



**river**  
collective

# **STUDENTS FOR RIVERS CAMP**

INTERDISCIPLINARY RIVER CONSERVATION  
CAMP FOR YOUNG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

**NERETVA RIVER  
2024**



# PROJECT SUMMARY

The River Collective will invite 30 bachelor, master, and PhD students from around the world, representing a diverse range of disciplines, to the Students for Rivers Camp (SRC) on the Neretva river in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is the 6th annual SRC of its kind, taking place between the 8th - 15th of September 2024. It emphasizes the creative exploration of the Neretva, combining science, art and community empowerment to create a collective vision for a future around the free-flowing Upper Neretva River.

The week-long programme involves workshops, lectures and practical fieldwork to engage students in the protection of free-flowing and thriving rivers. The SRC basecamp will be located in Ulog, situated on the banks of Neretva. Participants will gain knowledge of the river and engage with local communities, researchers, experts and artists, inspiring collaborations with long-lasting effects.

The week will be concluded with Neretva Fest, a day event open to the local community to meet with the SRC participants and celebrate collaborative action to protect the rivers in the Balkan area and beyond. We will discuss the future of rivers in the context of a changing planet and the power of community-led action to protect the most vulnerable habitats. Students will expand their ideas by asking questions at the forefront of environmental and social sciences; How can we re-establish the connection between nature and people in the quest for resilient climate change solutions? What can local communities and their connection to the Neretva River teach us and how can we empower them to continue protecting precious ecosystems in their vicinity?





# THE RIVER COLLECTIVE SRC TEAM



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**Seraphim Schuchter**

BA Contemporary Dance  
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# PROJECT DETAILS

**Proposed camp date:** 8 -15 September 2024

**Number of places for students:** 30

**Location:** Ulog and the surrounding area, Kalinovik Municipality, Bosnia and Herzegovina

**River:** Neretva

**Organiser:** River Collective - Verein für die interdisziplinäre Zusammenarbeit zum Schutz der Flüsse, based in Graz, Austria

**Collaborating partners:** River Watch

**Local Partners:** Center for Environment of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Banja Luka; Foundation for Social Changes, Sarajevo; Aarhus Center Association Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

**Supporting Partners:** Manfred Hermsen Stiftung

## COLLABORATION

A strong suit of the River Collective has always been the involvement of diverse partners from academia, business, and NGOs. As a diverse team, we are deeply convinced that collaboration must form the core of sustainable futures for free-flowing rivers.

For the Students for Rivers Camp 2024 we are looking for sponsors dedicated to supporting environmental engagement projects through collaborative action. We welcome comments on this proposal and invite specialists in environmental and social sciences and creative arts to work with us towards developing an interdisciplinary approach to student and community empowerment.

In return for support, we offer the opportunity to be part of an innovative concept that combines education, river conservation and activism in a mutually beneficial way. Specifically, we can feature names and logos of partner organisations and individuals in our official communications, including brochures, social media posts and on our website. In addition, we can provide photos and text that can be used for the partner organisations' own outreach efforts to highlight their commitment to sustainability. Beyond this, we are always open to suggestions on how we can create value for supporting organisations.





# COLLABORATION AND SPONSORING

## Financial support

Financial support helps to organise camp logistics, prioritizing community-engaging events like participatory mapping sessions and a collective artwork during the Neretva Fest at the camp's conclusion. Crucially, funding enables a financial recognition of the commitment of experts, videographers, photographers, and graphic designers involved throughout the camp. We believe that environmental action itself must become a viable livelihood and should not remain on the fringes of society through purely voluntary engagement. In this way, we also create a more inclusive setting and counteract the fact that the engagement for sustainability is tied to a financially privileged position from the outset. Finally, we would like to offer starting grants for projects that emerge from the camp and are substantially supported by the incubator of the River Collective "Actions for Rivers".

