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EDITORIAL

The European Union has recently published a guidance document on the implementation of Articles 5 and 9 of the Birds Directive, providing clarification on the general system of protection for wild bird species and the conditions under which derogations may be applied. The guidance supports Member States in ensuring effective implementation of species protection requirements through preventive measures, monitoring, and proportionate application of derogations, while balancing biodiversity conservation objectives with socio-economic considerations. The document is advisory in nature and does not create new legal obligations.

Purpose

This brief outlines key principles and implementation guidance for Articles 5 and 9 of the EU Birds Directive, focusing on the protection of wild bird species and the regulated use of derogations. It is intended to support policymakers, public authorities, and practitioners in ensuring effective compliance while addressing socio-economic needs. The guidance document is advisory in nature and intended to support interpretation and implementation of the EU Birds Directive; it is not legally binding and does not create additional legal obligations.
Policy Context
The EU Birds Directive provides a comprehensive legal framework for the conservation of all naturally occurring wild bird species across the EU. It combines strict species protection with habitat conservation, aiming to maintain or restore bird populations at favourable levels. Implementation must balance ecological objectives with economic and social considerations, without compromising long-term conservation goals.

Key Provisions under Article 5

Article 5 establishes a strict and general system of protection applicable to all wild birds throughout the year. Member States are required to prohibit deliberate killing or capture, destruction of nests and eggs, removal of eggs, and significant disturbance, especially during breeding and rearing periods. The notion of “deliberate” includes actions undertaken with awareness of potential harm, not only intentional acts.

These obligations apply across all territories and species, regardless of their conservation status. As such, Member States must ensure that their legal frameworks are clear, enforceable, and supported by concrete measures that prevent harmful activities before they occur.

Implementation Approach

Effective implementation relies on integrating bird protection into broader policy and regulatory systems. Preventive measures are central, with emphasis on avoiding impacts through planning, design, and operational practices. This includes incorporating requirements into Environmental Impact Assessments, Natura 2000 procedures, and sector-specific regulations.

In practice, this involves adapting activities in sectors such as infrastructure, energy, agriculture, and forestry to reduce risks to birds. Examples include collision prevention measures, careful siting of developments, seasonal restrictions during breeding periods, and habitat management practices. Continuous monitoring is essential to verify effectiveness and ensure compliance.

Derogations under Article 9

Article 9 allows for limited and strictly controlled derogations from Article 5 prohibitions. These are exceptional measures and can only be granted when no satisfactory alternative exists, when the action is justified and proportionate, and when it does not undermine the Directive's conservation objectives.

Permissible grounds for derogations include public health and safety, prevention of serious damage to crops, livestock, or fisheries, protection of flora and fauna, and specific research or conservation purposes. Each derogation must clearly define the species concerned, methods used, geographic scope, duration, and control mechanisms.

Priority of Preventive and Non-Lethal Measures

A fundamental principle is that non-lethal and preventive solutions must always be prioritized. Measures such as habitat management, deterrent systems, and ecosystem-based approaches should be exhausted before considering lethal control. Derogations involving lethal methods are therefore a last resort and require strong justification.

Monitoring, Reporting, and Compliance

Member States are required to monitor the effectiveness of protection measures and assess the impacts of derogations on bird populations. Annual reporting obligations ensure transparency and accountability, with data submitted to the European Commission through standardized systems.

The Commission plays a key oversight role, ensuring that derogations remain compatible with conservation objectives and that cumulative impacts do not lead to population decline. Corrective actions may be taken where necessary.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Effective implementation of Articles 5 and 9 requires strengthening preventive approaches, ensuring legal clarity, and enhancing institutional capacity for enforcement and monitoring. Policymakers should prioritize the integration of bird protection into sectoral policies, promote the use of non-lethal solutions, and ensure that derogations remain exceptional and evidence-based.

Improved data collection, stakeholder engagement, and cross-border cooperation are also critical, particularly for migratory species and shared ecosystems. Aligning agricultural, energy, and infrastructure policies with biodiversity objectives will be essential to achieving long-term conservation outcomes.

