

CIVILISED WILDERNESS

Life at the Sava Floodplains

Life between the Elbe Dikes



A Two-Part Documentary Series

2*45min / 2*52min / 2* 28min

by Anne Mesecke, Dr. Heribert Schöller and Guido Kilbert

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THE SERIES

The big European rivers are the lifelines of our continent. But in one of the most densely populated regions worldwide, there is less and less room left for them. Over the last centuries, most of these large streams developed into channelled waterways, as man straightens their course, deepens the river beds and aspires to secure himself from their influence by building still higher dikes.

The first peasants' settlements at the fertile banks of these rivers mark the beginning of an unequal struggle. By the end of the last century, this conflict appeared to be settled – as long as the dikes were high enough, man believed he had defeated nature. Yet, ever new, more and more extreme floods show that time has come to reconsider the way we treated the big European rivers – and to recognise that these streams are more than mere transportation routes and water reservoirs.

“Civilised Wilderness” reveals the story of the most striking floodplains of our continent. The two-part series leads into the Elbe biosphere reserve in Germany and into the Croatian nature reserve of the Sava floodplains.

The Sava riverbanks are among the least modernised in Europe. Nowhere else could such a large and cohesive area of riverside woodland be preserved. For centuries, the Slavonian farmers graze their cattle here and thereby created a unique and fascinating landscape. Here, animals and plants elsewhere long extinct survived. The river, its people, flora and fauna are part of one interconnected microcosm. Some shepherds live this old tradition up till today and drive hundreds of droll Turopolje pigs or wild horses over the floodplains. With modernization though, this original form of farming is in danger of extinction. Will the peasants favor modern stock farming over their old pact with the river Sava?

Yet a different situation at the river Elbe in Germany: One of the most original European landscapes did once spread wide as the Elbe floodplains. But, what we know today as the nature of this region has little in common with its original form. With the arrival of the first farmers, dense floodplain forests and old gnarled oak trees disappeared. Broad marsh areas developed, dikes dominate the scenery. But now the people at the Elbe revise their treatment of the river: Together, environmentalists and farmers could change the Elbe's destiny. Aurochs, Przewalski horses and other, once disappeared wild animals return to the riverbanks. Can the original river wilderness be revived?

The documentaries are produced in 2007/ 2008. Filmed on HD-CAM and enriched by elaborate aerial shots and intriguing sequences filmed with extreme focal lengths, this is a visually challenging series of the genre “Nature/ Wildlife”. For more information see www.hoferichterjacobs.de.

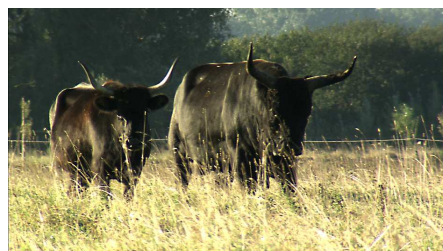
LIFE BETWEEN THE ELBE DIKES



The river Elbe, a few centuries ago: Mighty aurochs trek through the shrubbery of the floodplains and vast marsh area. An original landscape extends from the low mountain range to the sea, right in the midst of a densely populated continent. But with the arrival of the first peasants, a grim combat between man and river is initiated: The

old gnarled oak trees give way to pasture land for cows and horses. Up till then impenetrable floodplain forests disappear. Broad marsh areas emerge along the river banks. Dikes increasingly restrict the flood area of the Elbe in order to secure the houses and fields of the farmers. A century-long struggle between man and river begins.

Today, as the apparent victory of man over river is challenged by increasingly inexorable floods, the destiny of the Elbe might change once again: Can the river wilderness return - into its own original past? The film meets those people along the Elbe who aspire ways to revive the lost diversity of the riverbanks. They replant the floodplains, displace dikes and graze the marsh areas of the Elbe region with ancient cattle races. Will formerly disappeared animals and plants find their way back to the river?



The changeful history of the conflict between man and river is part of a filmic journey through the contemporary Elbe wilderness. The documentary tracks the evolution of the Elbe floodplains by visiting its different development phases. It seeks to find the last remaining floodplain forests, dives into the fascinating microcosm of a marsh area, discovers the diverging worlds of sand river banks or dike and, moreover, witnesses the return of the aurochs and the Przewalski horse.

LIFE AT THE SAVA FLOODPLAINS



In the Croatian plains of the Pannonian Basin, just before the border to Bosnia-Herzegovina, the river Sava slows down to spread out across the vast lowlands. It is here that the largest European floodplain forest exists: An area of about 500 square kilometers, covered by water up to nine meters above normal, several times a year. While most other great European rivers are long channelled and diked, the Sava river region remained a natural floodplain. Therefore, one of Europe's most diverse and fascinating river landscapes survived and saved the traditions of the people who live at the Sava. In the rhythm of drought and flood, farmers and river formed an alliance over centuries. Yet today, only some shepherds along the river Sava are left who work according to a more than thousand year-old

tradition. They graze their cattle, vast herds of wild horses, cows and pigs, freely in the open range of the floodplains.

