

# RENAISSANCE DE LA VALLEE DE LA SELUNE

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*The largest dam removal in Finland, River Hiitolanjoki, paving the way for new era in river restoration*

Barriers to the upstream migration of fish will be removed at Finland's most significant landlocked salmon river. **River Hiitolanjoki** in Rautjärvi, South Karelia, is home to Finland's last remaining stock of original and fully natural, yet critically endangered **landlocked salmon** (*Salmo salar m. Sebago Girard*), and furthermore to endangered population of **brown trout** (*Salmo trutta*).

Over 100 years hydropower dams have replaced natural rapids and acted as complete barriers for Lake Ladoga salmon to enter their historic breeding grounds. After the WW2 the river basin was split for two countries, the western upper part remained in Finland, but Soviet Union took the main lower stretch of the river. In Russian side the dams have fallen into ruins, but in Finland the remaining three hydropower plants are still in operation.

The area located above the Hiitolanjoki power plants has plenty production potential: an estimated 5,000 - 11,000 migratory salmonid smolts per year. That would mean doubling of the current production in the whole river length. At present, a maximum of few dozen salmon ascend to the Finnish side annually, just to meet the dam at Kangaskoski, few hundred meters from the Russian border.

The freeing of the River Hiitolanjoki has taken now two decades and involved not only the authorities, but also numerous companies and private individuals whose unending belief in a free river is finally leading towards a long-anticipated outcome. As a result of the recent acquisitions, the South Karelian Recreation Area Foundation will own all the dams which means dismantling them and restoring the rapids. With a combined descent of 18 meters, the rapids at Ritakoski, Lahnasenkoski and Kangaskoski will form an exceptionally stunning passage through the Hiitolanjoki recreation areas.

In addition to the state funding, the acquisition of the power plants and the following dam removals are supported by many public organisations, NGOs and private donors. The first dam removal is to take place in August 2021. Sustainable tourism can then be built on this valuable fish stock, wild rapids and the fascination of the close proximity of the Eastern border!

Finland is no question among the first European countries to include dam removal high up in their political agenda. Finland's new Governmental Programme explicitly states dam removals as a desired national activity, and aims at allocating 18 million of public funds in the next four years for restoring migratory fish stocks. In 2020 six million euros of will be available for dam removals and by-pass solutions – that is part of the 100 million EUR of new money allocated to increasing the total funding of nature conservation in Finland.

In order to revitalize migratory fish stocks, also fishing needs to be on a sustainable basis. Since few years, the wild-born individuals of endangered fish stocks are either fully or partially protected from fishing, and in 2019 conservation values were set to these fish. Thus one illegally caught landlocked salmon in the Hiitolanjoki tributary now means confiscation to the State worth 7 510 euros.

Further information:

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