INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR DANUBE RESEARCH

Scientific Report 2025

Recent Research Activities

In 2025, the research issues in the IAD network continued to advance freshwater science across the Danube Basin, combining fundamental (45%) and applied research (50%) with innovative tools and approaches. IAD studies span multiple, interconnected areas that together enhance understanding of riverine ecosystems and support sustainable management, which finally relates to publications about Policy & Governance (5%).

A major focus of our research is **ecosystem structure, biodiversity, and connectivity**, examining how hydrological, geomorphological, and habitat links shape the river-floodplain communities. By integrating novel methods, such as *UAV photogrammetry*, IAD research network focussed on ecological patterns with underlying processes, providing actionable insights for **conservation** and **restoration** in the Danube River Basin.

Fish, their **ecology** and **biological interactions**, including studies on **invasive alien species** (IAS), remained central in view of Danube River biota in year 2025. This research focus documents distributional shifts, first records of non-native species, and population-level mechanisms such as reproductive traits and climate impacts, highlighting IAS as a critical conservation concern.

Water quality and microbial dynamics are another two interlinked core components of expertise in IAD research network. Investigations into **contaminants**, **microplastics**, and **microbial turnover** complement basin-wide research initiatives like the Joint Danube Survey 5 (JDS5), supporting comprehensive assessments of ecosystem health and Human Health Related Water Microbiology.

IAD work 2025 also addresses **climate driving environmental change**, exploring how warming, tidal variation, and hydrological fluctuations influence ecological structure and function. Complementing these studies, **methodological innovation, and digital tools**—including software (R), statistical frameworks, and automated data processing - enhance monitoring, assessment, and modelling capabilities. All in all, these are about 100 research articles, and 50 contributions to scientific conference, which are listed below in Annex 2 and 3.

Key findings emerging from the 2025 published work include:

- Maintaining ecosystem integrity and connectivity is essential for sustaining *biodiversity* and *ecological function*.
- Invasive species and biodiversity changes *require ongoing monitoring and management*.
- Water quality research is *critical for both ecosystem and human health*.
- Climate and environmental drivers increasingly shape freshwater responses, *fostering integrated analyses*.
- Digital tools and methodological advances are foundational to *modern freshwater science*.

These research activities in 2025, taken as a whole, illustrate a continuation of IAD's commitment to understanding and safeguarding the Danube Basin's freshwater ecosystems, bridging basic science, applied research, and innovative methodologies.

Key Events and other Activities

The IAD research activities in the Danube River Basin continued further with active involvement in project implementation, monitoring, teaching and student training, dialogue with policy-makers and stakeholders, and environmental education. The Danube book under IAD coordination, entitled "Danube River and Western Black Sea Coast: Complex Transboundary Management" was published in July 2025. The implementation of the three Horizon Europe projects in which IAD is a partner successfully started in January and September 2025. The 45th IAD conference was held in Sofia, Bulgaria between 9-12 April 2025. Since autumn, the preparation of the 46th IAD conference in Baja, Hungary, planned between 10-14 August 2026, was launched. In addition, the preparation of two celebration events, the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Austrian Committee of IAD, planned for June 2026 in Vienna and 70th anniversary of the IAD foundation, planned on the occasion of the IAD conference in Baja, Hungary have also started in 2025. More information is available on the IAD homepage – www.danube-iad.eu.

• Science – Policy interactions

IAD continued to provide scientific support to national water authorities, the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube Region (ICPDR) and the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR). In particular, IAD members contributed to several ICPDR Expert Groups on topics such as: River Basin Management, Pressures and Measures, Biodiversity Conservation, Monitoring and Assessment, Hydromorphology, Microbiology, Invasive Alien Species (IAS) and Sturgeon conservation. In addition, IAD contributed to the Joint Danube Survey 5 (JDS5) of the ICPDR, by coordinating several investigations of biological quality elements (macrozoobenthos and fish, including sturgeons), eDNA analyses and supported the investigations of the invasive alien species. IAD continued to contribute to the implementation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region through the Danube Sturgeon Task Force (DSTF), the Danube network for Invasive Alien Species (DIAS), and the Danube: Landscapes Task Force.

Several experts and working groups participated in the harmonisation of national water and nature policy with the EU requirements or in the development of European standard methods for biological and ecological monitoring and water quality assessment. Despite the extremely difficult conditions, Ukrainian IAD members also took part in the JDS5, sampling algae, zooplankton, benthic invertebrates and fish for further analyses of eDNA, microplastics, PAHs, and heavy metals content in the tissues of aquatic organisms from the Ukrainian section of the Danube River.

