

# WHAT FISH WANT

LAST CHANCE FOR TYROL'S INN RIVER



ecotone

experts for ecology

A Film by Christoph Walder



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## IMPRINT

Ecotone - experts for ecology  
Brixnerstraße 4  
A 6020 Innsbruck  
Tyrol, Austria © 2021

# CREDITS

Title	WHAT FISH WANT
Format	4K / digital
Duration	59 mins
Languages	German, English
Producer & Director	Christoph Walder
Camera	Christoph Walder, Christian Kuen
2. Camera	Andreas Walder, Andreas Monsberger
Graphics	Andreas Walder, Gernot Schwendinger
Animation	Andreas Walder
Editor	Christoph Walder
Narrator	Peter Marton
Voice-Overs	Steve Chaid, Patrick Lamb, Howard Nightingall
Translation	Dylan Whiting
Music	terrasound.de, audiojungle.net, bensound.com, Leo Walder
Mixing	Markus Niederhauser / Studio L2, Stefan Fielder / WERBETON

## IN COOPERATION WITH

Tyrolean Fisheries Association  
Innsbruck Fisheries Society  
WWF





**The silent disappearance  
of fish from the largest  
river in the Alps.**

# WHAT FISH WANT

LAST CHANCE FOR TYROL'S INN RIVER

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## LOGLINE

WHAT FISH WANT documents the dramatic deterioration of the once-mighty, incredibly diverse Inn River in Tyrol, and the silent disappearance of its innumerable fish.

It examines the different causes of these troubling developments and accompanies the committed fishermen and conservationists who fight for an intact river habitat and the return of the fish.

## SYNOPSIS

Riverside construction, dams and climate change have had a dramatic impact on alpine rivers - and caused catastrophic environmental damage.

Tyrol's Inn River has lost 95% of its floodplains and 28 of the 31 native fish species are endangered or extinct. These developments have largely occurred without public outcry. Under water, life and death are both silent and invisible.

This film takes the viewer below the surface, revealing the mating process of brown trout and swimming alongside male graylings as they compete for the attention of the females.

WHAT FISH WANT doesn't just examine the lives and behaviours of the fish in the Inn River, it also explores the reasons for the dramatic disappearance of vast numbers of the river's inhabitants. The film documents the largely unknown but significant effects of hydropower on the underwater world and accompanies conservationists and fishermen as they attempt to make the Inn River a diverse and liveable river once again.



„If fish could scream, the  
Inntal and Zillertal valleys  
would sometimes be  
horrifying places indeed.“

Christoph Walder

## ABOUT CHRISTOPH WALDER

A trained biologist, Christoph Walder has worked for WWF Austria since 1989. He has been responsible for numerous national and international conservation campaigns, including for the protection of rivers and endangered species and the creation of nature reserves around Europe. He has coordinated European conservation projects and task forces, is the WWF representative at the International Alpine Convention and is a member of Tyrol's advisory council for nature issues.

Christoph Walder is now the head of WWF Austria's nature conservation department, as well as the CEO of the nature conservation company „Ecotone - experts for ecology“ ([www.ecotone.at](http://www.ecotone.at)). Since 1995 he has focused extensively on researching and protecting endangered species, particularly bats and amphibians, together with Anton Vorauer. Ecotone has been responsible for national and international research and conservation projects.

Ecotone's work has included several film projects, including a critical documentary about the Ilisu dam in Turkey. The film „Climate Crimes“ by Uli Eichelmann (CEO/RiverWatch) was realised with the technical assistance of Ecotone. In the last 15 years, the company has released many other nature documentaries, including films about the natural treasures of Costa Rica, moor conservation in the Alps, bat protection in Tyrol, nature conservation projects organised by the city of Innsbruck and controversial hydropower projects throughout Austria.



## STATEMENT

# CHRISTOPH WALDER

### ABOUT THE INN...

I have always wanted to make a film about the Inn, my favourite river. I grew up along its banks, swam in its freezing waters and enjoyed some of my most compelling nature sightings here. This is also where I was infected with the conservation bug which has lasted a lifetime. For almost 30 years, I have worked to help protect the last remaining natural treasures along the Inn River and support conservation efforts and projects to revitalise the watercourse. Some ideas were successful, like securing protected status for the 100-kilometre stretch of unobstructed river between Imst and Kirchbichl. Other threats to the Inn have remained or grown, like the ongoing hunger of the hydropower industry for more and more dams. The river is firmly in the grip of climate change, and the warming of the water poses further risks to the aquatic organisms.

The only solution to this is the re-establishment of natural stretches of water. If we are not successful, the river and the few natural habitats that still exist will vanish completely.

