

Update on casefile 2016/5: Recent developments in the Vjosa delta protected landscape (Pishe Poro–Narta), Albania

Submitted ahead of the Bern Convention Bureau Meeting

June 16th, 2026

1. Recent developments and escalating threats in the Protected Landscape “Pishe Poro – Narta”

We would like to bring to the attention of the Bureau a series of recent developments concerning the Vjosa Delta Protected Landscape (Pishë Poro–Narta), one of the most valuable coastal ecosystems in the Mediterranean and a site already subject to concerns expressed under the Bern Convention.

Since March 2026, Albanian authorities have accelerated administrative procedures related to large-scale tourism developments planned within the protected landscape. During this period, development permits were issued for projects promoted under the government's Strategic Investments Framework, including the tourism development within the Zvërnec area of the protected landscape.

The pace of administrative approvals has been accompanied by a serious lack of transparency. Key project documents, environmental studies, technical assessments and planning information have not been made readily available to the public despite repeated requests from civil society organizations, experts and local communities. This has significantly limited public participation and meaningful scrutiny of decisions affecting one of Albania's most sensitive protected areas.

A particularly concerning development occurred in early May 2026, when construction-related activities commenced on the ground. Field observations indicate that ground-moving operations, fencing works and preparatory interventions began on 5th of May 2026. However, only ten days later, on 15 May 2026, the competent environmental authority formally determined that the project must undergo a Profound Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA).

This sequence of events raises serious concerns regarding compliance with the fundamental principles of environmental assessment. Physical interventions had already begun before the authorities had formally established the level of environmental assessment required for the project and before a comprehensive evaluation of its environmental acceptability had been completed. Environmental assessment procedures are intended to inform decision-making before interventions take place. When construction activities precede the completion of this process, it becomes difficult to conclude that the sequence and logic envisaged by environmental legislation have been respected.

The commencement of works triggered strong public reaction. Initial protests began in the project area during the middle of May 2026, as local residents, environmental organizations and concerned citizens gathered to oppose the destruction of protected habitats and demand transparency regarding the development plans.

By the end of May, these protests had expanded far beyond the project site. What began as a local environmental mobilisation evolved into a nationwide movement. Since 31st May 2026, demonstrations have been organized continuously in Tirana and numerous cities throughout Albania, while solidarity actions have also taken place within Albanian diaspora communities abroad. Thousands of citizens have participated in these protests, making them one of the largest environmental mobilisations witnessed in Albania in recent years. Demonstrations continue while this report is being prepared.

Field observations conducted after the commencement of construction activities suggest that preliminary works have already caused significant impacts on natural habitats. Heavy machinery operations along the beaches of Dajlan and Portonova appear to have damaged nesting habitats of the globally threatened loggerhead sea turtle (*Caretta caretta*). Sensitive dune systems have been affected through the deposition and compaction of construction materials used for internal access roads. Interventions within the Portonova channel have the potential to alter the natural exchange of water between the lagoon and the sea, a process that is essential for maintaining the ecological functioning of the entire wetland complex.

These impacts are particularly alarming given the ecological importance of the Vjosa Delta. The area represents the most intact estuarine ecosystem remaining in the Mediterranean Basin and constitutes the only landscape in Albania where all categories of protected areas occur within a single interconnected ecological system.

2. Cumulative development pressure and planned tourism expansion

The current concerns extend well beyond a single project.

Available information indicates that the Vjosa Delta and surrounding coastal protected areas are being targeted for a series of large-scale tourism and urban development schemes that, if

implemented collectively, would fundamentally transform the ecological character of the protected landscape.

Projects currently known to civil society include:

- **Sazan Development**, including the Strategic Investment project and associated luxury tourism infrastructure on the Sazan Island. Yet there is no consolidated plan or project about that;
- [Zvërnec Development](#), a large-scale tourism and urban development project proposed for the Zvërnec Peninsula; since around 10 June 2026 a so-called masterplan appeared in the public domain, named after the island of Sazan, but covering the Zvërnec and Narta area. This masterplan might be not the final version, but it suggests the size and direction of the project;
- [UMEA Masterplan \(Novoselë\)](#), a large-scale tourism and urban development project proposed within the broader Vjosa Delta area;
- [New Apollonia](#), another major coastal resort development planned between the Seman and Vjosa river systems;
- Additional tourism developments proposed for the coastal corridor stretching from the [Seman River to the Vjosa River](#), involving extensive tourism infrastructure, residential developments and recreational facilities.

Publicly available masterplans indicate developments covering hundreds of hectares and involving extensive tourism accommodation, villas, marinas, golf-related infrastructure, hospitality facilities and associated transport networks. Considered individually, each project may generate substantial environmental pressures. Considered cumulatively, they represent a development model capable of permanently fragmenting habitats, altering hydrological processes, increasing disturbance to wildlife and fundamentally changing the ecological integrity of the protected landscape.

The cumulative impacts of these projects have not been adequately assessed through a strategic and ecosystem-based approach. Instead, developments continue to be advanced through fragmented administrative procedures that fail to capture their combined effects on biodiversity, ecological connectivity and ecosystem functioning.

This cumulative threat is particularly significant because the Vjosa Delta serves as a critical ecological corridor connecting riverine, lagoon, coastal dune and marine ecosystems. The degradation of one component inevitably affects the functioning of the entire ecological system.

3. Need for an Urgent On-the-Spot Appraisal (OSA)

Given the rapid escalation of developments on the ground, the commencement of construction activities, the reported impacts on protected habitats, the scale of public

concern, and the existence of multiple large-scale tourism projects planned throughout the protected landscape, we respectfully urge the Bureau to consider the organization of an urgent On-the-Spot Appraisal (OSA).

Such an appraisal is necessary not only to evaluate the impacts of the specific Zvërnec development currently under implementation, but also to assess the broader transformation underway across the entire Vjosa Delta region.

An OSA would provide an independent assessment of:

- The environmental impacts already resulting from ongoing construction activities;
- Compliance of current permitting and environmental assessment procedures with the obligations arising under the Bern Convention;
- The cumulative effects of multiple planned tourism developments across the protected landscape;
- Potential impacts on habitats and species protected under the Convention, including migratory birds, coastal dune habitats, wetland ecosystems and the loggerhead sea turtle (*Caretta caretta*);
- The adequacy of public participation, transparency and access to environmental information;
- The compatibility of the current development model with the conservation objectives of the protected area.

We further encourage the Bureau to request enhanced transparency and accountability from Albanian authorities, including the publication of all relevant project documentation, environmental assessments, permits and planning instruments, and to ensure that no irreversible interventions proceed before independent assessments have been completed.

The Vjosa Delta represents one of the most valuable and irreplaceable natural landscapes in Europe. Decisions taken during the coming months may determine whether this ecosystem remains intact or undergoes irreversible transformation. For this reason, timely intervention and independent assessment by the Bern Convention are both justified and urgently needed.