Conclusion

The EU Birds Directive establishes a robust and preventive system for the protection of wild birds, underpinned by strict legal obligations and carefully controlled flexibility. While Article 9 allows for necessary exceptions, these must be applied cautiously and transparently, ensuring that conservation objectives remain the central priority.

A YEAR OF PROGRESS: WHAT EU4NATURE HAS CHANGED SO FAR

The EU4Nature programme continues to play a central role in supporting Albania's transition toward EU-compliant nature protection, contributing directly to the target of protecting 25% of land and marine areas by 2030. Implemented by the European Union, UNDP, and the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS), the programme focuses on strengthening legal frameworks, institutional capacities, and practical conservation measures.



Using water quality monitoring toolkits
Discussing of Dajti Mountain National Park Business Plan;



Joint meeting with ASPA on the e-learning modules





Round table discussion on species reference lists at the Faculty of Natural Sciences

Over the past year, Albania has advanced its alignment with the EU Nature Directives through targeted legal and institutional support. EU4Nature has contributed to drafting key by-laws and improving coordination among national and regional authorities, particularly the Ministry of Environment and the National Agency of Protected Areas. New governance tools for Protected Area Management Committees have enhanced decision-making and operational consistency.

A major achievement has been the introduction of digital systems for revenue collection in protected areas. The rollout of e-invoicing and e-ticketing has increased transparency, reduced informal practices, and enabled real-time financial monitoring.

The programme introduced digital revenue systems across protected areas, including e-ticketing in three pilot sites with over 8,600 tickets issued, the adoption of fiscalized invoicing by seven RAPAs and NAPA, and the standardization of more than 95 ecosystem service fee categories. This marks an important step toward modern, accountable management of ecosystem services.
Capacity development has remained a cornerstone of the programme. Through structured training programmes, workshops, and an expanding e-learning platform, over 150 professionals have strengthened their knowledge of Natura 2000, protected area management, and EU standards. Collaboration with the Albanian School of Public Administration ensures sustainability and institutional integration of these efforts.

The programme has also prioritized youth engagement through the Youth4Nature initiative, empowering young professionals to contribute to conservation activities and environmental awareness. This approach is fostering a new generation of environmental stewards and strengthening community involvement, with currently 20 young professionals engaged through Youth4Nature.
Progress in protected area management has been significant. New management plans, biodiversity assessments, and socio-economic studies, such as those conducted in the Shala Valley, are improving planning and decision-making. The application of the Management Effectiveness Tracking Tool (METT-4) across pilot sites is helping to systematically assess and improve performance.
EU4Nature has further supported the use of modern technologies, including GIS mapping and biodiversity databases, which are essential for Natura 2000 preparation and EU reporting requirements. At the same time, field-level investments, such as drones, monitoring equipment, and firefighting tools, have strengthened operational capacities and resilience to environmental risks.

Efforts to combat environmental crime and promote sustainable development have also been reinforced through targeted trainings and cross-institutional cooperation.

Despite challenges related to financial and administrative constraints, the programme remains on track. Its integrated approach, combining policy reform, digital innovation, capacity building, and field support,continues to deliver tangible results. EU4Nature is not only advancing Albania's EU integration process but also ensuring that biodiversity conservation becomes a practical and lasting national priority.

EU4Nature Team

BUILDING ALBANIA'S NATURA 2000 DATABASE

One of the most important and technically demanding steps in Albania's path toward EU environmental alignment is the establishment of a functional Natura 2000 database. While much attention is often placed on protected area designation and management, the reality is that none of this can happen without a solid scientific foundation. Under the EU4Nature programme, this process is now being initiated, marking a crucial transition from fragmented biodiversity information toward a structured, EU-compliant system.

