

European River Restoration and the ECRR - An Interview with Bart Fokkens (Dec. 2012)



Bart Fokkens is the Chairman of the European Centre for River Restoration, a pan-European network of national river restoration centres and other members bound by their common mission to promote and enhance ecological river restoration throughout the greater European region. As an associate

expert, he is a technical advisor and ambassador for Wetlands International, an independent, global non-profit organisation working to sustain and restore wetlands and their resources for the benefit of people and biodiversity.

Bart worked for 40 years with the Ministry for Water Management in the Netherlands in various positions in the field of Land, Water and Wetland Management, often participating in international cooperation programs. Between 2002 and 2010, Bart was also president of the Dutch National Union of Provincial Nature Conservation Organisations, representing about 500 conservation sites covering a total of about 100,000 hectares. These sites are mainly wetlands and are managed by 12 member organisations, one from each of the Dutch provinces.

In 2009, Bart was awarded the Russian Medal "From Understanding to Unity" for having excelled in preventing international conflicts, strengthening international connections, drawing together diverse national cultures, and promoting ideals contributing to the environmental safety of the planet and the health of its inhabitants.

1. Please introduce yourself and the European Centre for River Restoration.



I worked for forty years at the Dutch Ministry of Water Management. Initially, due to my educational background, my work focused on land management, later shifting to river issues, and finally leading me to become one of the directors of the National Water Management Centre dealing with river and wetland restoration policies, planning, and implementation. In attaining this multidisciplinary perspective, I was able to bring aspects such as ecology, land management, and spatial planning into what was at the time a water management discussion that approached water features as isolated issues (e.g., quality, quantity). At different points in my career, I have had the chance to apply this integrated approach at the policy-making as well as implementation levels. In 2005 I became Chairman of the European Centre for River Restoration (ECRR) and, after retiring from my post in the ministry in 2010, I started to combine this with my work as an associate expert with Wetlands International.

The ECRR emerged in 1995 as an idea conceived by the Ministry of Water Management in the Netherlands together with the partners of a LIFE project (involving organisations from Denmark, Sweden, and the UK) that was commissioned to support river restoration demonstration projects in Europe. After surfacing, the organisation remained an unofficial structure for several years until it was formalised in 1999. Since its inception, Denmark, Italy, and the Netherlands (twice) have hosted the secretariat of the ECRR during different periods of three to four years.

The ECRR aims to enhance ecological river restoration in Europe by disseminating information on river restoration for its inclusion in integrated water resources management, provide access to a European network of individuals and organisations involved in river restoration, coordinate the support of National Centres for river restoration that facilitate strategic collaboration at the country level, and support the development of best practices.

The strength of the ECRR lies in the nature of its structure, which encompasses a diverse network that is active at the European level as well as the National Centres that extend the reach of the organisation to the country level.

2. What is your view on progress made in river restoration over the last 15 years? Do you see enough progress or too little progress? And, in your opinion, what are the major issues for river restoration currently in Europe?

I believe there has been substantial development in river restoration in the last 15 years or even more. It started off with the emergence of a number of small pilot projects in a few countries like Denmark and England and has gradually gained inertia to the point where we can now find large-scale projects taking place in Germany, the Netherlands, and the UK, for instance. It can also generally be said that, while in the past river restoration projects were commonly detached from other disciplines (e.g., flood protection, hydropower), we are now in a crucial period of shift that is leading to the adoption of more integrated approaches. For instance, while river restoration goes much further than supporting the implementation of policies like the WFD, the synergies between them has a high potential for mutual benefits.

The challenge posed by the current scarcity of financial resources requires that water resource management in general and river restoration in specific develop and implement more cost-effective solutions that minimise investments while maximising ecological outputs. In the past, management of costs was rather poor in part due to the lack of data and the relative availability of funding in comparison to today. While we are still transitioning to such cost-effective solutions, it must be noted that there is a change in perception taking place; there are studies and practical examples combined with a growing awareness of the need for best practices that are both cost-effective and successful in achieving the ecological objectives of restoration.

