

## **Great Binding Prize 2014 Acceptance Speech by Ulrich Eichelmann**

Their Serene Highnesses, dear ladies and gentlemen and friends,

It is a great honour and delight to stand here today and accept this award. I consider this award as an appreciation of rivers, but let me get back to that later.

I want to thank the Binding Foundation board of trustees for awarding me this prize. I particularly want to express my thanks to Georg Grabherr, also for the laudation he presented. Dear Georg, it is a big honour for me that you held the laudation. We have known each other for a long time and I appreciate your tireless effort and dedication. In a positive sense, I think you are at least just as stubborn as I am.

Let me tell you how I found out about this award. I was sitting in a car at a gas station reading my emails. I saw one from the Binding Foundation. It said "Great Binding Prize" in the subject line and below, Mario Broggi wrote: "Dear Mr Eichelmann, crack a bottle of champagne." So I got out of the car, bought a bottle and only then continued to read. Indeed, the Great Binding Prize. I couldn't even believe it. Later I called my family in Germany to tell my mother, sister and brother-in-law.

I have been environmentalist by profession for over 25 years. However, this is not a profession like any other and it is hard to explain what exactly an environmentalist does. A mason lays bricks, a carpenter timbers, an architect designs and builds houses. But an environmentalist? My family in Germany has been asking me that question and to this day, they have a hard time picturing what in fact it is I am doing. When I excitedly told them about winning an award, my mother said: "An award? What are you getting an award for? Watch out for the hidden camera!"

Now, apparently there is no hidden camera. And so I am happy that my mother, sister, aunt and uncle, my daughter Luca and friends from Germany and Austria are here today to celebrate this special day with me.

Most of what I accomplished at work would not have been possible without the support from others. For that reason, I would like to express my thanks to many people and organisations.

First of all, I would like to thank the WWF Austria, my professional home for over 17 years. The WWF always allowed me sufficient leeway in my activities. Allowing space is an important quality, because, just like rivers, human beings also need space to evolve.

I particularly want to thank Christoph Walder, a friend from Innsbruck, with whom I worked on many projects and contrived even more. We didn't win all of them, but it was in any case much more fun to lose with rather than without you.

Many thanks go to EuroNatur, to the team around Christel Schroeder and Gabriel Schwaderer in Radolfzell. Together, we are currently trying to save the rivers on the Balkans from being sold off. We will continue to cooperate – hopefully successfully.

In spite of all commitment and creativity, most of the projects would not be feasible without financial support. In this regard I would like to mention two organisations in particular, which have been funding our work for years.

Special thanks go to the Manfred-Hermesen-Stiftung (MHS), a foundation based in Bremen, for which I freelance. The MHS possesses a quality that has become rare today: courage. The MHS supports projects which are deemed hopeless. In 2007, they gave me the opportunity to fully dedicate myself to the fight against the Ilisu dam in Turkey, at a time when nobody else believed in its success. In addition, I would have never been able to produce the documentary “Climate Crimes” if it wasn’t for the support of MHS. As of today, they are still funding Riverwatch and our projects.

The same goes for the MAVA Foundation based in Switzerland, which is also supporting our river projects substantially and continuously. With your help we are able to maintain the necessary endurance in the fight against the destruction of nature. Thank you for that.

Last but not least, I want to thank my assistant Conny Wieser for her dedication and patience with me. The two of us ARE Riverwatch, so to speak.

I want to take this opportunity to raise a few issues that are important to me.

I received this award not least due to our commitment to the rivers on the Balkans. In this sense, the honour also belongs to these rivers. They can really need every conceivable support. And they can need this award in particular to shed light on their existence. Hardly anyone knows about these incredible rivers between Slovenia and Albania, about the crystal clear creeks, breathtaking waterfalls or the last big wild rivers on our continent.

Did you know that 15 different trout species roam these rivers and 69 fish species live only here and nowhere else in the world? Even less known is the fact that these rivers are at risk. 570 hydropower plants are to be built in this region in the next few years. And this only includes medium and large scale projects. Taking into account all the projected small-scale projects, the actual number rises to a few thousand. Virtually no river will remain unharmed.

The tragedy is that apparently we have not learned anything from our own mistakes that we made in the past. On the Balkans, projects are planned and constructed without any regard for nature and biodiversity – even inside national parks. “Impossible”, you would say, but it gets even worse: these projects are often funded by international financial institutions such as the World Bank or the EBRD (European Bank for Reconstruction and Development), all of which have well-sounding environmental standards in their portfolio. In reality, however, these standards don’t mean anything.

