

Foundation prize „The Living Danube“ Application documents 2026

(Application period 01. April 2025 until 31. August 2025)

Proposer (if not identical with applicants)

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Applicant

Institution/ responsible	DANUBEPARKS - Danube River Network of Protected Areas - Das Network der Donauschutzgebiete
Name of project	Danube WILDisland Ramsar Regional Initiative
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Summary of institution/of project/of applicant

DANUBEPARKS Association

The DANUBEPARKS Association is the platform for coordinated and extensive collaboration among the various administrations of the Danube Protected Areas.

In 2007, eight Danube Protected Areas met to sign the Declaration of Tulcea as they recognized the new opportunities, challenges and the necessity to ensure that nature protection along an international river was raised to international level. With the commitment to form a Danube River Network of Protected Areas, the spirit of DANUBEPARKS was born.

Building on existing transnational cooperation and successful Danube-wide joint initiatives over the last years, the Danube Protected Areas have developed a strong and enriching partnership. The non-profit DANUBEPARKS Association was founded in 2014. As a clear signal of our long-term and shared commitment to the Danube's natural heritage, the founding of the DANUBEPARKS Association will enable us to intensify our joint conservation efforts.



Photo: DANUBEPARKS General Assembly in May 2025 in Belene, Bulgaria

An association dedicated to a shared natural heritage

The Danube River Network of Protected Areas brings together national and nature parks, biosphere and nature reserves from nearly all the Danube countries, including Romania, Moldova, Bulgaria, Serbia, Croatia, Hungary, Slovakia, Austria, and Germany.

The DANUBEPARKS secretariat serves as a hub for coordination, communication and representation, advocating tirelessly for nature conservation along the Danube. The aim of transnational cooperation is to increase both the number and effectiveness of individual Danube Protected Area projects and programmes.

The DANUBEPARKS mission and goals

The mission of the DANUBEPARKS Association is to preserve, develop and restore the Danube River, its main tributaries, and surrounding wetlands. As a cohesive ecosystem, it should be an inspiring lifeline for all the inhabitants of this European macro region.

The DANUBEPARKS goals are:

- ensuring the integrity of the ecosystem
- developing the Danube River as a bio-corridor
- supporting sustainable management of natural resources
- improving the protected area management practices
- raising awareness among the general public and decision-makers about the protection of the Danube River.

Coordination of the Danube WILDisland Ramsar Regional Initiative

The DANUBEPARKS Association acts as the official coordinator of the Danube WILDisland Ramsar Regional Initiative (RRI), endorsed in 2024 as the first river-based Ramsar Regional Initiative in Europe. Hosting the coordination of this unique initiative is both a recognition of DANUBEPARKS' long-term efforts and a responsibility to further strengthen Danube-wide wetland conservation.

Through its Secretariat and transnational offices in Donau-Auen National Park (Austria), Kopački rit Nature Park (Croatia), and Persina Nature Park (Bulgaria), DANUBEPARKS ensures the governance, communication, and facilitation of cooperation among more than 20 protected areas and relevant national authorities in 10 Danube countries.

As a RRI's coordinator, DANUBEPARKS provides:

- ✓ **Strategic leadership** - aligning the Initiative with the Ramsar Strategic Plan, EU biodiversity targets, and ICPDR strategies.
- ✓ **Project development and fundraising** - mobilizing financial support, including start-up funding from the Ramsar Convention and the German Federal Ministry for the Environment.
- ✓ **Capacity building and networking** - connecting wetland managers, scientists, and decision-makers across the region.
- ✓ **Awareness raising** - promoting the WILDisland concept as a best practice for riverine biodiversity, ecological connectivity, and sustainable non-intervention management.

Detailed description

1. background, max. 1500 character

2. target (concept, project design, methods), max. 2500 character

3. implementation (extent of implementation, next steps) max. 2500 character

4. attachments: up to three files with max. 3MB per file, in German or English

... language. Use this option to provide us with additional information and media to your project (e.g. specialized publications, reports, sources / references).

1. Background:

The Convention on Wetlands is the oldest multilateral international conservation treaty and the only one dedicated to a single ecosystem type - wetlands. It provides a framework for the conservation and wise use of wetlands, their unique biodiversity, and vital ecosystem services.

The Convention was adopted in the Iranian city of Ramsar in 1971 and entered into force in 1975. Since then, almost 90% of UN member states (172 countries), from all the world's geographic regions, have become "Contracting Parties" representing more than 2,500 wetlands of international importance worldwide.

The Convention provides for the establishment of Ramsar Regional Initiatives (RRIs) to achieve the objectives of the Ramsar Strategic Plan and support cooperation and capacity-building on wetland-related issues in specific regions.

A key aspect of RRIs is that although they do operate through voluntary international cooperation on wetland-related issues, they involve the national Focal Points of the Member States, which typically represent the relevant ministries and nature-conservation-related authorities.



