



**river**  
collective

# STUDENTS FOR RIVERS CAMP

INTERDISCIPLINARY RIVER CONSERVATION  
CAMP FOR YOUNG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS  
IN THE AUSTRIAN ALPS



# PROJECT SUMMARY

The Students for Rivers Camp (SRC) in the Ötztal Valley, Austria, is a week-long gathering where the River Collective engages young university students in the protection of free-flowing and healthy rivers through interdisciplinary and intercultural education, combining science, art and action. We, the River Collective, in collaboration with WET (Wildwasser Erhalten Tirol) and WWF Austria, invite 30 bachelors, masters and PhD students from around Europe and from a diverse range of disciplines. The SRC is located along the banks of the alpine Ötztaler Ache River, where participants learn from each other's experiences, workshops and lectures, and from the local river-defending community, inspiring creative collaborations between participants.

We discuss the future of rivers in Austria in the context of a fast changing planet. How have rivers changed since the industrialisation of Austria and which role do rivers have in our society today? Which narratives exist that justify the construction of large hydropower infrastructure? Can we change these narratives and reestablish the connection between natural rivers and people?

Our aim is to celebrate rivers and support the local communities in the protection of rivers and their thriving ecosystems to sustain a healthy living environment (social, economic and environmental) for all species including humans. Through the case study experience of the Ötztaler Ache River, which has parallels to many threatened rivers worldwide, the SRC provides an entry point for future scientists, artists, lawyers and other experts to take an active role in river conservation.





# PROJECT DETAILS

**Camp dates:** 4-11 September 2022

**Location:** Ötztaler Ache River, Austria

**Total project budget:** € 30.200,-

A break-down of the costs can be found on page 9.

## **Organizer:**

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

## **The River Collective team involved in this project:**

Vera Knook - General Coordinator, MSc in Hydraulic Engineering, National Geographic Explorer

David Farò - Program Coordinator, PhD in Environmental Engineering, PostDoctoral researcher at the University of Trento

Elisabeth Dirninger - Participants, Association and Finances, MSc in Process Engineering

Jessica Droujko - Science and Communication, PhD Candidate in Environmental Engineering

## **Local Partners**

WET - Wildwasser Erhalten Tirol, WWF Austria and StV Biologie (Study Association of the University of Innsbruck)

**The local team** involved in this project consists of Chiara Hirsch (WET), Marianne Götsch (WWF Austria) and Sandra Schallhart (StV Biologie).

## **Supporting Partners**

The project is partially supported by WWF Austria, NRS Europe, Toros Outdoor, and Packraft Europe.





# OUR VALUES

PASSION

INCLUSIVITY

COLLABORATION

ACTION

JUSTICE

OPEN SCIENCE

INSPIRATION

INTERDISCIPLINARITY



# 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. New perspectives and new ideas are needed to challenge the status-quo. However, traditional education systems rarely allow for the creative and trans-disciplinary thinking which is needed to create such a needed change. Students are asked to choose a study field on which to specialize early in their lives. Passion and the wish to make a change are often abandoned due to the strict structures of academia, with employability or research funds' availability often becoming the main criteria for the choice of study area. The gap between subjects is rarely bridged and interdisciplinarity is only slowly making its way forward, and typically only amongst already similar fields.

In the SRC program, we provide an alternative to this situation by inviting students from diverse fields of study, embracing their backgrounds, to come together based on a single passion: Rivers. By combining not only art and science education, but also action, this project provides a new entry point for the younger generation that is eager to lead the change that is needed but struggles to take a position or is uncertain of the role they can play. While most summer schools are organized as an exchange between two countries, we aim to bring together 30 international students: 15 from Austria, and 15 from the rest of Europe. This camp gives local Austrian students opportunities for outdoor exploration, sharing their home lands with students from abroad. Furthermore, the SRC offers local students an opportunity to develop actionable ideas to tackle environmental problems on their home river, through the support of experts and the collaboration with non-local students. We specifically make scholarships available for students from the Balkan Region and Eastern Europe.

Already the fourth annual event of its kind, this year's Students for Rivers Camp will bring together all experience from the earlier editions, which took place in Slovenia (in 2019), online (though focused on Montenegro, in 2020) and in Albania (2021). SRC 2022 seeks to represent a wide range of perspectives on river protection, including not only the more traditional biological and physical sciences, but also social sciences, art and storytelling. Further, the camp will be developed in close collaboration with WWF Austria and WET, the local partner organisations. The study case couldn't be more real and the locals more involved. They fight for the preservation of the Ötztaler Ache river that is under threat by several hydropower projects, one of them being recently built (Tumpen-Habichen). Local communities are especially in strong opposition to the diversion of 80% of the water following the project plans to expand the existing Kaunertal hydropower plant. This would threaten not only riverine biodiversity but also the livelihood of local agriculture, depending on the irrigation of their fields by water from the river. By stimulating interaction between these communities and the students, we are pushing the boundaries of education and conservation, as we are removing the line between them.



# ÖTZTALER ACHE

The Ötztaler Ache is unique in the eastern alps. It is one of the last remaining rivers with an unaffected glacial flow, as its main headwaters, the Venter and Gurgler Ache, remain mainly free-flowing. These three rivers attract not only white water sports but also scientists who come to explore their glacial flow regime and ecosystems. Local residents enjoy the river for recreation and hikes, and the tourism industry, an important branch in the Ötztal valley, profits from the beauty of the spectacular river, attracting tourists and nature lovers from all around the globe. The Ötztaler Ache river flows 60 kilometres from the glaciers north until it reaches the Inn river. On its way it forms the life line of the Ötztal valley, an inner-alpine valley that is facing increasing drought due to the climate crisis. Irrigation of the fields by water from the river is vital for local agriculture. But the future of the river and the people depending on it is at threat. Plans to expand a nearby hydropower plant foresee the diversion of up to 80% of the Venter and Gurgler Ache, affecting the whole river length of the Ötz. With more than 5200 (small and large) hydropower plants in Austria already built, this would heavily affect one of the last rivers of Austria that is characterized by the flow of the glaciers. Losing natural rivers means losing the ability to show our future generations what wild and free rivers look like. While most larger alpine rivers suffer from massive human alteration, preserving rivers like the Ötztaler Ache and its headwaters, can help maintain the understanding and connection of people with riverine nature.