At the start of the camp, we would like to give the participants a practical, sustainable and durable gift, such as an item of clothing, writing materials or outdoor equipment. In this case, we are looking for companies that are interested in such material contributions.

The logo for RiverWatch, featuring the word "RiverWatch" in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The letter "R" is stylized with a blue wave-like shape integrated into its left side.

## Expertise and mentorship

We also seek partnerships for knowledge transfer and mentorship. Organisations and individuals can support us with their expertise, for example as part of the official program through lectures and workshops. Ample opportunities for this are provided in preliminary meetings, during the camp itself and after the camp by supporting concrete "Actions for Rivers" projects.

One of our main objectives is to use our communication platforms to make the voices of the often marginalised communities from the Balkan region heard. Any support in sharing the stories of the local communities and their views on the future, would help reach our goals. We are therefore also looking for support in communication and outreach.

## Our Partners at the moment:



Center of environment, Banja Luka,  
Bosnia and Herzegovina



Aarhus Center Association, Sarajevo,  
Bosnia and Herzegovina



# BACKGROUND

Only one third of the rivers worldwide still flow freely from source to sea [1] and already more than 80% of the freshwater biodiversity is lost [2]. The planet is changing and we are called to action. However, traditional education systems rarely allow for the creative and trans-disciplinary thinking which is needed to create radical change. Passion and meaningful action are often hindered by the strict structures of academia, as the gap between subjects is rarely bridged and interdisciplinarity is making slow progress.

With the SRC, we take action to provide an accessible alternative by inviting students from diverse fields of study and backgrounds, to come together based on their passion for free-flowing, connected rivers. By combining not only art and science education, but also activism, this project provides a new entry point for the younger generation, eager to lead the change that is needed but struggling to take a position or uncertain of the role they can play. We aim to bring together 30 international students: 10 from Bosnia and Herzegovina, and 20 from other countries, preferably also including students from the wider Balkan area. The camp offers local students an opportunity to develop actionable ideas to tackle environmental problems on their home river, through the support of experts and in collaboration with non-local students. We hope to make scholarships available for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

We seek to represent a wide range of perspectives on river ecosystem protection, including not only the more traditional biological and physical sciences, but also social sciences, art and storytelling. The program is developed in close collaboration with local partner organisations which we invite to comment on this proposal. The setting of the camp in Ulog is not a coincidence, as the battle against the dam construction there intensifies daily, yet 30 kilometers upstream lies a zone with the river's richest habitat diversity. With the help of our participating students we aim to develop actionable, dam-free, alternative projects, fostering a belief in a sustainable economy and community around the free-flowing Upper Neretva. The SRC's core objective is to unify efforts across different sectors and disciplines, highlighting the strength in partnerships between non-government organisations, government bodies, community action groups, scientific researchers and outdoor businesses to achieve meaningful local change that has global significance. By stimulating interactions between local communities and participating students, we are pushing the boundaries of education and conservation by removing the divide between them.



# NERETVA RIVER

The stage for this Students for Rivers Camp is the Upper Neretva River in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Neretva is a 230 km long river flowing through Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia before its confluence with the Adriatic Sea. Beyond its ecological significance, the Neretva River is a precious natural and cultural heritage that connects history, nature, and people, serving as a reminder of the delicate balance between human development and environmental preservation. It is believed that the name "Neretva" has its roots in the ancient Illyrian language and goes back to "Nera-Etwa", which means "deity in motion". This name illustrates the river's role as a source of creative and intellectual stimulation that has enchanted a colorful mix of thinkers, writers and scholars over the centuries.

While much of the river network now comprises reservoirs, the upper "Gornja Neretva" and its tributaries can still be considered free-flowing. Here, the river constitutes the heart of a karstic valley widely regarded as a natural heritage of regional significance. This unspoiled section shows an intact flow pattern and harmonious integration with the surrounding landscape. The uniquely large diversity of habitats on a very small spatial scale is the foundation for the high biodiversity in this system, supporting a rich array of species such as Adriatic and softmouth trout, Grey stream frog, white throated dipper and more. Studies during the Science Weeks in its upper reaches have identified over 1,300 animal and plant species, solidifying the Neretva's status as one of Europe's most biodiverse rivers.