Photo: Selmeczi-Kovács Ádám © DINPI - WILDislands

Before the Danube WILDisland Initiative, there were 20 RRIs globally, including four in Europe (Nordic-Baltic, Mediterranean, Carpathian, Black Sea). Their success, together with the need for international recognition of the WILDisland concept as a best practice in river conservation, inspired the creation of the Danube WILDisland Ramsar Regional Initiative, the first river-based RRI in Europe.



Photo: 13th Annual Forum of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, June 2024, Vienna, Austria

2. Target:

Established in 2024, the Danube WILDisland RRI is a community of stakeholders dedicated to wetland conservation — governments, scientists, managers, and NGOs from across the Danube region. It unites 10 countries from the source of the Danube River in Germany, through Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Bulgaria, Moldova, and the Danube Delta in Romania and Ukraine.

The initiative is formally supported by the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR), as well as other international and local institutions and it is coordinated by the DANUBEPARKS Association.

The Initiative aims at the joint preservation and restoration of the Danube's near-natural river islands, which form the backbone of a unique ecological corridor. These islands connect numerous protected areas, safeguard biodiversity, provide essential ecosystem services, and serve as destinations for authentic nature experiences, recreation, and sustainable tourism.

To achieve this, the main goals of the Initiative are:

- ✓ promoting the role of river islands as indicators of preserved natural hydrological and morphological processes and symbols of intact habitat connectivity;

- ✓ international and cross-sector cooperation for wetland conservation;
- ✓ joint projects to preserve, develop, and restore the Danube River, its adjacent floodplains and main tributaries as an integrated ecosystem and inspiring green lifeline;
- ✓ promotion of adaptive and integrated non-intervention management and wise use of wetlands;
- ✓ capacity building, transfer of knowledge and best practice expertise;
- ✓ public awareness and joint information campaigns;

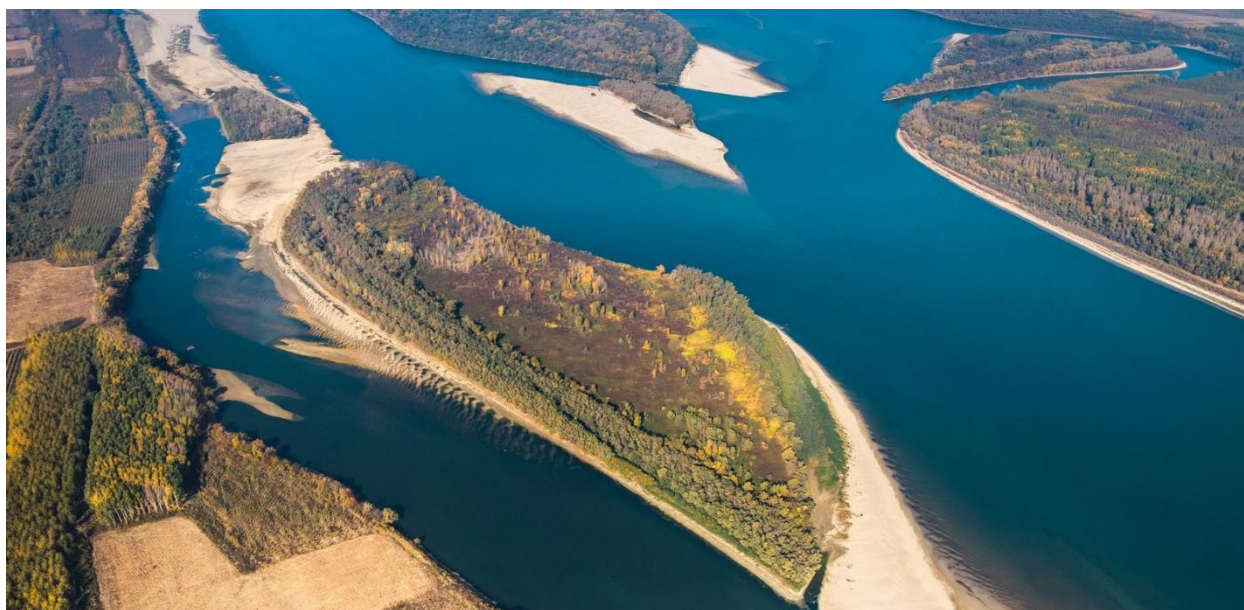


Photo: Palets island, BG © DANUBE PARKS/Persina NP/Ivanov - WILDislands

The RRI strives to provide practical means for international cooperation and will support effective implementation of the Ramsar Convention and its Strategic Plan in the Danube region. It aims to improve the visibility of wetland conservation issues and to involve all relevant national and regional stakeholders. By mobilizing political support, the RRI will strengthen the Danube as an ecological corridor, linking more biogeographic regions than any other river in Europe, and serve as a model of best practice for establishing European Green and Blue Infrastructure.

3. Implementation:

As the first river-based Ramsar Regional Initiative (RRI) in Europe, the Danube WILDisland RRI has, since its establishment in June 2024, taken important steps to anchor its work and build long-term cooperation.

A first milestone was achieved in August 2024, when the Initiative was awarded the **Danube Strategy Flagship Certificate**, recognizing its role in conserving and sustainably managing vital ecosystems along the Danube.