### ABOUT THE FISH...

Fish are the natural protagonists for a film about a river, even if they have so far played little role in my work. My newfound fascination with graylings, barbels and brown trout is largely due to the experienced Inn fisherman Luis Töchterle.

To us humans, fish are often less visible than birds, butterflies or tigers, for example. That is also the reason they vanished silently from Tyrol's Inn River. Some species have disappeared entirely, while the populations of others have decreased greatly. The numbers of the last three that remain to any significant extent - brown trout, grayling and European bullhead - are sinking rapidly. I was particularly horrified by the mass deaths of young fish as a result of the hydropeaking surges caused by hydropower stations. I experienced these surges personally. If fish could scream, the Inntal and Zillertal valleys would sometimes be horrifying places indeed.

### ABOUT GRAYLINGS...

2021 is the Year of the Grayling in Austria. If one talks to fishermen, one soon discovers that this is a very special fish - probably because of its distinctive dorsal fin and a colourful exterior more common in tropical fish. The reduction in graylings, the keystone species of the Inn River, is not only troubling for the local fishermen, but also a warning sign that the river's ecosystem is under threat.

### WHAT MUST BE DONE...

We are currently experiencing an unprecedented decimation of life in the Inn River. If this trend is not reversed, the grayling may eventually abandon the Inn altogether. I don't want to imagine the Inn without graylings. An intact Inn River is important for the surrounding Inntal valley - for humans and for fish. It is a defence against the increasing effects of climate change. It is a freshwater source that ensures we have sufficient drinking water and healthy groundwater levels that irrigate the fields and meadows in the valley. It provides a habitat for flora and fauna, and its floodplains and natural wetlands reduce the impact of flooding. And, of course, it provides recreational opportunities for people. Without the Inn, life in the Inntal valley would be unrecognisable. We have to respect the Inn, protect its last remaining natural oases and create new ones. As soon as possible.

### ABOUT THE FILM...

Filming WHAT FISH WANT took almost three years. Some sequences, like the successful spawning of the brown trout, were only captured last season. In general, the decision not to „stage“ any sequences or shoot in studios or aquariums made the work more complicated and time-consuming than is often the case in documentaries. We can therefore say in all honesty that almost all nature footage in the film was actually captured in nature. In addition, there are no publicly available publications which record where which fish species congregate, where they spawn or where young fish are to be found. We therefore had to embark on several excursions to create our own maps of the fish universe and suitable filming locations, supported by local fishermen and fish biologists.

The scouting for the scenes involving fish stranded as a result of the hydropeaking surges was particularly difficult. This is a phenomenon that had, so far, not been explored in Tyrol, and no-one knew where these tragedies occurred. As a result, the scenes shown in the film are, as far as I know, the first to document these silent deaths in Austria (and, possibly, in the entire alpine region). The decision was made to subsequently rescue these fish, for ethical and conservationist reasons.

## STATEMENT

### FISHERIES ASSOCIATION

„Our national waters and fish populations need urgent help. The careless approach to river habitats has led to a dramatic collapse of fish populations.

Christoph Walder takes the viewers on a journey into the mystical underwater world, revealing both the fascinating spawning processes of graylings and brown trout, but also showing the true extent of the suffering caused by the local dependence on hydropower. This trend will only be reversed if the public is able to look below the surface - something WHAT FISH WANT makes both possible and captivating.“

Zacharias Schähle,  
Tyrolean Fisheries Association



## STATEMENT

### INNSBRUCK FISHERIES SOCIETY

„As fishermen, we are used to watching natural processes attentively and patiently. However, this film is testimony to the precision and perseverance required by a nature documentary filmmaker. The footage of the hidden world below the water is fascinating but also horrifying, particularly when the full scale of the destruction visited on the young graylings is revealed. It proves that the claim that hydropower provides „clean energy“ is really only propaganda.“

Luis Töchterle  
Director, Innsbruck Fisheries Society



## STATEMENT

### WWF AUSTRIA

Tyrol's Inn River has been of great significance to the WWF for thirty years. It may no longer be as natural as, for example, the Lech River, and it may not be located in a national park, but it is nonetheless special and worthy of conservation efforts. In fact, the Inn holds an Austrian record: by now, no other river flows for 120 kilometres without encountering a dam or other man-made obstruction. This significant success is the result of decades of hard work by many committed people. The small natural treasures that remain along the Inn are some of the last refuges for a variety of rare species, particularly fish. The dramatic drop in grayling numbers, a typical inhabitant of the Inn, is an alarming call for help and a sign that the ecosystem is fundamentally damaged. We have to join forces to stop this. However, until now few people knew the truth about the largest river in the Alps. I am therefore very happy that WHAT FISH WANT makes such an important contribution to raising awareness of the many issues facing the Inn River.“