At its core, the initiative aims to build a comprehensive database on the distribution of habitats and species of Community interest, supported by Geographic Information Systems (GIS), standardized datasets, and field-based verification. The work will focus on a number of priority sites such as the Drinos Valley, Upper Vjosa, Vjosa River Delta, Shebenik National Park, and Lake Shkodra, which are considered strong candidates for inclusion in Albania's future Natura 2000 network. For each of these areas, detailed information will be collected, analyzed, and structured into datasets that describe the presence, condition, and ecological importance of habitats and species.

This process goes far beyond simple data collection. It requires the integration of multiple sources of information, such as scientific studies, institutional databases, NGO reports, academic research, and international platforms into a single, coherent system. In parallel, field verification will play a critical role in validating existing data and filling key gaps. The outputs of this work will include GIS maps, species and habitat inventories, and ultimately the preparation of Natura 2000 Standard Data Forms (SDFs), which are the official documents used to justify site designation .

At this early stage, one of the most significant challenges lies in the current state of biodiversity data in Albania. Information is often scattered across institutions, stored in incompatible formats, or not publicly accessible. In many cases, datasets are incomplete or outdated, particularly for certain taxonomic groups such as invertebrates, which are essential for Natura 2000 assessments but remain under-studied. In addition, the lack of standardized methodologies and coordinated data collection has made it difficult to compare or aggregate information across sites.

At the same time, EU4Nature has already made important progress in laying the institutional and technical groundwork required by the EU Birds and Habitats Directives. The project has supported Albania in advancing the transposition of the EU Nature Protection acquis, including the identification of remaining legal and procedural gaps and the preparation of secondary legislation needed for full compliance. While Albania's legal framework is broadly aligned with the directives, key elements such as appropriate assessment procedures, ecological connectivity, and systematic species monitoring, still require further development through by-laws and implementation tools .

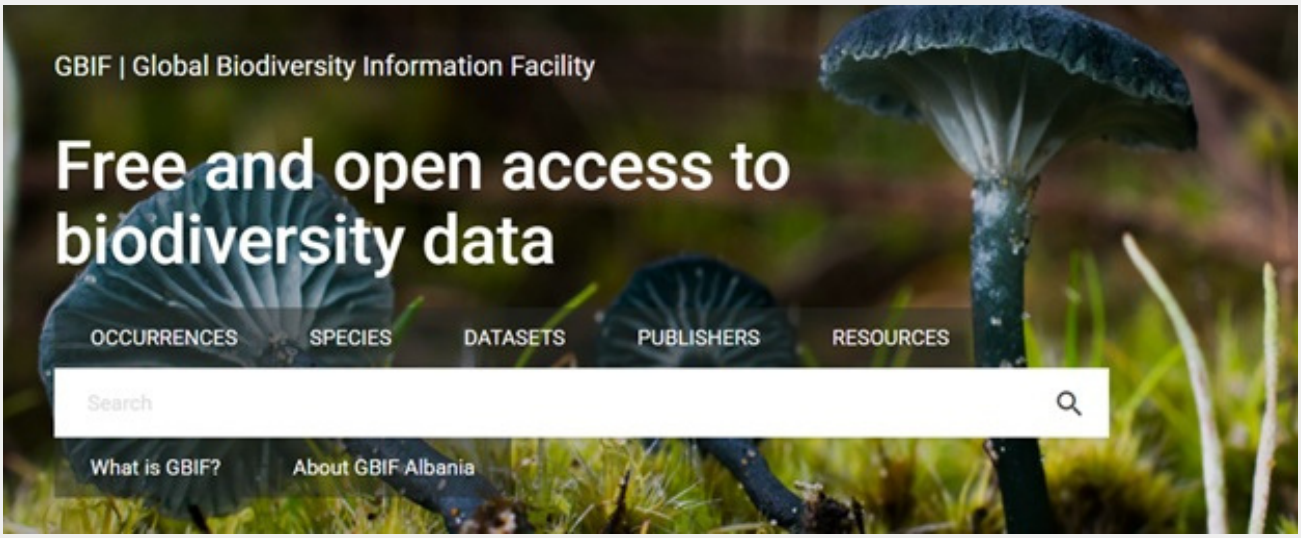
In parallel, significant efforts have been made to strengthen institutional capacities. EU4Nature has delivered a series of targeted trainings and workshops to improve understanding of Natura 2000 requirements, reaching participants across national and local institutions. These sessions have focused on the core principles of the Birds and Habitats Directives, including the concept of favourable conservation status, the logic of site designation (SCIs, SACs, and SPAs), and the practical implications of Article 6 requirements for conservation measures and impact assessment .





