

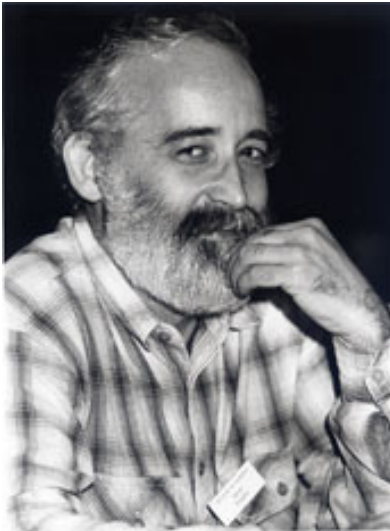


The Right Livelihood Award

for outstanding vision and work on behalf of our planet and its people

Duna Kör / Janos Vargha (Hungary)

(1985)



for working under unusually difficult circumstances to preserve the river Danube, a vital part of Hungary's environment.

Janos Vargha

Duna Kör, meaning the Danube Circle, was set up in 1984 as an environmental movement opposing the construction of an enormous dam and hydroelectric complex on the Danube. Its founder was Janos Vargha, a biologist who had earlier worked for some years for the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and was then on the editorial staff of a science magazine.

The \$3 billion-plus Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros complex was to be built jointly by Hungary and Czechoslovakia, providing for one massive dam in each country. It involved drastic interference with nearly 200 km of river, the flooding of 50 islands and 120 sq kms of forests and fields, and the loss of valuable wildlife habitats. It also had incalculable implications for the groundwater of the region and the drinking water supply of some three million people.

Duna Kör was a social innovation as well as a protest movement. Such groups were officially much discouraged at the time it was established and could obtain no formal registration. Moreover, for a certain period no one was permitted to publish anything on the power project. But Duna Kör networked informally and provided a focus for increasing opposition to the project in scientific and professional circles. In 1988, keeping up the pressure, Vargha organised an international conference on the issue in cooperation with the World Wildlife Fund and by October of that year 150,000 people had signed a petition demanding a referendum on the dam.

In the following year, 1989, giving way to this public pressure, Hungary halted construction of the Nagymaros dam. But in neighbouring Czechoslovakia the massive Gabčíkovo dam was almost complete when the Communist government fell. Despite strong protests from Budapest, the new Czechoslovak government decided to proceed with its side of the project. The Gabčíkovo dam was in due course put into operation by newly-independent Slovakia, diverting a 20-mile section of the Danube, which forms its border with Hungary and thus appropriating both the water and the electricity which it generates. Hungary subsequently sued Slovakia over the issue and the case was due to reach the International Court of Justice at The Hague in 1997.

Duna Kör, meanwhile, has continued its efforts to save the Danube and has developed proposals for the ecological restoration of river branches, islands and wetlands. Vargha and his colleagues hoped that the verdict of the International Court would make possible the restoration of the river between Bratislava and Budapest. In 1995, Vargha was awarded the European Environmental Prize.

RIGHT LIVELIHOOD
AWARD FOUNDATION

