluvial regime of the release of flows from reservoirs with attention to "solid flows", the effect of infrastructures (reservoirs, scales, weirs , etc.) in the imbalances of the erosion and clogging processes of river courses and reservoirs, etc.
- **The consideration of deltas as priority areas for action within the framework of the European Green Deal** and the European Strategy for Biodiversity 2030, which includes the restoration of ecosystems, as well as the recovery of river flow and its ecological quality.
- **The development of an European plan for the restoration and recovery of the deltas**, with the aim of conserving their natural, agricultural and urban spaces through an adaptive strategy that takes into account the effects of climate change.

The deltas and their future show us the true vulnerability derived from the lack of balance between human activity and nature. Improving its management and ensuring its future will involve betting on a true balance that favours nature, delta ecosystems and their biodiversity, in order to protect the health and well-being of the people who live in them.

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