



Adopt a River for Sustainable Development

General Introduction

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Vision

Adopt a River for Sustainable Development (Adopt-a-River) has the goal of ameliorating the global water crisis through focused activities on freshwater ecosystems at a local level. The initiative provides a vehicle for engagement and action by community members, private enterprise and other stakeholders concerned about the degradation of freshwater environments and the impact this has on local people. Harnessing the power of communities, linked through a global initiative and backed by strong technical expertise, Adopt-a-River aims to protect, restore and sustain local freshwater ecosystems and ecosystem services to contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

The Importance of Protecting Freshwater

Rivers are a lifeline of human societies and civilizations. Freshwater ecosystems and their biodiversity provide numerous products and services that are beneficial to society, both directly and indirectly, including: drinking water, water for irrigation, fish and other food, recreation, transport, and water for industrial uses including energy production. Riverine ecosystems also have a particularly high economic, cultural, ecological, aesthetic, recreational and educational value.

Many communities rely on rivers and lakes as their primary source of water for domestic and agricultural use. The World Health Organization estimates that 159 million people use surface water bodies such as lakes and rivers as their primary drinking water source, 80% of whom live in sub-Saharan Africa¹.

Freshwater ecosystems, however, are under serious threat from population growth and urbanization, increased economic activity, intensification and expansion of agriculture, climate change, and increased pollution. Their geographical position also means that they transport effluents and other wastes including solid wastes, leading to degradation of not only freshwater ecosystems but also of coastal and marine environments. This ongoing and intensifying series of threats has led to what has been called a global water crisis.

¹ 2015 estimates. World Health Organization and UNICEF, Progress on drinking water, sanitation and hygiene: 2017 update and SDG baselines. At <https://washdata.org/report/jmp-2017-report-final>

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A Vehicle for Community Action

Balancing the increasing demands on freshwater resources through good management practices and maintaining the health of freshwater ecosystems is essential for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) relating to water and for realizing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at large.

Adopt-a-River aims to capture the changing mood and increased awareness, both locally and globally, of the importance of healthy freshwater ecosystems and their link to support and sustain human populations. Adopt-a-River programmes will provide an opportunity for communities and local organisations to enact change and improve the local environment for their own benefit and the benefit of others and the ecosystems itself. It is at the local level that efforts to protect the environment must take place, but by linking to broader, national, and international initiatives the local success can be multiplied many times to achieve significant positive change.

Adopting a river is an opportunity to support, sustain and enhance a community by improving, restoring, and protecting the waters and waterways on which the community depends. Adopt-a-River can create significant and long-lasting change for local communities and through combined efforts create a global impact.

Initiative Strategy

The key to protecting and sustaining natural ecosystems is engaging, educating and motivating the communities that live with those ecosystems. For this reason, Rotary Clubs are the key actors in the Adopt-a-River initiative. The clubs, individually or in groups, identify and adopt a local waterbody (river, lake, wetland, estuary, or reservoir) and actively engage with the local community and other stakeholders to identify the major threats to the waterbody and develop a strategic programme to alleviate these threats while also standing as guardians to protect from future negative impacts. The clubs work closely with the community and other key stakeholders including private enterprise and government agencies to raise funds and implement projects to enact their strategy to protect, restore and sustain the waterbody.

The activities of the clubs and the broader initiative are guided by the Adopt-a-River Steering Committee, made up of representatives from Rotary and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). The Steering Committee also administers the Adopt-a-River Core Fund which seeks funds from national and international private and public donors and distributes funds to assist clubs with project implementation. The work of both the clubs and the Steering Committee

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is informed by the Adopt-a-River Technical Advisory Group which provides the technical expertise and strategic awareness to ensure best practice is realised throughout the initiative. A vital connecting and communication role is played by the Adopt-a-River Management Team, which provides a link between clubs and other Adopt-a-River entities ensuring appropriate monitoring and reporting as well as identification and communication of best practice.

The Partners

Adopt-a-River benefits from the active partnership of Rotary International and UNEP creating a unique synergy of the comparative advantages provided by both organizations and their networks. The global mandate and technical expertise of UNEP to drive the global environmental agenda in partnership with countries worldwide and the global reach of Rotary International that is intimately connected to the local community and stakeholders through Rotary Clubs.

Central to Adopt-a-River is the Rotary Clubs and their connection with, and ability to motivate, the communities in which they exist. This strong direct engagement with local communities and stakeholders to drive action and generate change while being cognizant and responsive to regional, national and international programmes, strategies and initiatives is the core of the Adopt-a-River initiative.

Further Information

For further information on Adopt a River for Sustainable Development please refer to:

- Adopt a River for Sustainable Development – Roles and Responsibilities
- Adopt a River for Sustainable Development – Processes and Procedures