# GOALS

The main goal of the Ötztaler Ache Students for Rivers Camp is to empower an international group of students early in their careers, giving them interdisciplinary skills and intercultural knowledge to help bring their ideas into action for river conservation in collaboration with local river defenders. By joining the camp, they will be able to:

1. *Explore their role as a scientist, artist, lawyer and/or activist.* There are multiple ways to contribute to the protection of rivers. We emphasize the interconnectedness of people, rivers, science, and creativity, and show that all have something invaluable to contribute. This exploration should help students to understand their potential role and to appreciate those others with enthusiasm, rather than judgment.
2. *Put River Conservation (and diverse disciplines including science, economics, law and arts) in a global context* - Our students have the potential to contribute to the local fight of river defenders, but will be most effective when understanding the global context. We help them understand the socio-economic conditions which shape the decision making processes on a global and local level, including the role of subsidy systems that drive renewable energies such as hydropower and the interactions between changing energy supply and demand.
3. *Be creative about communication* - Participants will walk away with the realisation that their toolbox is 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.
4. *Engage with local citizens* - We bring international and regional students together with the local communities. Students will gain new perspectives as locals exchange their stories, and their non-academic experiences in living with their efforts to keep the rivers healthy and free-flowing. This will create a strong learning environment, which will give new perspectives for the students.
5. *Get to action* - After broadening the context, opening the toolbox and understanding the local living environment, we will empower participants to combine new skills and thinking with their own (expert) knowledge and that of others. We create space for the students to develop new initiatives that consider multiple perspectives and that can directly support the local communities in their endeavors to protect rivers. We push participants to find solutions that are also applicable to similar challenges in other watersheds, including their own.





# LOCAL IMPACT

The Students for Rivers Camp welcomes not only the students, but also local inhabitants to develop a vision for the future of the Ötztaler Ache. Due to the diverse group of participants, this vision is based on a critical discussion of the arguments that justify hydropower infrastructure. The vision can become a strong message towards local and national politicians, and helps local partners WET and WWF Austria to refine their further strategy. We expect a large group of the students to stay engaged with research and action in the Ötztaler region, giving a new boost to the local river defenders.







# CAMP ACTIVITIES

After selecting a motivated group of river passionates in the early stages of their (academic) career, we gather for a week-long gathering full of activities, mostly outdoors. The program will include the following elements:

- Expert lectures and workshops - Through various sessions, the SRC gives space for discussions on topics varying from the natural functioning of rivers, to ecopolitics and from the importance of data visualisation to the intersection between arts and environmentalism.
- River Experience and Excursions - Learning about the river is done best while experiencing it. During a raft descent of the Ötztaler Ache River, students are triggered to open their eyes for details they might normally pass by, linking up the complex ecosystem that a river is part of. Another day, we will make it all the way up the valley, where the glacier turns into a river.
- Actions for Rivers - The moment to turn knowledge into action. Inspired by the various discussions during the week, the students have the chance to form interdisciplinary groups around their project ideas. These result in creative actions that can be further developed during an incubator program developed by the River Collective that will take place online over the winter season.





# PAST RELEVANT EXPERIENCE

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 three years, the River Collective, lead by a team of river passionates, has organized three “Students for Rivers Camps” (one on the Soca River in Slovenia, one online, focused on the Lim River in Montenegro and one on the Valbona River in Albania) and the “Actions for Rivers”; a project incubator gathering students from 35 different countries around the globe. In response to the quarantine environment, it organizes 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.





# BUDGET

The total budget required to realise the Students for Rivers Camp is € 30.239,-. A breakdown of the costs can be found in the table below.

Category	Specified	Quan.		#pers	/quant/pers	Cost	Totals
SRC basic logistics	Accommodation Camp Total	7	nights	47	20	6580	
	Pre Organizers Accommodation	4	nights	3	15	180	
	Food Camp Total	7	days	47	10	3290	
	Food Pre Organization	4	days	6	10	240	
	Food Day Experts	1	days	10	10	100	
	Transport Pre Organization	10	days	1	50	500	
							10890
Facilities	Kitchen Equipment	7	days	1	100	700	
	Rent Workspace	4	days	1	300	1200	
							1900
Excursions	Transport	1	day	47	20	940	
	Rafting Oetz	1	day	47	50	2350	
							3290
Program	Materials	1	-	1	300	300	
	Travel Costs Experts	1	-	1	500	500	
							800
Media	Media Crew	1	-	1	1500	1500	
	Graphic Design	1	-	1	200	200	
	Present for Students, Day Experts a	1	-	50	10	500	
	Presents for Week Experts	1	-	5	50	250	
							2450
Staff	Salary (coordinator)	3	months	1	1000	3000	
	Volunteers Contribution Prep	47	days	2	25	2350	
	Volunteers Contribution Camp	7	days	3	25	525	
	Travel expenses to Feb meeting	2	ways	2	50	200	
	Travel expenses to SRC	2	ways	4	100	800	
	Accommodation Feb meeting	3	nights	1	30	90	
							6965
<b>Total</b>							<b>26295</b>
Contingency	10% of total budget						2630
Overhead Costs	5% of total budget						1315
<b>Total With Contingency Expenses</b>							<b>30239</b>



# 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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