Not only the Balkan rivers are struck with this fate, but rivers worldwide. The last unimpaired life lines of our planet are under severe pressure – destruction disguised as

green energy and contribution to climate conservation. Environmental protection through nature's destruction is what we are led to believe.

Moreover, this new wave of hydropower development means water privatisation on a large scale. A river or creek flows for everyone, for flora and fauna, for fishermen, skippers and other recreational visitors. However, if a hydropower plant is built on a river, its water flows exclusively for its operator. This means that a good is being privatised that actually belongs to the commons. This kind of water privatisation is even more pervasive than the privatisation of drinking water. Hardly anyone recognizes that.

This abuse needs to be named and shamed. This is what we are doing on the Balkans. We can save these rivers if we pay attention to the following three steps:

First, we need to make the threat known, that is, making the problem visible. We have to take every opportunity to give the Balkan rivers a voice. This is what we are currently trying to do in our campaign, but everyone can contribute.

Second, we need a masterplan for this precious network of rivers, a spatial plan which dictates where rivers can be dammed and, most of all, where not. A designation of no-go areas is imperative. Imagine building a house: one cannot just build anywhere one pleases – it has to be done according to a land-use plan. Once the land-use plan is taken into account, one can build, but has to abide by building regulations. However, when it comes to rivers, one can indeed build wherever. Prior deliberation is limited to the construction of fish ladders without first taking the basics into account. This approach needs to be changed as it falls short of the most important considerations. We need a masterplan for river and, in my opinion, for any other types of habitat as well.

Third, we need to resist specific projects. Only those who are annoying and relentless can make a big difference. This might not be everyone's cup of tea, but be bold, be courageous, and dare to stand "against". As long as grievances exist in the world and as long as nature is destroyed under wrong pretences, it is our right and duty to resist. This is what Riverwatch does in the Balkan campaign and elsewhere. To this end, we continue to need support, also financially.

Many people regard this as a futile undertaking. In many cases, this is true, but sometimes it isn't, and this "sometimes" is of great importance. Without the resistance and this "sometimes", the floodplains east of Vienna would no longer exist, the Loire in France wouldn't be free-flowing and – please excuse the magnitude of the example – Germany would probably still not be united. It is mostly the insane, the nutcases, who dare to do the unthinkable when standing at the crossroad of an initially undreamed of development.

I want to leave you with a very special example for such a "sometimes" and for "being courageous", which at the same time is a project vision of mine for the future:

We are experiencing a gold rush atmosphere in the hydropower sector; dams are being built and planned all over the place. Worldwide, about 5,000 large-scale dams are currently under construction or about to be. Even the most remote rivers and floodplains are not to be spared.

However, there are counter-movements that are highly admirable. Having their origin in the USA, they have already left positive marks in Europe: I am referring to de-damming, the tearing down of dams. Since the era of Bill Clinton, about 1,000 dams have been removed in the US. Even in France and Spain, first dams have been taken down. Besides the obvious positive implications for the environment, this is also an important social message: dams are not for eternity; we can turn things around and give the rivers back their space!

How about conducting a substantial study on dams to be removed in the Alps? Defining power plants that are disastrous ecologically and outdated economically? Compiling a list of let's say 30 hydropower plants to be taken down? Technically, that's easy. We could reconnect fish populations, create new spawning grounds, new habitats as well as places where people can experience nature as it is.

I'm convinced that, in regards to the protection of rivers, not only a preventive strategy is required but also a forward strategy. De-damming constitutes such a forward strategy. It is an idea that can be implemented – we just have to do it.

An example from my home in north-western Germany shows that de-damming is a viable option in Europe as well. I grew up in a small village in North Rhine-Westphalia, near Paderborn, at a creek called Altenau. My father and uncle used to learn how to swim in the deep bits of the creek, and I learned how to catch river trouts barehanded. In the 1970s, the Altenau was regulated heavily and was dammed in its upper reach in 1985. That was too much for the small creek. Every since then it runs dry every summer.

Shortly after completion of the dams we started an initiative for the draining of the reservoirs. As you can imagine, hardly anyone believed in our success back then. However, on September 1<sup>st</sup> of this year, the first reservoir was drained and another dam will be torn down next year. The grayling will be able to migrate; the dippers and the dragonflies will fly once again. All that in the middle of Germany – so why not everywhere else?

Dare to think that way.

With this in mind, I thank you once more for this big honor and promise you to remain persistent and dedicated.

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