



Interview with Mrs. Prof. Dr.-Ing. Birgit Vogel, ICPDR Executive Secretary

One of the biggest international activities in water protection is the multilateral cooperation in protecting the Danube. It originally started in the 1980s in the form of the Declaration signed in Bucharest in 1985, which concerned the Danube River itself. In 1992, at the initiative of the European Communities, the internationally supported Danube Environment Programme was launched, covering the entire Danube basin including its tributaries. In parallel, work was underway to prepare a Convention on Cooperation for the Protection and Sustainable Use of the Danube. The Convention was submitted for signature in Sofia on 29th June 1994 and entered into force on 22nd October 1998. The Contracting Parties to the Convention are Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Moldova, Slovakia, Slovenia, Serbia, Montenegro, Romania, Ukraine, and the European Union. In August 2022, for the first time, a woman became the Executive Secretary of the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR) – Prof. Dr.-Ing. Birgit Vogel.

Mrs. Vogel, before we talk about your work in the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River, I cannot leave out your beginnings in water management. Do you remember the moment when you decided to take up water professionally?

It was during my university years that my interest in rivers and their management began to intensify. I was determined to focus on the assessment of human impacts on water ecology and quality. To achieve this, I combined courses in hydrobiology at BOKU, the University of Vienna and Innsbruck with studies in wastewater treatment and sanitation at the Technical University Vienna. Additionally, I pursued legal lectures. It was important to me to adopt an integrative and holistic approach to fully grasp the picture of river basin management as it is also reflected in the EU Water Framework Directive. My academic journey was incredibly exciting and paved the way for me to embark on challenging and enriching jobs.

You have extensive experience in the field of water management. Do you still remember your beginnings, for example in the form of a project and in which institution was it?

My first job was at BOKU within the Department for Hydrobiology where I was tasked with organising an international water conference in Vienna titled “Assessing the Ecological Integrity of Running Rivers”. Following the conference, I contributed to the development of the related proceedings. It was an incredible experience to collaborate with world-renowned experts from across the globe who were pioneers in assessing the ecological water status and its impacts. This conference and the work environment fuelled my motivation to pursue international work in the future. Later, when I worked at the Technical University in Vienna, I had the opportunity to serve as core team member in the first ICPDR Joint Danube Survey. This was a truly unique experience that forged a lasting connection with the Danube River and its management that holds until today.

From what I have read about you, for several years you also worked in India, Southeast Asia, China, Africa, and the South Caucasus. With what idea did you go to these destinations?

During my student years I travelled a lot and became deeply fascinated with Asia – its unique approach to life and landscape fascinated me. Eventually, I felt that I needed to broaden my horizons and deepen my understanding of river basins beyond Europe and the communities living in these regions. Somehow it was therefore a logical professional but also passionate step for me to apply for the position of Chief Technical Advisor for the IWR Project at the Mekong River Commission and luckily, it worked out. Working with the Mekong Commission was very challenging in an extremely interesting and also positive way. Especially coordinating the prior notification and prior consultation process for the Xayaburi Dam, the first mainstream hydropower project in the Mekong below the Chinese border. This role was a steep and fast learning curve for me regarding such management matters. Then projects in China and Africa followed, each offering a unique set of experiences and learning opportunities. In my last post before my current role with the ICPDR, I was involved with GIZ and the India-EU Water Partnership. India with its vast diversity and numerous water management challenges proved to be a fascinating country to work in. The impacts on rivers are significant and complex, largely due to the country's dense population. In India, adopting an integrative approach to problem-solving is a must.

What benefit did these non-European countries get from your experience in and what, in contrast, enriched you?

In my opinion, the EU Water Framework Directive (EU WFD) stands as the most comprehensive water legislation in the world. While its philosophy and methodologies cannot be directly applied to countries and river basins outside of the EU, we successfully integrated the EU WFD's approach with related transboundary cooperation processes in the Mekong region and India. In India, we developed a river basin management plan for the Tapi Basin which has the size of Austria and is shared by three states. This initiative was highly successful and much appreciated by the Indian Ministry for Water and related agencies. The National Mission for Clean Ganga adopted this approach for a sub-basin of the Ganga River and is now considering its expansion. What enriched me? The list is long if not endless. Working with colleagues from and in different countries is always an enriching experience despite the often different ways of thinking and communicating. Adapting to these differences has allowed me to learn immensely from my river basin management colleagues abroad, many of whom have become friends. What also enriched me is the beauty of the countries and river basins I've worked in. Understanding the challenges they face and contributing to their solutions is an invaluable experience I wouldn't have wanted to miss.