The project has also contributed to strengthening the scientific basis required for Natura 2000 implementation. National reference lists of species and habitats aligned with the EU directives have been completed, providing a critical foundation for identifying sites of Community importance and ensuring consistency in future reporting. At the same time, GIS analyses and biodiversity mapping are already underway for multiple sites, with habitat classification, species distribution mapping, and spatial analysis being developed in line with EU standards .

These efforts are complemented by the development of practical tools for implementation. Standardized monitoring templates, management planning approaches aligned with Natura 2000, and improved performance monitoring systems (such as METT-4) are being introduced to help translate EU requirements into day-to-day management practices within protected areas. Together, these steps are helping to bridge the gap between legal alignment and operational readiness. To build on this progress, EU4Nature is now supporting the establishment of a centralized, interoperable database that will consolidate biodiversity data and make it accessible for analysis, planning, and reporting. The system is expected to align with international standards and connect with global biodiversity platforms such as GBIF, ensuring that Albania's data is not only usable at national level but also compatible with EU reporting frameworks.

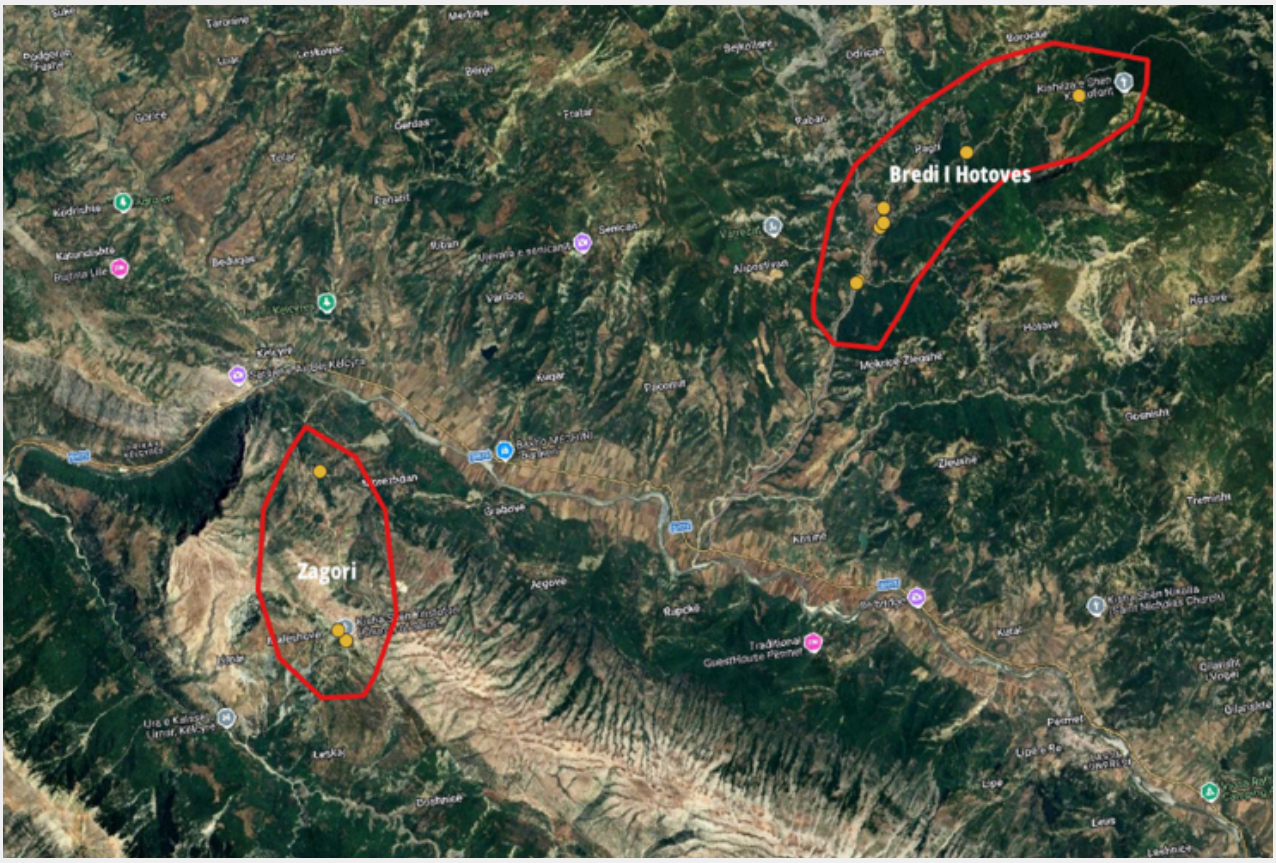


Author: EU4Nature

A WEEK OF TECHNICAL FIELD MISSIONS SHAPES THE FUTURE OF ENVIRONMENTAL RESTORATION UNDER EU4NATURE

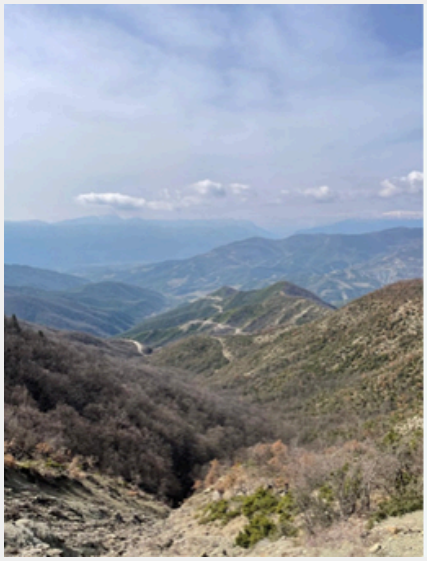
During the first week of March 2026, the EU4Nature technical working group, composed of experts from CREA-FL and the University of Florence, carried out an important field mission across several protected areas in central and southern Albania. The mission aimed not only to assess environmental degradation and hydrogeological risks, but also to evaluate the technical feasibility of future restoration interventions capable of protecting biodiversity while improving the safety and resilience of rural communities.

From the Bredhi i Hotovës National Park to the Zagori area, the team identified several critical sites affected by erosion and slope instability threatening local rural roads and infrastructures. Particular attention was given to the potential application of Nature-Based Solutions and bioengineering techniques for slope stabilization and riverbank protection, using locally available natural materials such as timber and native vegetation species. The mission also highlighted the impact of uncontrolled grazing, especially by goats, on natural forest regeneration processes and future reforestation efforts.


