



VJOSA

THE LAST EUROPE'S WILD RIVER

GENERAL INFORMATION

The Vjosa River in Albania is of pan-European or even global importance. Along its 270km flow it represents one of the last intact large river systems in Europe, flowing from the Pindus Mountains in Greece to the Adriatic Sea without artificial obstacles. It hosts all different types of ecosystems: from the narrow gorges in the upper part to the wide braided river sections in the middle part to the near natural delta. The Vjosa River is draining a total area of 6,700 km² in Albania and Greece and discharges an average of 204 m³/s into the Adriatic Sea. Even more outstanding about the Vjosa system is the fact that, besides the main river, also most of its tributaries are still in a natural or near-natural state. The intact tributaries most likely add an enormous variety of habitats and biodiversity to the Vjosa river system.

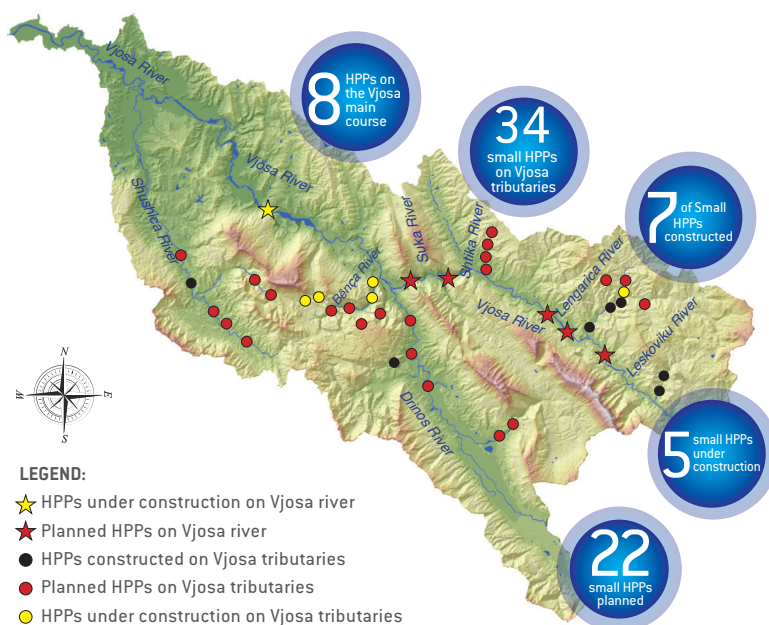
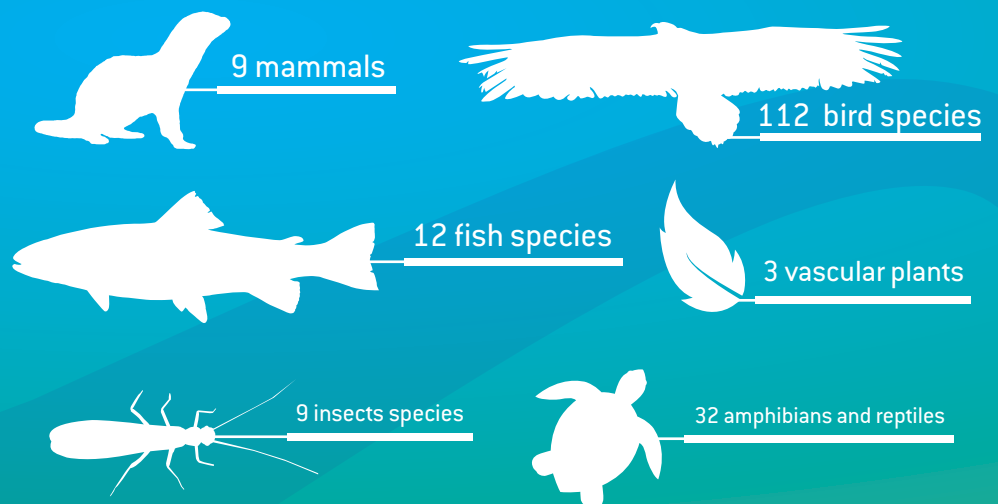


BIODIVERSITY

Vjosa valley covers almost 16% of Albania's territory. Despite the lack of extended studies, due to variety of natural habitats, this part of the country creates the possibility of an ecological continuance giving shelter to a rich biodiversity. Dimension, complexity and integrity of river habitats along the Vjosa are unique within Europe. The braided river system is characterized by large gravel banks with pioneer vegetation, islands, side arms, oxbows, ponds, and alluvial forests of native vegetation that provides breeding ground for typical bird species. Despite major knowledge gaps in regards to biodiversity, the surveys were conducted show that the Vjosa is a hotspot for biodiversity. In only few days of survey there have been 40 species reported for the first time in Albania while 2 of them were completely new species for science.

