ProtectFish members meet in Vienna for the 2026 General Assembly

PRESS RELEASE

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Vienna - Austria

Description of the image: ProtectFish partners and the External Advisory Board experts at the BOKU University (Vienna – Austria).
Author: Aliénor - 2026

On **28 April 2026**, partners of the Horizon EU-funded research project **"Protecting threatened river fish against predation (ProtectFish)"** met in Vienna for the 2026 General Assembly meeting. This meeting was hosted by BOKU University.

Throughout the meeting, leaders of each of the project's Work Packages[1] presented key updates on ongoing activities, collaboration across partners, and priorities for the **2026–2027 period**.

A key development under **project coordination (Work Package 1)** is the appointment of Kim Birnie-Gauvin **as new coordinator for (Danmarks Tekniske Universitet Aqua)**, succeeding Niels Jepsen following his retirement in January 2026.

Dr. Birnie-Gauvin shared results and findings from the February 2026 review meeting with the European Commission[2].

[1] Work package leaders under ProtectFish are *Danish Tekniske Universitet Aqua, Aarhus University, Federal Institute of Hydrology – BfG, BOKU University and Aliénor*
[2] More info: ProtectFish Consortium reviews first 18 months of work in Prague

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Under **Work Package 2**, partners (Aarhus University) reported on the **11th International Conference on Cormorants** held in Prague and co-financed by ProtectFish. One of the key conference outcomes is an upcoming **special issue of the journal *Ornis Fennica***, dedicated to the *"Ecology of cormorants in a changing world"*, to be published in Spring 2027.

The coming year will bring a considerable amount of work under WP2 to collect data and report the breeding count – which is to be organised in 2026-2027. There are some indications that DG ENV under the European Commission will find funding for organizing a wintering cormorants' count will in January 2027 which would be a valuable supplement to the 2027 count of breeding colonies – according to the WP leader Aarhus University.

Under Work Package 3, representatives from the Federal Institute of Hydrology - BfG shared that the EU-listed river fish's monitoring status evaluation is completed, compiled and interpreted. During their work, the partners monitored a **general lack of appropriate data on monitoring of protected fish species** and consequently on fish densities. A major problem relates to the lack of method and data standardisation.

BfG representatives modelled a "minimal viable population size", which includes stressors – having an impact on fish populations. BfG shared that the most relevant environmental stressors are predation, exploitation, flow regime and water temperature.

Field activities remain central to the project. Updates were presented by Work Package 4 leader **BOKU University.** They highlighted extensive **monitoring and management work across test sites**, aiming at a better understanding of how **cormorant management measures influence bird behaviour, and how predation pressure affects fish populations**.

BOKU also reported **challenges**, particularly regarding permitting procedures.

A notable innovation presented during the meeting is the development of an **AI-based tool to automatically detect cormorants in camera trap images**, elaborated by Aarhus University. The system is capable of processing **around 1.2 million images from a single monitoring season**, significantly reducing the manual workload required for data analysis. While performance is strong under certain conditions, accuracy varies across sites due to vegetation and species diversity, and further validation of the game camera pictures is ongoing through manual review.

ProtectFish partners took part in a **field visit to the Traisen River (Lower Austria)**, a test site focusing on the spawning habits of spring-spawning fish species and providing insights into ongoing restoration and monitoring activities within the MERI

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project[3].

The project team now looks ahead to continuing its work to support science-based fisheries management in Europe during the second half of the project's course.

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[3] MERI is a Christian Doppler Laboratory (CD-Laboratory) for 'Meta-Ecosystem Restoration in Riverine Landscapes', a collaborative research initiative between BOKU University and practice partners. The laboratory investigates ecological processes, habitat dynamics and restoration effectiveness in river-floodplain systems to support science-based river management.

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Media contact or for any further information:

Aliénor : protectfish@alienor.eu

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Note to the Editors:

You can read more about the project on this page. The full description of the project's work packages can be accessed here.

ProtectFish consists of 9 partners from research organisations, higher education institutions and SMEs from eight EU countries. The following partners form the project's consortium:

The consortium partners of this project are:

- Aarhus University,
- Aliénor
- BOKU University
- Consiglio Nazional delle Ricerche (CNR) - Istituto di Ricerca sulle Acque
- Czech Academy of Sciences
- Danish Technical University - DTU Aqua
- Federal Institute of Hydrology - BfG
- National Inland Fisheries Research Institute – NIFRI,
- Sveriges Lantbrukuniversitet - SLU

The project's consortium is further assisted by the **External Advisory Board (EAB)** which provides feedback and advice on the project's direction. The EAB is composed of representatives from environmental NGOs, academia, nature management representatives, EU agencies and institutions. More information on the External Advisory Board (EAB) can be found here.

Media:

- LinkedIn
- Project website

Contact:

- Project coordinator:

Kim Birnie Gauvin | Danish Technical University (DTU): kbir@aqua.dtu.dk

- Project Communication & Dissemination leader :

Aliénor: protectfish@alienor.eu

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