Bredi I Hotoves
Zagori



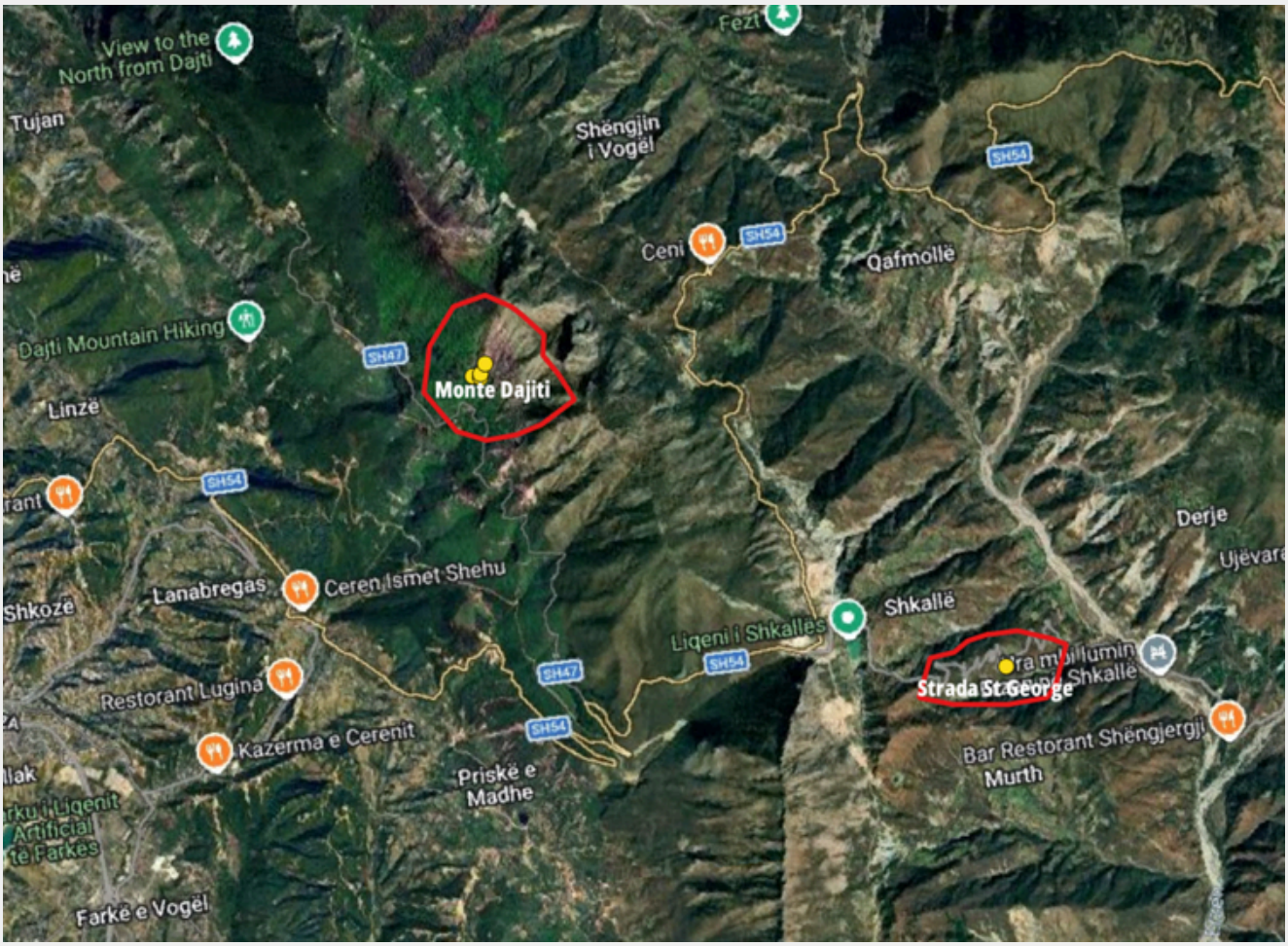






The field activities then continued in Mount Dajti National Park, where experts assessed a large forest area still affected by the consequences of the 2007 wildfire. The mission focused on evaluating possible ecological restoration measures aimed at accelerating forest renaturalization, reducing soil erosion, supporting forest regeneration and mitigating grazing pressure that currently prevents the natural growth of young beech trees. Additional localized interventions were also assessed along the St. George provincial road, where slope stabilization works may be required.

In Shebenik National Park, the technical team focused on river systems and watercourses affected by severe riverbed incision and widespread erosion processes that threaten infrastructures located upstream of inhabited areas. The mission emphasized the importance of integrated watershed-scale interventions capable of combining ecosystem restoration with risk reduction and protection of local communities.



The ongoing collaboration between AKZM and ASPA plays a key role in maintaining the quality and relevance of the platform's content. Regular updates, technical improvements, and periodic reviews ensure that the system remains responsive to the evolving training needs of Albania's environmental administration. Future plans include expanding the number of users, diversifying learning materials, and introducing new functionalities that will facilitate blended learning and peer-to-peer exchange.





