The Skjern River - Denmark's River Restoration Model

Mains: General Studies

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Source report: 22 October 2026 (Times of India, 9:40 AM IST) - an account of the Skjern river's restoration.

Introduction

The **Skjern** is a river of western Jutland. By volume of water flow it is Denmark's largest river (EU LIFE project description; DCE/DMU report), and it empties into Ringkobing Fjord (a lagoon on the North Sea coast) (DCE/DMU report). In the 1960s, a large project straightened the river and bound it in embankments so that the surrounding marshland could be brought under farming. The decision was later reversed: the river was given back a winding course and the marshland was restored. This is a well-known example of **river restoration**.

Key points of the project

- **The problem**: farming succeeded for a while, but over time yields fell sharply, while large amounts of fertiliser were put into the fields (European Commission).
- **The restoration**: the river was re-excavated and laid in a more natural, winding bed about **26 km** long; about **2,200 hectares** of land were converted back into marshland (European Commission, Times of India).
- **Nutrients (DCE/DMU monitoring, 1999-2003)**: about 5-10% of nutrients were retained in the flooded valley. Still, the monitoring concluded that the nitrogen-phosphorus load reaching Ringkobing Fjord did not fall markedly with the restoration, because that load is determined by sources across the entire catchment.
- **Results (European Commission)**: wildlife returned in large numbers. By the end of the project, about 3.5 to 4 lakh people were using the new nature trails (European Commission).
- **Farmers and cost-benefit**: farmers were helped to adopt nature-friendly farming. The cost-benefit analysis found that local economic opportunities exceeded the project's total cost (European Commission).

- **The limit**: according to a Times of India report of 9 August 2026, a long-term study (Ecological Engineering, volume 218, researchers at Aarhus University) found that some habitats lost to decades of river engineering can take centuries to return; aquatic species came back, but below their historical diversity.
- **The project's stages**: in 1987 Denmark's parliament decided to restore the lower Skjern river and valley (DCE/DMU, EC). Construction work began in June 1999 and was largely complete by the end of 2002 (DCE/DMU). The river's main channel grew from 19 km to 26 km (DCE/DMU). The project received EU LIFE support (DCE/DMU report). According to the Times of India (9 August 2026), work to turn 19 km of straightened river into a 26 km winding course began in 2001. The dates above are from the official DCE/DMU reports.

In India's context

- For questions in India such as the channelisation of rivers, encroachment on floodplains and the loss of wetlands, this example is useful for comparison. It is not a claim about any project in India; the facts above are Denmark's.

Mains Practice Question

"The restoration of the Skjern river is an example of a 'nature-based solution'. What lessons does it offer for India's rivers and wetlands? Discuss with suitable examples." (250 words)

Sources

- Times of India, 22 October 2026: How Denmark restored 26 kilometres of the Skjern River...
- European Commission: Nature restoration success stories - Skjern river restoration in Denmark
- DCE (Aarhus University), NERI Technical Report No. 531, 2005: Restoration of Skjern River - environmental monitoring 1999-2003
- DMU: Skjern Å - baggrund
- EU LIFE00 NAT/DK/007116: Restoration of habitats and wildlife of the Skjern River
- Times of India, 9 August 2026: In 2001, Denmark began turning 19 km of straightened River Skjern into 26 km of bends