



FACTSHEET

ISEL • 2020



Picture: © W. Retter

THE ISEL: A NATURAL JEWEL WITH EXPIRATION DATE?

The Isel flows through East Tyrol from the icy heights of the glaciers in the Hohe Tauern to the sunny district capital Lienz in the southeast. Nothing but the forces of nature influence the dynamics of the East Tyrolean heart river. Almost unaffected by congestion, diversions or surges, the Isel flows from its source to its mouth. On its journey several glacial streams of the Tyrolean National Park Hohe Tauern unite in the Isel. About 4 percent of the catchment area or 50 square kilometers are glaciated. The meltwater has a major influence on the Isel during the course of the day and year: in summer the river carries up to twenty times more water than in winter. On warm summer afternoons, the rock contained in the glacier water, finely crushed by the ice, flows into the Isel in the form of "glacier milk" and gives it its characteristic turbidity. This uniqueness is also reflected in its diversity: the Isel and its tributaries are a treasure trove of nature and provide habitats for numerous endangered animal and plant species.

The fact that the Isel is still in such a good condition today is due to the foresight of committed conservationists who have been vehemently and successfully fighting against the obstruction of the glacial river for decades. Today, the Isel is the last of its kind - in the entire Eastern Alps. However, several power plant projects continue to threaten this natural treasure of international importance.

ISEL, KALSERBACH, TAUERNBACH AND SCHWARZACH FORM THE LIFELINES OF EAST TYROL

- The Isel with its tributaries is an internationally unique treasure trove of nature and provides habitat for endangered animal and plant species.
- From the source to the mouth, the Isel may still flow freely, almost unimpeded by congestion, diversion or surge.
- **Profile**
 - Origin:** at 2 450 m above sea level at the Umbalkees (Glacier)
 - Length:** 58 km
 - Feeding area:** 1 200 km² (=2/3 of the area of East Tyrol)
 - Estuary:** into the Drau near Lienz
 - Water flow at mouth:** 40 m³/s (= three times more than Drau itself leads and ¾ of all the East Tyrolean water)
 - Share of natural flow paths:** > 90 %



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Common Sandpiper, Alpine Groundhopper and Grayling. Pictures: © T. Vorauer, G. Wöss, C. Ratschan

NATURAL GEM ISEL

Unique habitat

The wide river bed of the Isel is in constant change. Regular floods reshape the landscape each time and create new gravel and sandbanks over and over. These natural river dynamics create a diverse habitat for rare animal and plant species, which have already disappeared elsewhere because their habitats have been destroyed by construction work and power plants. On the Isel and its tributaries you can still experience and explore what a natural glacier river looks like. It is therefore an equally indispensable reference river for science.

Hotspot of biological diversity

Several species specialised in natural riverine landscapes find refuge on the banks and in the current of the Isel and its tributaries. Among them is the German tamarisk, once widespread on Austria's riverbanks, but now threatened to extinction. The evergreen shrub is considered an indicator plant for intact, natural river systems. The Isel and its tributaries are home to the most vital and genetically diverse tamarisk occurrence in the entire region of the Alps. This once again shows the international importance of the East Tyrolean glacial rivers as an ecological treasure-trove in the heart of Europe.

RECREATION AND SPORT

The Isel is a valuable local recreation area, but also an important source of income for tourism. With the Iseltrail a long-distance hiking trail has been created, which makes it possible to experience the unspoiled nature of the glacial river system from its mouth to its source. The river is also of great importance for fishers and white-water sports: around 30,000 water sports enthusiasts come to the Isel every year and make use of the tourist infrastructure. The river offers all six whitewater grades (degrees of difficulty) in a breathtaking landscape.

FAUNA & FLORA

- **Common Sandpiper**
(*Actitis hypoleucos*) – The Isel and its tributaries provide refuge for the largest population of the long-legged, endangered bird in Tyrol.
- **Alpine Groundhopper**
(*Tetrix tuerki*) – The small grasshopper is master of camouflage and suffers from continuous habitat loss. (endangered)
- **Grayling**
(*Thymallus thymallus*) – This colourful fish is sensitive to water pollution and obstruction. (vulnerable)
- **German tamarisk**
(*Myricaria germanica*) – This evergreen shrub, which is critically endangered to the threat of extinction, is the indicator species par excellence for natural rivers and is widespread on the Isel.
- **Little Ringed Plover**
(*Charadrius dubius*) – This small tripping bird is dependent on gravel islands as resting place when passing through. (vulnerable)
- **Yellow-bellied Toad**
(*Bombina variegata*) – The flooded area of rivers is home to the strongly protected amphibian species, which shows its bright yellow spotted belly when in danger. (vulnerable)



German Tamarisk, Little Ringed Plover and Yellow-bellied Toad. Pictures: © M. Götsch, M. Sommerhage, E. Fischer

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Pictures: © W. Retter, Cam Kärnten Rafting, I. Trafford

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PROTECTION AND CONSERVATION

After decades of hard work and tenacious struggle, the Natura 2000 area "East Tyrolean Glacial Rivers, Isel, Schwarzach and Kalserbach" was finally officially registered with the EU in 2015. At the same time a first draft for a nature reserve with the same name was prepared. This is a great success for nature conservation and for all those who have worked for years to protect the Isel. But unfortunately it became apparent that the final protection of the East Tyrolean lifelines had not yet been achieved.