• Project implementation

In 2025, the IAD experts continued their active involvement in numerous research projects funded by the European Commission, Horizon 2020, Horizon Europe, the INTERREG Danube Transnational Program, as well as in other projects supported by the national authorities and European funding programs.

These projects contribute to advance knowledge in fields such as assessment of the ecological status of water bodies based on different biological quality elements, exploring hydrological dynamics in water courses, creating a water balance model for the DRB, exploring innovative solutions for restoring the sediment balance in the DRB, restoration of aquatic ecosystems to increase resilience to climate change, ecosystem-based governance, microbial pollution, bioaccumulation of heavy metals in different fish species, health risk assessment of toxins, possibility to use harmful invasive alien species as food resource, monitoring the ecological status of the aquatic ecosystems, investigating climate change impact on aquatic biodiversity, investigating the presence and uptake of microplastics in biota, supporting habitat restoration for migratory fish species, long-term changes occurred at ecosystem level under the current anthropogenic challenges, etc.

The most important projects carried out in 2025 with the support of IAD experts are presented in Annex 1.

• Editorial activities and scientific journals

As in the previous years, IAD members contributed to awareness-raising activities on environmental problems in the Danube Region and dissemination of scientific information to experts, policymakers and the general public. Two new issues of the IAD Bulletin, Danube News were published in 2025 (DN 51 and DN 52) and are available for download on the IAD website. The Transylvanian Review of Systematical and Ecological Research, supported by IAD, continued its series "The Wetlands Biodiversity". Several IAD members were involved as Guest Editors in Special Issues or Scientific Journals, e.g. Water - Special Issue „Freshwater Ecosystems—Biodiversity and Protection"; Plants – Special Issue „Phytoplankton Community Structure and Succession" or Climate – Special Issue - „Modelling for the Influences of Climate and Landscape Processes on Hydrology".

Numerous books, book chapters and scientific articles emerging from the projects and research activities carried out in the Danube Basin were published in 2025, a selection of the most relevant titles being presented in Annex 2.

Education activities

Many IAD members are involved in environmental education activities, such as lectures for undergraduates, coordination of PhD programs and master theses in the affiliated universities and creating public outreach materials ee Annex 2). A particular focus is placed on doctoral programs ensuring a transdisciplinary approach to current environmental challenges, An International Summer School was organised between 7-11 July 2025 in Osijek and Kopački rit Nature Park in the frame of CEEPUS network EcoManAqua (*Ecology and Management of aquatic ecosystems in Central, East and Southeast Europe*), focused on biodiversity of riverine wetlands and sustainable management and protection of Danube floodplains.

As part of the citizen science activities, bioblitz surveys on invasive alien species (IAS) in Croatia, Bulgaria, and Romania were conducted in May - June in the frame of Alien CSI BioBlitz initiative, organised at the European level (https://www.inaturalist.org/projects/alien-csi-bioblitz-2025). In addition, in Bulgaria and Romania, the 'Invasive Alien Species in Europe' app, developed by the EC Joint Research Centre (https://easin.jrc.ec.europa.eu/ias) was also used. After validation, these app data will be stored directly in EASIN – European Alien Species Information Network, which supports the implementation of the EU Regulation 1143/2014 on invasive alien species, and will complement the data recorded during the Joint Danube Survey 5 (JDS5). In Serbia, IAD members participated actively in the panel discussion organised by the Academy of Sciences with the topic "Citizen science for promotion and popularisation of the fauna of Serbia" (Belgrade, 18 Nov. 2025).

Other activities

Different scientific events were organised or attended by IAD members in 2025 to exchange knowledge and disseminate project results to stakeholders, such as the 45th IAD Conference, the Annual Assembly of the European Geosciences Union, the Health Related Water Microbiology Conference, the Croatian Botanical Symposium, the 6th Croatian Symposium on Invasive Species, Joint ESENIAS and DIAS Scientific Conference and 14th ESENIAS Workshop 'Invasive alien species in a changing climate: challenges for ecosystem resilience', etc. A detailed list of these events and the presentations held is provided in Annex 3.