Before you took up the position of executive secretary of ICPDR, you worked there for five years as a technical expert for river basin management. What was the impulse to work in this international commission?

My connection to the Danube River Basin is profound, blending professional engagement with a deep emotional bond. This unique relationship was sparked by my participation in the first Joint Danube Survey (JDS 1) and further cemented during my position from 2000–2005 as RBM Technical Expert. JDS 1 ignited my passion for large rivers, a shift from my earlier focus on alpine rivers. The history, landscape and people of the Danube Basin are globally unique and make the Danube River a connector for all the countries sharing the basin. Even in difficult times, ICPDR was founded on the basis of the Convention on Cooperation for the Protection and Sustainable Use of the Danube with the intention of initiating solutions to serious problems in the basin.

What vision does the fourth secretary general have in her position?

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the Danube Protection Convention. This is a very special year for the ICPDR and I am proud to be part of this milestone. As for my vision, I believe that we live in extremely challenging times where the necessity and the ability for transformation is essential. The effects of climate change are unmistakably present and related impacts add up to many of the challenges we are dealing with anyway (e.g. pollution). Thus, adaptation is high on the agenda and adaptation is very high on my vision for the future. Action is essential and I foresee the need for us to respond more flexibly and swiftly to the impacts on water quality and quantity. The topic of droughts and potential water scarcity during certain seasons has now arrived in the Danube River Basin. Addressing this challenge is crucial and the ICPDR has already begun to take steps towards enhancing water resilience.

What are the current topics that ICPDR and its secretariat are currently dealing with?

In our role, we are dedicated to the implementation of the Convention alongside with coordinating international management plans that cover transboundary river basin management and flood risk management. We address key management topics like point source and diffuse pollution, pollution through hazardous substance but also the structural alterations of rivers in the Danube River Basin. A significant focus within this context is to ensure the free migration of all

Danube fish species with particular attention to our flagship species, the sturgeon. Achieving this requires a productive dialogue with hydropower operators and the cooperation of all Danube countries to make hydropower dams passable for fish, thereby supporting their natural reproductive processes. As mentioned, climate change presents a significant challenge for the ICPDR, prompting us to address emerging issues such as droughts and water quantity management.

This year we will commemorate 30 years since the Convention was presented for signature in Sofia, Bulgaria. How would you imagine the functioning of this commission in the next 30 years?

Cooperation in tackling and solving water resource challenges remains a cornerstone of efforts in the Danube Basin and will continue to be crucial even in 30 years from now. It is difficult to predict the challenges that will emerge in the next three decades. Yet, I am convinced that if the ICPDR countries maintain their current level of cooperation – based on trust and willingness – we will be well-prepared to face future challenges – also new ones. I envision the ICPDR keeping tackling all these challenges in an innovative and transformative way. This foundation, coupled with the openness and readiness to adapt our approaches as necessary, will ensure that the ICPDR remains a champion in transboundary river basin management. I am highly convinced of this.

On the occasion of the signing of the Convention, Danube Day has been celebrated since 2004. How are you going to celebrate this day?

On the occasion of Danube Day, celebrated since 2004 to commemorate the signing of the Convention, we are set to honour this important day with a series of collaborative and educational events throughout the basin. Such events are held every year, but 30 years is an anniversary that deserves special attention. The events are designed to underscore the critical importance of water resource management and celebrate the achievements of cooperation across the Danube Basin. Our celebrations will aim to deepen the understanding of the challenges confronting the Danube River Basin, especially those related to climate change and the imperative of sustainable management practices. Highlighting this, a special event on 25th June in Bratislava, under the auspices of the Slovak Presidency of the ICPDR, will feature an exhibition and a panel discussion. This gathering will not only inspire action but also strengthen the spirit of cooperation that has been fundamental to our collective efforts. Furthermore, we will spotlight the innovative and transformative strategies the ICPDR has implemented to address these challenges, reaffirming our dedication to a cleaner, healthier and safer Danube River Basin for the benefit of future generations.

Mrs. Vogel, thank you very much for the interview.

Ing. Josef Nistler

Prof. Dr.-Ing. Birgit Vogel

Prof. Dr.-Ing. Birgit Vogel, born on 12th November 1961, has been involved in international water management throughout her professional life, both in Austria and in Asia and Africa. She studied at the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences (BOKU Vienna) and the University of Leicester (UK). She is the founder of RBM solutions – River Basin Management with many projects in Europe, Asia, and Africa; she worked as a project manager in India at the German Society for International Cooperation (GIZ) GmbH and was, among other things, the chief technical advisor of the Mekong River Commission. The new role of Executive Secretary of the ICPDR is another milestone in her professional career.