Estonia is covered by a dense network of running water – we have over 7,000 rivers, brooks and ditches with a total length of 31,000 km.

In the past, rivers have been extremely important for the economy as an energy supply for industry and agriculture. Rivers have also played an important role as transport routes, but regrettably also as a sewage for getting rid of wastes. However, there is a price attached to this kind of usage of valuable natural resource – compromised or ruined ecosystems. Rivers have been ditched, redirected and dammed; rivers have received our pollution and they have carried this pollution into other bodies of water, and eventually to the Baltic Sea.

In present-day Estonia the economic profit that a few people obtain from exploiting rivers should not overweigh the harm caused to nature. Rivers with clean water flowing freely in their natural beds should be considered a great public wealth. More and more people understand this and are willing to participate in preserving and restoring our watercourses.

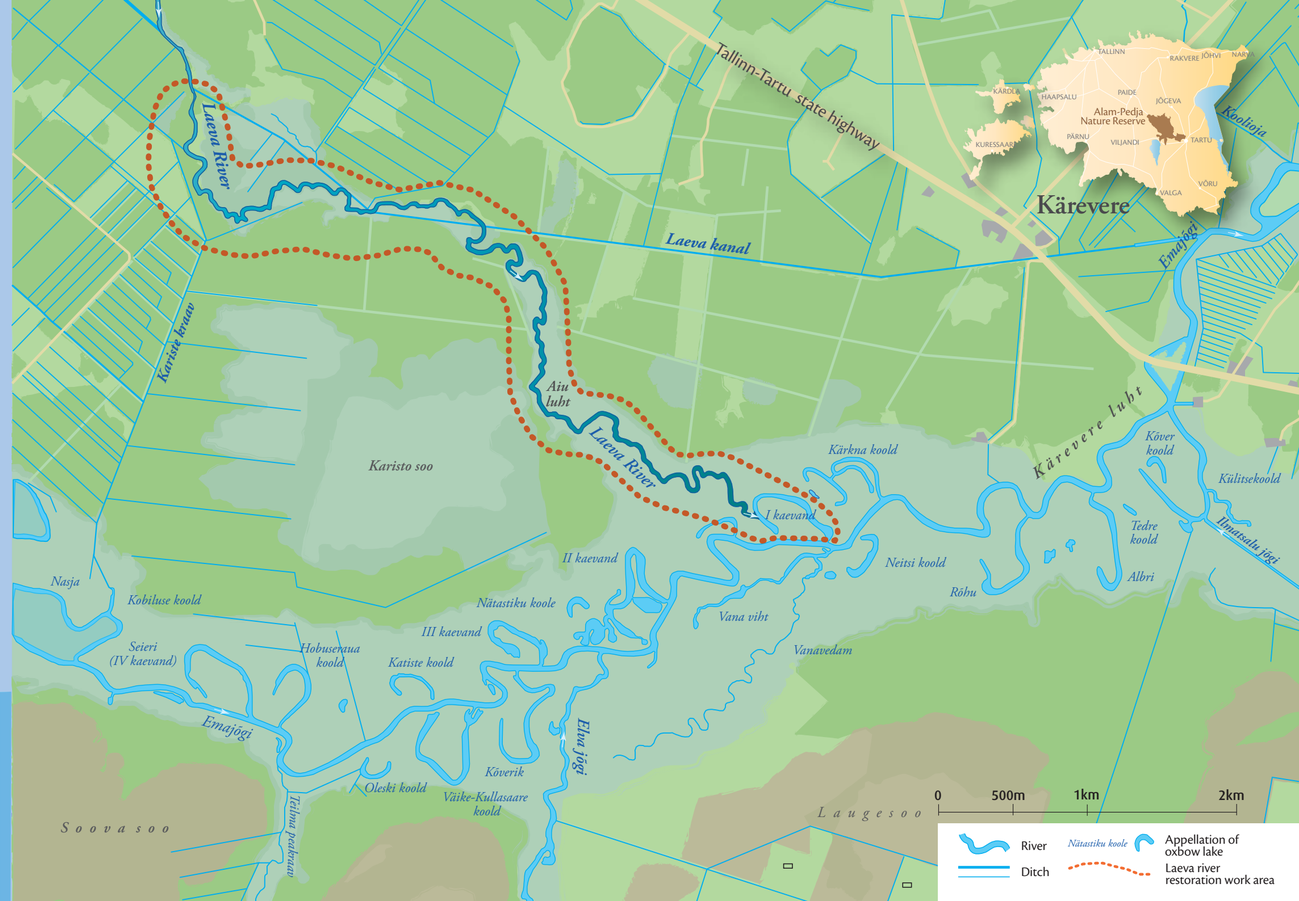
While cleanliness of water has been in focus for some time already, activities directed towards protecting and improving the bodies of water as ecosystems is only starting to take off. In Estonia, improving river habitats started from alleviating the influence of damming. On Estonian watercourses, almost 1,300 man-made dams have been registered, and during the last years about one hundred of them have been removed or the ecological situation has been alleviated through constructing fish passes.

Alam-Pedja Nature Reserve is an extremely valuable region – an intact area of 35,000 ha, making it possible to protect different habitats and thus many animal and plant species. A central connecting element in this area is the Emajõgi River with its tributaries and oxbow lakes. Emajõgi River and its tributaries form migration routes connecting different habitats, while oxbow lakes (over 50 of them) are extremely important breeding and feeding grounds for our fish populations.

Photo: Marko Kohv

Restored river viewed from the air

Photo: Arvo Tuvikene

However, during the periods of low water, these oxbow lakes tended to become clogged, thus leaving the fish trapped – and in the worst cases even to die from lack of oxygen. To change this unfavorable situation, Wildlife Estonia implemented the project "Happyfish", aimed to reopen ten oxbow lakes to the river, within the framework of European Union LIFE Program. In addition to that project, another eight oxbow lakes were opened to the river using the support from the EU Cohesion Fund.

The project was successful and inspired us to start making plans to restore one of the major fishing rivers of the region – Laeva River. The last dozen kilometers of Laeva River have been directed into a straight ditch. Only a discontinuous line of ponds and shorter and longer pieces of original watercourse is what has remained of its natural course. During spring floods, fish could swim into these ponds, but when the water level falls and conditions worsen, they cannot leave the ponds – they are trapped. The problem has to be solved.