Protective Screen with Leaks

The Isel needs the networking with its tributary rivers in order to survive as a living, dynamic natural river. However, it is precisely these tributaries that were left out in important areas when the Natura 2000 area was designed. More than 40 percent of the core habitats of the endangered German Tamarisk still lie unprotected, outside the Natura 2000 area.

In addition, the province of Tyrol limited itself to only one species, the German Tamarisk, when defining the protected assets of the area. The many other animal and plant species worthy of protection in the Isel feeding area were not considered. This omission favours nature-destroying decisions, especially in procedures for the construction of new hydroelectric power plants.

THREAT

As many as seven current hydropower plant projects threaten the rivers in the Isel catchment area, three of which even affect the Natura 2000 area directly (as of November 2020). Over a total length of 42 kilometres of river, the water is to be diverted and used to generate electricity. This would be a catastrophe for the unique river landscape. Expected consequences would be:

- the reduction of water quantity and bed load and thus loss of river dynamics;
- the silting up of the bottom of the water and thus the loss of spawning grounds for fish;
- the impoverishment of particularly valuable river habitats that have become rare in the Alps;
- and the threat to endangered plant and animal species.

Fish stocks in the vicinity of existing power plants have already plummeted. The incomplete protected area, as well as the advancing hydropower development within the sensitive river system contradicts the protection regulations of the EU, and threatens to irretrievably destroy a unique river landscape.



INITIATIVES FOR THE EAST TYROLEAN GLACIAL RIVERS

Numerous citizens' initiatives are working together to protect the Isel and its tributaries.

- **Association for the Protection of the Recreational Landscape East Tyrol (VEO)**
- **Network Water East Tyrol**
www.wasser-osttirol.at
- **Initiative „Women for the Isel“**
- **Citizens' initiative against the Virgental power plant**
www.kraftwerk-virgental.at
- **Project group for the Proseggklamm natural heritage**
www.proseggklamm.at



Picture: © WWF / V.Sufiyan

Platform "Flüsse voller Leben" (Rivers of Life)

Together we are stronger. This is why the WWF and numerous other interest groups, as well as citizens' initiatives from all over Austria have joined forces.

Our goal: to protect Austria's last intact watercourses from unrestricted hydropower expansion.

- ➔ www.fluessevollerleben.at
- ➔ fb.com/groups/fluessevollerleben



Pictures: © W. Retter, Bürgerinitiative gegen das Wasserkraftwerk Virgental, I. Trafford

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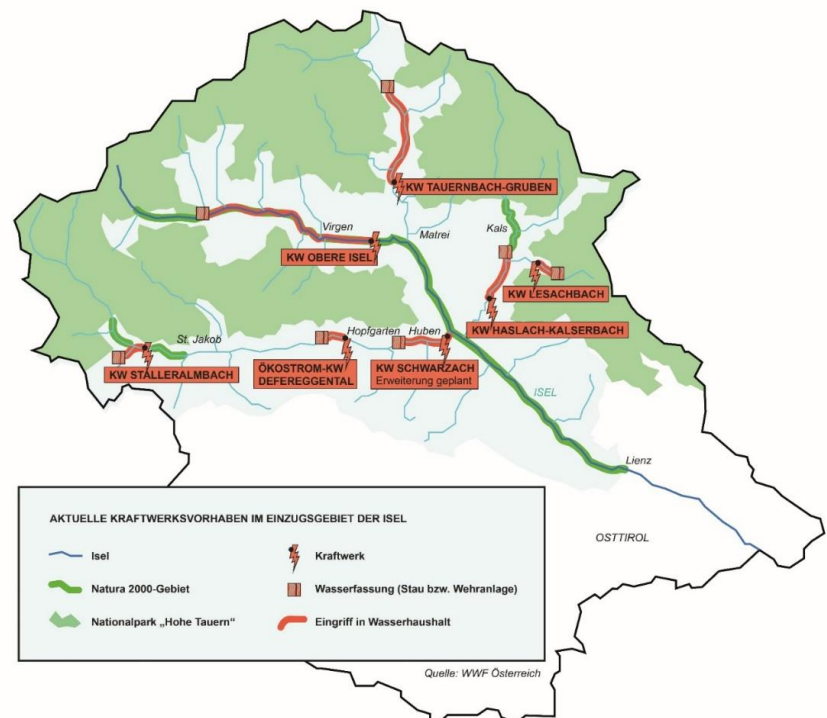
REAL PROTECTION FOR THE ISEL

Developments in recent years have shown that the existing protection is not sufficient to effectively protect the Isel as a whole system and its natural gems. Power plants have been approved for ecologically unique feeder rivers such as the Lesachbach and the Stalleralmbach. Many other plants, even on the protected Isel, are in the planning stage and are being pushed forward with high pressure. It is now time to take concrete steps for the effective and long-term protection of the East Tyrolean glacial rivers.

Four essential steps for the future of the East Tyrolean lifelines:

- Expansion stop for power plants. No further hydropower development on the Isel and the important feeder rivers Tauernbach, Kalserbach and Schwarzach.
- The designation of the entire Isel - including its ecologically valuable tributaries - as a nature reserve according to the Tyrolean Nature Conservation Act.
- A technically sound management plan for the protected area, including a complete list of protected goods and conservation objectives as a basis for area management and impact assessments.
- Establishment of a future-oriented river basin management for the Isel and its tributaries and implementation of comprehensive renaturation and revitalization measures in the affected stretches.

Together with several nature conservation associations and citizen initiatives, WWF Austria is committed to the preservation of the unique Isel and its tributaries as the "lifelines of East Tyrol".



Sources

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