Projects

- Aquatic invasive alien species – risk assessment and management, impact on trophic structure and ecosystem functioning, integrated management related to restoration and sustainability of aquatic ecosystems
- Biodiversity Knowledge Agora: Developing the Science Service for European Research and Biodiversity Policy-making (BioAgora)
- Biological Control of Dreissenid Mussels: Use of novel Eurasian parasites to control North American dreissenid populations
- Biological diversity and ecological status of the Danube River and adjacent wetlands, optimal use of their ecosystem functions and services, sustainable development and achieving good ecological status
- Black Sea Initiative for Sturgeon Sustainability (BLISS)
- Cross-sectoral Framework for Socio-Economic Resilience to Climate Change and Extreme Events in Europe (CROSSEU)
- DANUBIUS-RO-2 – Support for the Development and Consolidation of DANUBIUS-RO
- Demining, restoration and protection of forest and forestland in protected and Natura 2000 sites in Danube-Drava regions (NATURAVITA)
- Development and Implementation of Field Protocol for eDNA sampling of Danube Crested Newt (*Triturus dobrogicus*)
- Floodplain restoration and the effects on aquatic ecology and self-purification processes
- Functioning of vertebrate metacommunities in dynamic riverine landscapes: an innovative approach using eDNA metabarcoding (RIMECO)
- Global measure of biodiversity by understanding biogeochemical cycling of environmental DNA in lakes (LeDNA)
- H2020 COST: Applications for zoosporic parasites in aquatic systems – ParAqua
- H2020 MARine COastal BiOdiversity Long-term Observations (MarcoBolo)
- H2020 Modelling RESTORation of wEtlands for Carbon pathways, Climate Change mitigation and adaptation, ecosystem services, and biodiversity, Co-benefits (Restore4C)
- H2020 Science for evidence-based and sustainable decisions about natural capital (SELINA).
- H2020: Securing biodiversity, functional integrity and ecosystem services in DRYing rivER networks (DRYVER)
- HORIZON EUROPE - Danube Sediment Restoration: towards deployment and upscaling of sustainable sediment management across the Danube River Basin (DANSER)
- HORIZON EUROPE - ECOsystem-based governance with DAnube lighthouse Living Lab for sustainable Innovation processes (EcoDaLLi)
- HORIZON EUROPE – Innovative sediment management in the Danube River Basin (INNOSED)
- HORIZON EUROPE - Nature-based smart water grids for integrated water and drought management
- HORIZON EUROPE - Restoration of the Danube River Basin waters for ecosystems and people from mountains to coast (DANUBE4all)
- HORIZON EUROPE - Restoration of Wetland Complexes as Life Supporting Systems in the Danube Basin (Restore4Life)
- HORIZON EUROPE - Safeguarding Migratory Fish and their Habitats in the Danube River Basin and beyond (DANUBE LIFELINES)
- HORIZON EUROPE - Sustainable Water Management and Integrated Management of Fish Migration and Habitats in the Danube River Basin and the North-Western Black Sea (SWIM)
- Industrialization of the Danube as a dynamic socio-natural site: river morphology, floodplain use and long-term legacies, 1780-1940 (IDAN).
- Initiating bottom-up management solutions to reduce plastic waste in the Danube Basin – Aquatic Plastic (AQPLA)
- Integrated research and sustainable solutions to protect and restore Lower Danube Basin and coastal Black Sea ecosystems (RESPONSE)
- Interreg Danube Region - Danube Sediment Q2

- Interreg Danube Region – Danube Water Balance
- Interreg Danube Region – Development of a harmonized water balance modeling system for the Danube River Basin (Danube Water Balance)
- Interreg Danube Region - Establishing, testing and launching a transboundary system for Monitoring Sturgeons, to manage and safeguard migratory fish in the Danube River Basin (MONSTUR)
- Interreg Danube Region - Innovative Water Retention for Climate Change Mitigation, Sustainable Agriculture and Flood Protection
- Interreg Danube Region - Tethys
- Life-history traits, ecology and invasiveness of North American ictalurid catfishes in European water bodies
- Linking climate warming to increasing invertebrate species richness in running waters: from historical data to experiments
- Microphytes in sediments of the floodplain lakes – the influence on cyanobacterial plankton
- Microplastics in surface waters - identification, quantification and pathway analysis
- Monitoring of the distribution of invasive alien species of Union concern in Bulgaria
- Monitoring the State of Aquatic Ecosystems in the Influence Zone, Restoration, and Operation of the DWF Danube-Black Sea (by Hydrobiological Indicators)
- Phagotrophic protists in periphyton of protected freshwater ecosystems in the East Croatia
- Phytoplankton biodiversity and dynamic in the floodplain of Kopački rit – long-term changes
- Potential threats to environmental and economic sustainability in the Danube and Black Sea region: Danube River as invasive alien species corridor
- Providing data for the assessment of ecological status of the Bulgarian sector of the Danube River in 2025 (JDS5)
- Providing data from hydrobiological monitoring of surface waters and sampling of biota for 2024–2025 in accordance with the Order of the Minister of Environment and Water in Bulgaria
- Technical and Scientific Support in Relation to the Implementation of Regulation 1143/2014 on Invasive Alien Species

Scientific publications

Books

Bloesch, J., Cyffka, B., Hein, T., Sandu, C., Sommerwerk, N., 2025. The Danube River and the Western Black Sea Coast: Complex Transboundary Management. Elsevier.

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Book chapters

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