Interreg
Danube Region



Co-funded by
the European Union

City of
Vienna



Certificate

DANUBE STRATEGY FLAGSHIP

This certificate is proudly awarded to

Danube WILDisland Ramsar Regional Initiative

Danube Strategy Flagships are projects or processes that contribute to the implementation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR), have a clear macro-regional dimension and a multi-level governance approach. They are of high importance for the Danube Region's economic, social and territorial cohesion and for improving the quality of life in the Danube Region.

Danube Strategy Flagships strengthen internal and external communication of the Strategy and the visibility of the topics, initiatives and prospects in the Danube Region. They illustrate the progress achieved in implementing the EUSDR and demonstrate exemplarily significant improvement in the Region that is induced by cooperation.

EUSDR National Coordinators and Priority Area Coordinators with the respective Steering Groups, in their capacity as representatives and key implementers of the EUSDR, as well as the Danube Strategy Point, are committed to contribute to and promote Danube Strategy Flagships in accordance with the Guidance Paper for identifying and listing Danube Strategy Flagships.

Date: 22 July 2024



EUSDR Priority Area(s): PA 6 Biodiversity, Landscapes and Air & Soil Quality

The internal kick-off meeting followed in September 2024 in the Danube Delta, the second-largest Ramsar Site in Europe, gathering representatives of 17 institutions from seven countries (protected area managers, forest authorities, and NGOs) to discuss priorities for the Initiative.



Photo: Danube WILDisland RRI - internal kick-off meeting, September 2024, Danube Delta, Romania

As the **RRI's Coordination** is assigned to the DANUBEPARKS Association, with offices in Donau-Auen National Park (**Austria**) and Kopački rit Nature Park (**Croatia**), a newly established RRI office in Persina Nature Park (**Bulgaria**), hosting the RRI Coordinator. This structure ensures transnational governance, communication, and cooperation across the 10 Danube countries.



Photo: DANUBE PARKS Lower Danube office in Persina, Bulgaria

Funding for the Initiative is secured through a three-year project financed by the Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Nuclear Safety and Consumer Protection (*Germany*), complementing financial start-up support from the Ramsar Convention Secretariat. These resources provide a strong foundation for building a long-term platform for joint action.

The RRI has already started linking with existing initiatives, including the Carpathian Wetlands Initiative (CWI) and the Mediterranean Wetlands Initiative (MedWet), to foster synergies and exchange. In parallel, the Strategic Work Plan 2025–2030 was developed, aligning Ramsar objectives with global agendas (SDGs, EU Water Framework Directive, ICPDR Strategic Plan).



Photo: Meeting between representatives of Danube WILDIsland RRI and Carpathian Wetland Initiative in Bratislava, November 2025

At the beginning of 2025, DANUBEPARKS launched **two small-scale pilot programmes** for DANUBEPARKS full members.

- ✓ Under **Category “Identification, preparation, and implementation of Restoration Actions in the Danube Region”**, 7 project proposals were approved with a total value of €49,284.10, supporting habitat restoration and improvement, data analysis, and feasibility studies.
- ✓ Under **Category “Awareness-raising events for the Danube WILDisland RRI”**, six proposals were approved, with the Initiative expected to be promoted during **28 events** along the Danube by the end of 2026.

Lessons learned from these pilot measures will be consolidated into **practical guidelines for management and conservation measures** in the Danube Region.

In July 2025, the RRI was formally presented at the **15th Ramsar Conference of the Parties (CoP15) in Zimbabwe**, marking its recognition on the **global stage**. On this occasion, our team participated in a closed coordination session held with the Ramsar Secretariat to discuss joint cooperation and internal communication.

At CoP15, the Initiative also organised its first Steering Group meeting, where current achievements, financial expenditure, and future plans were presented to the Member States. In addition, a joint session with other Ramsar Regional Initiatives (RRIs) provided an opportunity to promote our work within the wider Ramsar family. Finally, the Danube WILDisland RRI was featured at the International Wetland Exhibition, highlighting transboundary cooperation, restoration efforts, and opportunities for future projects.



Photo: 15th Conference of the Parties (CoP15) to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, July 2025, Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe

Looking ahead, the RRI will improve Danube wide conservation measures, strengthen the visibility of wetland-related issues, involve all relevant national and regional stakeholders, and provide a platform for networking, joint planning, awareness-raising, and fundraising. By preserving and restoring WILDislands as indicators of river dynamics, ecosystem services, and non-intervention management, the Initiative strives to reinforce the Danube as a living ecological corridor and model for international wetland cooperation.

4. Attachments

- ✓ Brochure Danube WILDisland Ramsar Regional Initiative
- ✓ Danube WILDisland Ramsar Regional Initiative Strategic Work Plan 2025-2030
- ✓ [Promotional video about Ramsar Regional Initiatives](#)

Place and date:

Kopacevo, 27/08/2025

Signature, stamp if necessary:

Vlatko Rozac, DANUBEPARKS President