Plans for 70 dams in the catchment area jeopardize the future of the Neretva River. One bigger dam in Ulog is already under construction, and would significantly impact the diversity of habitats of the Neretva. Scientists and environmental activists that have assessed and documented biodiversity in recent years suspect that this hydropower plant might be operated by producing artificial floodings with changes of water levels that are too fast for local species to adapt. Furthermore sediment-transportation would be inhibited and there are worries about possible landslides that would threaten the surrounding ecosystems.



# GOALS

The week-long gathering empowers participants to turn knowledge into action, fostering collaboration, and creative projects for river protection. The students will learn about the complexity of rivers from various perspectives, exchange ideas and future visions, and broaden their creative toolbox for action. By joining the camp, they will be able to:

## **1) Explore their individual role as a scientist, artist, lawyer and/or activist, and be creative about communication**

As there are multiple ways to contribute to the protection of rivers we emphasize the interconnectedness of people, rivers, science, and creativity, welcoming a diversity of approaches. The students will explore their own potential role in river conservation and encourage each other with enthusiasm. They will also walk away with the realization that their toolbox is even more than scientific papers or traditional research, and that interdisciplinary collaboration and creative communication can make the difference between numbers on a paper and a policy change.

## **2) Engage with locals and put River Conservation in a global context**

We invite local communities to share their stories and non-academic experiences in living with their efforts to keep their home rivers healthy and free-flowing. This should create a learning environment, offering students to gain new perspectives and inspiration. Additionally we believe that someone can be most effective when understanding the global context of fighting for intact rivers. The participants are therefore being encouraged to understand the socio-economic conditions which shape the decision making processes on a local and global level.

## **3) Get to action**

After broadening the context and understanding the local living environment, we will empower participants to combine newly acquired skills and thinking with their own knowledge and that of others. We create space to develop initiatives with multiple perspectives that can dissupport the local communities in their endeavors to protect rivers and generate momentum to find solutions that are applicable to similar challenges in other watersheds. Finally, we want to inspire students to attend events such as the Balkan Rivers Summit, taking place in Montenegro in autumn 2024, where they can advocate for rivers and river-dependent communities across the globe.





# MEASURABLE RESULTS

|                         | Results  | Evaluation criteria  |
|-------------------------|--|--|
| Inclusive participation | Involving people and students from Bosnia and Herzegovina and the wider Balkan region.   | Quantitative assessments of participants in the camp and specific activities                             |
|                         | Including stakeholders from at least two more cases in the Balkans, where hydropower developments have threatened or are currently threatening free-flowing rivers.  | Qualitative assessment through interviews to ensure that participants feel included in an equitable way. |
| Raising awareness       | Putting the Neretva into the spotlight through our own channels of communication (social media, website, newsletter)   | Collection of internal and external publications   |
|                         | For professional media (newspapers, radio, TV), we would like to get coverage by at least 3 organizations, covering the local, national and international scale.   | Quantitative assessment of likes and references to the camp.   |
| Outcomes of the camp    | Emerging projects and activities focusing on the vision of the free-flowing Neretva and river conservation in general.   | Short-term view right after the camp: description of the envisaged projects, defined next steps          |
|                         | Mobilizing for the Balkan Rivers Summit taking place in Montenegro in autumn 2024. The goal is to enable primarily Bosnian and Herzegovinian students and other young people from the area to attend this event. | Long-term view: Assessing the progress in these projects over the next months and years.                 |
|                         |  | Number of students attending the Balkan Rivers Summit 2024   |



# CAMP ACTIVITIES

The SRC Neretva will consist of activities in three phases with pre camp activities meant for preparation, camp activities for meeting to goals of the program, and post camp activities for creating a lasting impression on the community and the participants.