Andrea Johanides  
CEO, WWF Austria

## FACTS & BACKGROUND INFO

At a length of 510 kilometres, the Inn River is the longest river in the Alps (320 km lie in Austria, 200 km in Tyrol). Its catchment area covers 25,700 km<sup>2</sup>. It springs from the Maloja Pass in Switzerland and flows into the Danube at Passau. For centuries, humans have had an impact on the Inn - particularly since the beginning of systematic construction along the river at the beginning of the 18th century. This tamed the river's wild nature and led to the loss of 95% of the former floodplains. Just 100 years ago, the presence of 31 different species of fish was recorded. These days, only three species still have significant populations, and these are decreasing rapidly.

There are a number of reasons for this dramatic loss of biodiversity. WWF and the Tyrolean regional government regard widespread construction and the clearing of floodplains as significant issues, as well as the separation of tributaries, streams and branches from the main watercourse. These adjacent bodies of water provided important spawning grounds for the Inn fish. Mass migrations of fish like the common nase and barbels from the Bavarian Inn to the arms of the Inn are well-documented. There are captivating reports of these migrations in the Nasenbach stream near Kufstein or the Brandenberger Ache river. In fact,

some of these reports describe how, over the course of days or weeks, the large numbers of fish made it possible to catch them with one's bare hands, with pitchforks or with normal baskets. However, these great swarms vanished almost immediately after the first dam was erected near Jettenbach/Töging in Bavaria in 1923. The ongoing rise of water temperatures as a result of climate change has led to further changes for the fish. Brown trout and graylings now congregate further upstream, where the water is colder. If the water temperatures rise significantly during the summer, it can prove fatal for the fish.

The construction of transport infrastructure like trains (from the mid-19th century) and the motorway (20th century) led to further floodplain reduction and problems for the Inn. The motorway was largely constructed on the „cheap“ public land near the riverbanks. The effect of hydropeaking caused by hydropower stations has also been dramatic. Research is now under way to reduce the impact of such surges. See also (German) <https://www.bmlrt.gv.at/wasser/gewaesserbewirtschaftung/forschungsprojekte/schwallstudie.html> oder [https://forschung.boku.ac.at/fis/suchen.projekt\\_uebersicht?sprache\\_in=de&menu\\_id\\_in=300&id\\_in=10383](https://forschung.boku.ac.at/fis/suchen.projekt_uebersicht?sprache_in=de&menu_id_in=300&id_in=10383)

From 2022, a new power plant on the border between Switzerland and Austria should help to alleviate some of the surges along 23 kilometres of the river. The grayling is Austria's Fish of the Year, and the keystone species along many stretches of the Inn River in Tyrol (the species that should be most common). However, grayling numbers have dropped significantly in recent decades. In some places, it is the surges of the hydropower stations that are the primary culprits (particularly in the Engadin region and near the pumped-storage plants in the mountains). ([https://www.tiroler-fischereiverband.at/fileadmin/user\\_upload/PDF/Fisch\\_des\\_Jahres/Folder\\_FdJ2021\\_Aesche.pdf](https://www.tiroler-fischereiverband.at/fileadmin/user_upload/PDF/Fisch_des_Jahres/Folder_FdJ2021_Aesche.pdf))

For many years, the Tyrolean Fisheries Association and the Innsbruck Fisheries Society have been engaged in efforts to save the Inn graylings. This includes re-connecting separated spawning grounds, raising public awareness and measures to preserve grayling populations. More information can be found here (German): <http://www.fischereigesellschaft-innsbruck.at/de/verein/>

As part of the project „der.inn – lebendig und sicher“, the Austrian federal government, the Tyrolean regional government and WWF have worked together to make the Inn a more vital, lively river again since 2006. Around 20 revitalisation projects have been realised, creating new natural areas, restoring fish access to river branches and reconnecting streams and tributaries to the main watercourse. The current INTERREG project „InnSieme“ includes plans to establish a trilateral (Switzerland, Austria, Germany) plan of action for the protection and encouragement of flora and fauna and further restoration efforts ([https://www.tiroler-fischereiverband.at/fileadmin/user\\_upload/PDF/Fisch\\_des\\_Jahres/Folder\\_FdJ2021\\_Aesche.pdf](https://www.tiroler-fischereiverband.at/fileadmin/user_upload/PDF/Fisch_des_Jahres/Folder_FdJ2021_Aesche.pdf));

Detailed information is also available at [www.unser-inn.at](http://www.unser-inn.at).

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