177 SPECIES LISTED IN THE APPENDICES OF THE BERN CONVENTION WOULD BE AFFECTED BY DAM PLANS, ESPECIALLY BY THE POÇEM PROJECT

Further assessments would very likely discover much more species covered by the Bern Convention



THREATS

The habitats of the Vjosa valley are still in a natural or near-natural state. No artificial obstacles, weirs, or fixed embankments (except near bridges) disrupt the river continuity and morpho-dynamics. The main concern is the massive hydropower development that is foreseen on the Vjosa and its tributaries which will cause irreversible damage to this European natural heritage and its fauna and flora. In total, 42 hydropower plants are projected in the Albanian part of the Vjosa basin: 8 at the Vjosa itself and 34 at its tributaries. An additional five hydropower

plants have already been constructed on two tributaries in the last years. While the Albanian government is pushing for new hydropower plants, it fails to have proper Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) prepared for these projects. The proposed hydropower projects would flood unique alluvial areas with gravel islands, forests and fertile agricultural lands. Therefore, all the species that live or forage in the area would be gravely affected. Albanian scientists predict, that the populations of many species would decline considerably.

POÇEMI HPP

In the Poçem area, the river creates the exceptional habitats of alluvial vegetation and offers fertile lands as well for the people living along it. The main incomes of the residents are mainly based on agriculture. The second biggest hydropower in Vjosa is the one of Poçem and its dam is planned to be built near the Poçem village. The project of Poçem hydropower foresees the construction of a dam around 30m in height, 200m in length and with an installed capacity of 102, 2 MW. The HPP dam will create a reservoir of 24km², which will flood about 2000 ha of agricultural land, in the villages of the Mallakastra and Selenica Municipalities. The concession was given to the joint venture "Kovlu Energji" of Turkish "Ayen Enerji" and "Cinar San" on September 2016. The company did

not perform a public hearing with the affected community and Local Government Units violating this way the Albanian legislation and international Conventions. After a series of petitions, letters of concerns and protests, 38 residents and 3 NGOs filed a lawsuit requesting the annulment of the contract for the Poçem hydropower on December 2nd 2016. Within 5 months after a series of court hearings on May 2nd 2017 the Administrative Court of First Instance in Tirana decided to declare the nullification of the concession contract signed between the Ministry of Energy and Industry and the Turkish company "Kovlu Energji" as a result of a series of procedural law infringements. The process is ongoing as the Public Authorities appeal the court decision.



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KALIVAÇI HPP

The middle flow of Vjosa provides one of the most dynamic parts of the river. Here, the river landscape expands up to 2 kilometers in width, covering the entire morphological valley. In one of the "bottle necks" of the river near the village of Kalivaçi is planned to be constructed the dam project named after the village.

The Kalivaçi project is the first hydropower in Vjosa, permission given in 1997. The construction of the dam began in 2007, but has stopped several times. In the beginning, the main source of investment was the Italian investor Becchetti Group and Deutsche Bank, but the construction works

got up to 30 %, keeping the river still untouched. The Italian company had also continuously liquidation problems with the sub-contracted companies, which have abandoned the works. On May 2017, the Albanian government canceled the contract of the concession with the Italian company "Kalivaç Green Energy" of the investor Francesco Becchetti and has restarted the procedures for opening the tender for the construction of the Kalivaçi HPP. On October 2017, The Ministry of Energy and Industry announced the winners of the concession the joint venture of Albanian "Fusha sh. p. k." and Turkish "Ayen Enerji", for

which the Administrative Court took the decision to cancel the concession owned by this company for the construction of Poçem hydropower. With a 47m high dam, the Kalivaçi hydropower foresees to cover about 1700 ha of various habitats, arable land and more than 120 houses on the Memaliaj Municipality. The 500m long dam, placed in both sides of the hills is planned to form a reservoir with a volume of 350 million m³ with an energy-installed capacity of 111MW. Local community as well as NGOs, Scientists, and civil society in Albania is against this construction that would destroy the best part of Albanian natural heritage.



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SUMMARY IMPACTS OF HPPS

The projected hydropower plants would all have severe impacts on the pristine habitats of the Vjosa river system and the species it is hosting. In summary, the Poçem and Kalivaç as well as the other projects foreseen on the Vjosa and its tributaries would destroy Europe's last intact wild river system. They would lead to a severe loss in biodiversity and affect all ecosystem services, such as natural purification of water, vast groundwater aquifers for drinking water supply and agriculture, flood mitigation, and its

unique opportunities for a recreational development. Unlike the "big" dam projects on the Vjosa itself, the smaller hydropower plants on the tributaries are designed as diversion type: up to 95% of the water is taken from the river, diverted into pipes to electricity-generating turbine at a lower elevation and then returned to the river kilometers downstream of the intake. This leads to a dry river bed below the intake, since the biological minimum flow is usually not maintained.



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- The Vjosa is the last big wild river in Europe outside Russia. Entirely unobstructed, she flows through inaccessible gorges and sections with enormous gravel banks and islands on her course of almost 270 kilometers from the Pindus Mountains to the Adriatic Sea.

- The protection of the Vjosa is a key goal of the campaign "Save the Blue Heart of Europe", which aims to protect the most valuable rivers in the Balkans. The campaign is coordinated by the NGOs Riverwatch and EuroNatur and carried out together with partner organisations in the Balkan countries.

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