## Pre-Students for Rivers Camp

After candidates have been selected, we will kick-off the camp with an online session open to anyone interested including participants from previous camps, where we invite several speakers to discuss the pressing issues and the opportunities at the Neretva River.

## Post Students for Rivers Camp

Beyond the SRC week, our primary aim is to enhance local conservation initiatives by pairing them with the diverse expertise of our camp's students and experts. These initiatives will gain support through the River Collective's "Actions for Rivers" incubator, offering financial backing and mentorship. Additionally, the camp spotlights the Neretva, creating a platform to share its challenges and opportunities, and garnering broad support. A key objective is to represent the Neretva at the Balkan Rivers Summit in Montenegro in autumn 2024.





# CAMP ACTIVITIES

The heart of the project is the Students for Rivers Camp with workshops, expert lectures, excursions, and a river experience all in collaboration with the local community. Listed are some of the main program elements:

**Vision mapping:** The local community of Ulog is invited to participate in a session that investigates the value of the free-flowing upper Neretva.

**Corruption game:** The participants get the chance to play a serious game giving insight into the mechanisms of corruption, something that often influences dam construction.

**Expert lectures:** As participants have a wide range in backgrounds, they will have some basic lectures on e.g. the ecological functioning of the river with the aim to appreciate that the river as a complex system that holds much more than the flow of water alone, the legal systems that have the potential to protect rivers in the long-term or the diverse opportunities to value the rivers contributions to people.

**Art workshops:** This is the moment to tap into the participants' collective creativity to transform scientific knowledge into art and reach all audiences through expression.

**Project development:** During several sessions, the participants are guided through the development of their own, collaborative project ideas for the future of the Neretva River.

**River Experience:** During this activity, it's time to fully immerse in the Neretva River, feel its flow and appreciate its force by taking a river rafting excursion.





# CAMP SCHEDULE

An example of the SRC 2024 schedule is provided below with potential themes for each day. The SRC will follow the Neretva journey and its tributaries, equipping students with practical skills and knowledge in freshwater monitoring.

We invite local partners, artists and researchers to share ideas and encourage creative collaborations.

|       | Theme                                | Suggested topics   |  | Evening Activities          |
|-------|--------------------------------------|--|--|-----------------------------|
| Day 1 | Welcome                              | Student Arrivals   |  | Introductions               |
| Day 2 | Introduction to the Neretva river    | Introduction to the area and social context<br>Introduction to river biology and endemism                                  | Soundscapes of the river<br>In field art workshop  | Reflecting day's activities |
| Day 3 | River Connectivity                   | Lecture on river connectivity and aquatic river concepts   | Monitoring and managing river connectivity<br>Importance of lateral connectivity - visit logging sites and assess impacts<br>Importance of longitudinal connectivity - visit hydropower plant site | Campfires and storytelling  |
| Day 4 | Legal Frameworks and Tools           | Lecture on EU and non-EU available frameworks (Water Framework Directive)  | Practical use of legal frameworks in real life situations and their effectiveness in case of Neretva river in past situations - talk by scientists and lawyers                                     | Reflecting day's activities |
| Day 5 | Voices of Neretva                    | Talks and insights by members of NGO's previously involved in Neretva issues<br>Talk to local people, their views, stories | Workshop - ideas for an alternative future<br>Stakeholder Mapping and Community Engagement   | Movie night                 |
| Day 6 | Eco-tourism alternatives and impacts | Rafting down the Neretva river to Konjic   | Mapping Neretva from Source to Konjic<br>Student Poster Presentations<br>SRC Summaries   | Reflecting day's activities |
| Day 7 | Community Action                     | Neretva Fest   |  | End of SRC party            |
| Day 8 | End of Camp                          | Student departures   |  |                             |
|       | Lecture/Workshop                     | Practical fieldwork  | Event  | Community talks             |



