

Call from the international technical-scientific community: the Tagliamento must be kept free-flowing! The most natural of the large Alpine rivers is at risk due to the construction of major flood protection works: it is imperative to manage flood risk while preserving its great environmental, social and cultural value

The Tagliamento: a unique river system in the Alpine region

The Tagliamento, in Friuli-Venezia Giulia (Italy), is the last large river system that still displays the typical characteristics originally found in many Alpine rivers, i.e. a wide gravel bed with multiple channels, changing after each flood, maintaining the necessary space to ensure its particularly active dynamics. It is a river that generates a large volume of groundwater and has an almost natural dynamic of downstream sediment and wood transport, creating numerous river islands in all stages of development. This creates a dynamic and complex mosaic of biotopes, with an extraordinary diversity of aquatic, amphibious and terrestrial organisms, as well as all typical floodplain habitats and communities. The braided stretch of the Tagliamento is one of the very few in the Alps that is still "free-flowing", i.e. where connectivity is ensured in all dimensions. The restoration of river connectivity and its preservation in rivers where it is still present are key elements of the new EU Nature Restoration Law, and thus is an obligation for all Member States.

The extent and functionality of the Tagliamento river corridor makes it a key and reference ecosystem for Europe, as documented by numerous scientific studies. It has an extraordinary importance for research and teaching, in fact several universities and research institutes have worked and are working on this Alpine river. Its scenic value is also an invaluable cultural, tourism and economic resource for the communities living along its course. These qualities make it a heritage to be preserved not only for the citizens of Friuli, but of Europe, the world and future generations.



This unique ecosystem is now at risk due to planned flood protection infrastructure, that would NOT “ensure safety”

The conservation of the most environmentally pristine stretch of the Tagliamento river has been repeatedly threatened by planned interventions to reduce flood risk in the downstream stretch of the river. Over the years, in particular, the construction of huge artificial flood retention areas of different types and in different locations has been repeatedly discussed and then shelved, also due to the strong will of local communities to preserve the river ecosystem intact.

Recently, the Eastern Alps River Basin Authority, in the update of the flood risk management plan, and the Friuli-Venezia Giulia Region, with a resolution in April 2024, formalised the intention to build an in-line flood retention area upstream of the Dignano bridge and an off-line one in Varmo. Both measures foresee the construction of a transversal weir across the Tagliamento riverbed, which would interrupt its longitudinal connectivity. These interventions refer to the 100-year return time flood, so they would not be effective for higher intensity floods. And, like any other structural intervention that does not reduce the presence of anthropic elements and their vulnerability, it is important to highlight that these interventions would not ensure “safety” against floods, which can never be achieved since the residual risk inherent in the use of structural approaches must always be faced. Moreover, basing risk management on large structural works makes the territory very fragile in the event of their failure or collapse, which is always possible.

If these risk protection works were implemented, this would lead to:

- loss of river connectivity, both for fauna and sediments;
- major interference in the natural dynamics of the river, with far-reaching morphological consequences both upstream and downstream;
- alteration, in the intervention stretches, of one of the rarest river ecosystems in the Alps and of numerous habitats of Community interest;
- an irretrievable impact on the landscape and on recreational and tourism opportunities;
- a violation of EU environmental directives and regulations, including the Water Framework Directive, the Birds and Habitats Directives, the Nature Restoration Law, and the Alpine Convention, which Italy has signed.