3. What should be the way forward for restoring European rivers? What key actions need to be prioritised?

The main action should be mainstreaming river restoration by integrating it into all key EU policies and policy fields, meaning we need to engage in policy dialogue with national governments and the EU. Cost-effective solutions, tools, and resources to support river restoration should be discussed in order to develop secure financing strategies in the different countries. Water quality is highly important but should be understood more as a precondition for ecological restoration.



River restoration construction works in the project “Improvement of the ecological state of the Órbigo river” by the Water Commission of the Duero Basin Authority in the provinces of Leon and Zamora in north-western Spain. Photo: Bart Fokkens

4. How can research contribute to addressing river restoration challenges? What do you consider to be the importance of EU-level projects such as REFORM and Life+RESTORE?

The importance of these projects is that they provide an interface between research, practical implementation, and policy development on river restoration. I believe that, while research on river restoration is well advanced, the knowledge gathered has failed to reach the end users. I see the REFORM project fulfilling this need. On the implementation front, Life+RESTORE will provide information on practical lessons learned from projects implemented in the last 10 years.

I find it positive that REFORM, Life+RESTORE, and the ECRR learn from each other, establish synergies, and combine their development in a way that is most effective, and I think we are already seeing the benefits of this close cooperation.

5. What are the present ambitions of the ECRR and how do you work together with National Centres for river restoration?

Both the ECRR and the National Centres should engage in outreach activities to promote river restoration in the different EU countries and to encourage participation at the local level. There is a REFORM has received funding from the European Union’s Seventh Programme for Research, Technological Development and Demonstration under Grant Agreement no. 282656.

special need for this in eastern and southern European countries; however, much work is still required in western and northern European countries as well. In the next five to ten years, we should be reaching out to the future practitioners, and for this our network of National Centres will play an important role. Recently, for administrative reasons, we have discussed the establishment of a permanent secretariat for the ECRR, but it should be mentioned that the involvement of different countries remains in our interest.

Although some may be under the impression, there is actually no official hierarchy between ECRR and the National Centres. We are all in one network but have different roles to play. ECRR engages in disseminating activities at the European level and between countries, establishing and moderating discussions with the EU and the national governments. The role of the National Centres is to undertake the activities within their respective country, allowing the organisation to expand its reach.

6. The ECRR recently organised a session on river restoration at the 6th World Water Forum in Marseilles. What were main insights from this event?

The main question brought forward in the session was whether new knowledge on river restoration should be developed. This issue was discussed already in 2011 by a group of 125 participants from 25 countries in preparation for the Forum in Marseilles. The conclusion reached was that, while there is always a need for new knowledge, the pressing requirement at the moment is to disseminate knowledge already available more effectively and increase the uptake of best practices.

Two main issues emerged from the session:

- The relationship between river restoration, spatial planning, and land use planning has been under-recognised in the past and this should be acknowledged especially in urban areas.
- Next to stakeholder involvement, public engagement and participation could be substantially improved in the future, promoting not only top-down but also bottom-up approaches.

The attendees at the Forum fully endorsed the conclusions reached, adding that the efforts should not stop at identifying these issues, but that a target action plan should be developed. This resulted in some river basin representatives expressing their interest in elaborating and executing the plan and sharing advances with one another. The river basins involved (in Armenia, France, UK, Spain, and potentially Ukraine or Turkey) hold such a range of conditions that valuable insights are sure to emerge from the exercise.

7. What is the scope of the upcoming European River Restoration Conference on 11-13 September 2013 in Vienna?

The European River Restoration Conference will focus on mainstreaming different policy fields and integrating river restoration in them. The discussion topics will include sustainable flood protection, rebalancing water use measures, environmental resilience, the enhancement of multiple use areas, land use, and land-use planning. In addition, the European River Prize (estimated at approximately 100,000€) will be awarded for the first time. In addition to promoting organisations with excellent achievements in river restoration, the Prize aims to enhance connections with the corporate sector. The winner of the European River Prize will also be shortlisted for the International River Prize. More information at: www.errc2013.eu

Bart Fokkens was interviewed on 29 October 2012 by Eleftheria Kampa (Leader of Dissemination and Stakeholder Involvement of REFORM, Ecologic Institute) and Gerardo Anzaldúa (Researcher, Ecologic Institute).

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