# NERETVA FEST

Local residents, outdoor businesses, community groups and environmental organisations are invited to join the SRC in a celebration titled Neretva Fest. This event will take place in Konjic, where students will present their findings from a week of immersive workshops, lectures and fieldwork. Space will be given to local researchers, residents, volunteer groups, artists, musicians and environmental organisations who also wish to share their stories and experiences through art or scientific research. Since protests against hydropower plants have taken place in previous years in Konjic, Neretva Fest will facilitate further conversations between SRC students and local communities, allowing them to practice science communication and forge connections that can lead to impactful solutions. This event also gives opportunities for local partnerships to come together and discuss ways to continue engaging younger generations who represent the future scientists, artists and outdoor explorers who will champion the delivery of many of the climate-change solutions in development today. The final piece of the puzzle will be a large piece of art, such as a banner or a mural, in the name of Neretva conservation. This symbol of resistance will be a constant reminder of river conservation and the importance of the Neretva for the local communities.

## LOCAL IMPACT

The Students for Rivers Camp builds on the work of the Neretva Science Week in 2022 and 2023 and marks the next step in local and international river conservation efforts on the Neretva. As the struggle to protect rivers extends beyond the Neretva River, we aim to bring together communities facing similar problems, often feeling isolated in their efforts. Building on the success stories from communities that successfully protected their rivers, we will empower participants to use this knowledge in the fight for climate justice and nature protection. We want to instill a strong belief in the possibility of alternative futures, economies, and communities around a free-flowing Neretva.

By the year's end, we aim to expand our network to include local Neretva Valley communities, students from Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as from other countries, regional stakeholders, activists, artists, scientists, and river enthusiasts. These relationships will be fostered through collaborative projects and meetings before, during, and after SRC Neretva 2024.





## PAST RELEVANT EXPERIENCES

The River Collective has been a registered Association and NGO since May 2020. It is dedicated to protecting rivers, and empowering young students and local activists through education and collaboration. Over the past five years, the River Collective, lead by a team of river passionates, has organized five “Students for Rivers Camps”; the Soca River in Slovenia (2019), the Lim River in Montenegro (2020, hosted online), the Valbona River in Albania (2021), the Ötztaler Ache River in Austria (2022) and the River Dart in the UK (2023). These camps have been further supported by “Actions for Rivers”, a project incubator gathering students from 35 different countries around the globe. In response to the quarantine environment, it organized regular “Science Chats” and “Movie Nights” in which, together with leading experts on rivers and conservation, discussions are hosted via zoom on the role that science and activism can play in protecting rivers and nature.

Once a year, a world-wide Home River Bioblitz is organized, as a global event in which locals discover and document the biodiversity of their home rivers through citizen science. In all their activities, state-of-the-art educational methodologies are used and developed, allowing participants to explore new perspectives. These have included innovations such as the development of a serious game about the role of corruption in hydropower development, and participatory workshops on ecopolitical mapping and creating river anthologies. Through these activities, the River Collective has grown into a virtual space where scientists, river defenders and adventurers can connect and put their global knowledge into action.





## WORKS CITED

- [1] Grill, G., Lehner, B., Thieme, M. et al. (2019). Mapping the world's free-flowing rivers. *Nature* 569, 2.  
<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-019-1111-9>
- [2] WWF (2020) Living Planet Report 2020 - Bending the curve of biodiversity loss. Almond, R.E.A., G Petersen, T. (Eds). WWF, Gland, Switzerland.

## MEDIA AND SOCIALS

MEDIA and social platforms

- [M1] Facebook page of the River Collective:  
<https://www.facebook.com/rivercollectiveriver>
- [M2] Instagram of the River Collective: @therivercollective
- [M3] Youtube channel of the River Collective:  
[https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCvzHv4Ma92n-view\\_as=subscriber](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCvzHv4Ma92n-view_as=subscriber)

## PHOTO CREDITS

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