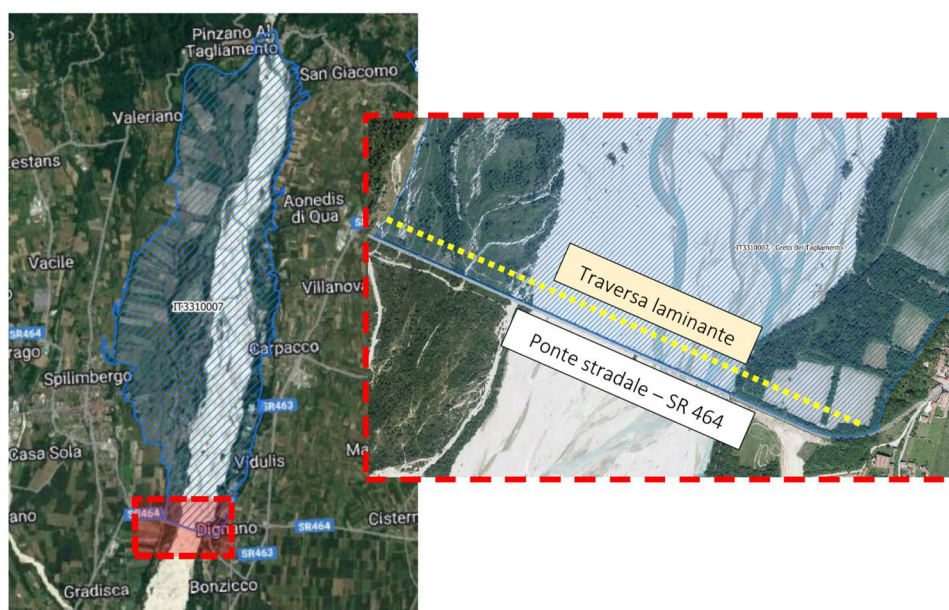


Image taken from the preliminary document for the design to construct a flood retention area upstream of the Dignano bridge, Resolution no. 530 of 11 April 2024 by the Regional Council of the Autonomous Region of Friuli Venezia Giulia

The need to evaluate and implement integrated, nature-based solutions

Intervening in such a rare and precious ecosystem requires, even more than in other territorial contexts, an exhaustive comparison of alternatives, a careful evaluation of impacts and possible benefits, not only on flood risk, but on a broad spectrum of objectives, and certainly demands shared choices with the population.

The Friuli-Venezia Giulia Region has so far refused to open a public debate on these interventions, which is provided for by Italian law, although not compulsory for this type of work. Their preliminary document for the design of the artificial retention area does not properly refer to the critical issues linked to the expected impacts or the need to assess further alternatives, starting with those that would bring environmental improvements instead of damage, such as the retreat of some embankments and the restoration of diffuse natural retention areas, reconnecting stretches of floodplain. In addition, the possibility of having a relevant part of the flood flowing within spillway channels (already existing or to be built) should be carefully analysed. Finally, the relocation of buildings subject to the highest level of flood hazard and the implementation of technical interventions to reduce the vulnerability of those located in less dangerous areas - together with warning systems customised for each citizen thanks to mobile phone technology - are more cost-effective, environmentally friendly solutions.

But even if the alternative solutions could not achieve the same effects as the two currently planned retention areas, irreparably damaging the most valuable stretch of the Tagliamento in order to partially mitigate the risk downstream is a far from obvious choice.

Our call

As an international community of researchers and professionals who study or have studied the Tagliamento and similar river systems, we ask the Friuli-Venezia Giulia Region, the Eastern Alps River Basin Authority, the Minister of the Environment and Energy Security, and all other competent bodies to:

- guarantee in every possible way the protection of the Tagliamento and in particular its unique morphological characteristics and connectivity;
- ensure for the purposes of flood risk management and adaptation to climate change, a truly integrated assessment of all possible alternatives, in particular those based on nature and involving the restoration of more space for the river, in line with EU guidelines, and taking into account the abundant scientific data produced over the years;
- promote measures for the ecological restoration of the Tagliamento and its tributaries and to mitigate the impacts due to the pressure factors along its course, such as hydrological alteration;
- ensure broad public participation in relation to all decisions on the planning and management of the Tagliamento river basin.

Finally, we reiterate our availability to actively contribute to the debate on the management of the Tagliamento and to the conservation and enhancement of its inestimable heritage value.

Views and opinions expressed in this document are those of the signatories and do not necessarily represent the position of their institution or company.

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