Ivan Adamovic is one of the last shepherds of the Sava floodplains. In spring, just after the snowmelt, he brings his Turopolje pigs on the pasture land. With their massive forehead, broad lop ears and curly-haired, they look quite different than the well-known pink domestic pigs. Turopolje pigs might be the oldest pig race in Europe. Here, at the river Sava, they were rediscovered, after being considered almost extinct. In small herds, these animals wander autonomously through the floodplains and dig the grasslands' soil with their long noses in search of food. Thereby, they keep open vast mud fields, where elsewhere endangered plants such as the Four Leaf Clover or the Yellow Floating Heart can grow. This enable birds like the Corncrake or the Whiskered Tern to reach their food.



When the floodplains dry out in summer, the pigs trek through the dense floodplain forests. The head of the herd, most often a sow, knows the region thoroughly and, during the flood, leads its flock to higher places. On the marsh land, impressive Hungarian grey cattle graze just beside brood colonies of rare Spoonbills, deeply hidden in the grass. The Sava floodplain is one of their most important reserves in Europe, also because the cattle keeps the pasture land around the colony open all summer.



The film follows the Sava shepherds on their old and traditional tracks over the floodplains and discovers rare animals and plants that are long extinct in the rest of Europe.



DIRECTOR'S NOTE

The two films that form the documentary series „Civilised Wilderness“ are the first projects which I directed. Besides the professional challenge, the work on these films has been coined primarily by one question: What importance do rivers carry for our everyday life, today? Up till then, the big European rivers have been for me – as for many others – not much more than something one crosses by car or on the train, at the best they may be the destination of a weekend trip.

Yet, while filming at the Sava and at the Elbe, I met people whose lives are bound closely to a river. They do not watch the effects of floods or low tides on TV, these people are affected directly by the changing waters of the river – for me, a strange bond, yet a connection which characterised so many human settlements only centuries ago.

I realised that living at a river not only influences everyday life and culture, in some ways, it might also form the people's character: We won the trust of a Croatian shepherd only after our own car broke down, thanks to the dried out river pastures – right in front of his door. United by a critical examination of the car, in the middle of the peasant's hundred-year-old farm, the river shepherd no longer held as much reservation towards the German film team, as he did before. Only after that did he guide us to one of his wild mother sows hidden deep in the Sava meadows and to her piglets which were born only a few days before. A few meters further into the wood, we encountered the nowadays endangered Little Bittern in a mud pool, a leftover from the last Sava flood earlier in the year.

At the Elbe, I drove the river pastures with the jeep of Jürgen Niederhoff in order to lure the herd to the other end of the field. The peasant marched ahead a few meters, the animals concentrated on the car, assuming food to be in there – therefore, full speed ahead and one memorable look into the rear view mirror: Galloping heck cattle behind the car, at the sides of the jeep Konik horses pushing their heads through the windows. A surprisingly wild part of the river pasture, right in the middle of Germany.

The river flood plains in Croatia are as little an untouched natural landscape as the Elbe plains in Germany. Cultivated by peasants, a fascinating living space developed at both rivers. Ancient trees, wide marsh areas, nowadays rare animals and plants, people with a vision and a, for me unknowingly close bond to nature – these experiences have changed my view towards the European rivers profoundly.

Anne Mesecke, April 2008

CREW

A Film by Anne Mesecke, Dr. Heribert Schöller, Guido Kilbert

Aerial Shots: Stemme UMS
Michael Kaiser, Bernhard Naumann, Phillip Scheffel

Video Editor: Klaus Eichler

Assistant Video Editor: Christoph Sturm

Music: Andreas Kuse

Sound Design: Sven Piesker

Expert Advisor: Dr. Heribert Schöller, Dr. Gunnar Grah

Production Manager: Geraldine Prange

Line Producer: Peter Effenberg

Producer: Carolin Scheffler

Editor: Olaf Jacobs

Production: Hoferichter & Jacobs GmbH in cooperation with
pentAlpha gGmbH co-financed by the
European Commission, DG Agriculture and Rural Development

PRODUCTION DATES

Filming Period: August – November 2007
Completion: March 2008

Locations: Germany – Nature Reserve Steckby-Lödderitzer Forst, Dessau,
Wulfener Bruch, Lenzen, Wittenberge etc.
Croatia – Nature Park Lonjsko Polje, 100 km southeast of Zagreb

Shooting Format: HD-Cam

Length: 2*52min / 2*45min / 2*28 min

Language Versions: German, Englisch

World Sales: Telepool GmbH

Sales Germany: pentAlpha gGmbH

SCREENINGS

“Life between the Elbe Dikes”,
04/08/08 [16. Elbe-Saale Camp](#) in Barby (Sachsen Anhalt)

“Life between the Elbe Dikes”, “Life at the Sava Floodplains”
18/07/08, 19/07/08, [Nationalpark Unteres Odertal](#): 6. Junior-Ranger-Camp

“Life between the Elbe Dikes”
17/06/08, 5:00 pm, [Biosphärenreservat Mittelelbe](#)

Pay-TV premiere for „Life between the Elbe Dikes”
02/04/08, 8:15 pm, [Planet](#) (plus a total of 18 repeats till 22/04/08)

Pay-TV premiere for „Life at the Sava Floodplains “
26/03/08, 8:15pm, [Planet](#) (plus a total of 18 repeats till 15/04/08)

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