One of the key moments of the mission was the visit to the Bovilla restoration site, considered a successful example of how environmental restoration and bioengineering techniques can be effectively implemented in Albania through cooperation with local forestry experts and private companies such as Lurimi Shpk. The site demonstrated the importance of using local species and locally sourced materials, including wooden poles from pine, chestnut and black locust, ensuring that restoration works remain fully integrated with the surrounding ecosystem.

The data and technical assessments collected during the mission are now contributing to the ongoing Transferability Analysis, which will support the replication of successful restoration models and Nature-Based Solutions across other protected areas targeted by the EU4Nature programme.

Prepared by AICS – CREA

FROM TRAINING TO PRACTICE: STRENGTHENING PROTECTED AREA STAFF

How can protected areas move beyond formal designation and become more effective in delivering real conservation outcomes?

This question shaped the discussions during the national workshop organized by the EU4Nature project on 8 April 2026 in Tirana, which brought together representatives of protected area institutions at national and regional level to discuss the future of protected area performance monitoring and management in Albania.

The meeting focused not only on the presentation of the 2025 Management Effectiveness Tracking Tool (METT) results for the project's 10 pilot protected areas, but also on the broader institutional and technical challenges linked to biodiversity monitoring, conservation reporting, management effectiveness, and alignment with EU nature protection standards.

Throughout the discussions, participants emphasized that effective protected area management is no longer measured only by the existence of legal boundaries or management plans, but increasingly by the capacity to demonstrate measurable conservation progress, coordinated management systems, and informed decision-making based on reliable data.

The workshop presented the latest METT assessment results for the EU4Nature pilot protected areas, including national parks, natural parks, and natural monuments across Albania. The results showed a gradual overall improvement in management effectiveness compared to the previous assessment cycle, particularly in operational components such as institutional processes, implementation capacities, and management inputs.

At the same time, the evaluations highlighted that progress remains uneven between protected areas and across management components. While some protected areas with longer management histories, such as "Shebenik" National Park and "Bredhi i Hotovës–Dangëlli" National Park, demonstrated more consolidated management structures and procedures, newer protected areas continue to face challenges related to staffing, planning instruments, financial resources, and institutional coordination.

Particular attention during the workshop was given to the case of the "Vjosa River" National Park, where the 2025 assessment reflected progress linked to the establishment and operationalization of new management structures and dedicated management capacities following its designation as a National Park. Discussions highlighted how METT can serve not only as an assessment tool, but also as a practical reference point for tracking the evolution and stability of management systems over time.

Beyond the assessment results themselves, the workshop focused strongly on the need to strengthen biodiversity monitoring and reporting systems in Albania's protected areas. Discussions highlighted persistent gaps in ecological data, monitoring protocols, data management systems, and reporting consistency, particularly regarding habitats and species relevant to the EU Birds and Habitats Directives.

As part of this effort, EU4Nature presented a proposed standardized annual reporting framework for protected areas, designed to support a more harmonized and performance-oriented reporting system aligned with EU standards. The framework introduces structured reporting elements related to conservation objectives, habitat and species status, pressures and threats, management effectiveness, law enforcement, monitoring systems, and progress toward favourable conservation status.

The discussions demonstrated growing recognition that effective monitoring and reporting are essential not only for evaluating protected area performance, but also for supporting adaptive management, institutional accountability, Natura 2000 preparation processes, and long-term biodiversity conservation planning.

The workshop reflected EU4Nature's broader vision of supporting Albania not only through site-level interventions, but also through stronger governance systems, institutional capacities, and technical frameworks capable of supporting a modern and resilient protected areas network.







ZAGORI NATURE PARK: WHERE NATURE AND CULTURE MEET

A land of stone villages, alpine pastures, and crystal-clear rivers, Zagori Nature Park is one of Albania's most distinctive landscapes, a place where human heritage and wild nature exist in rare harmony. As one of the EU4Nature pilot sites, Zagori represents both a biodiversity hotspot and a living cultural landscape, offering a powerful example of how conservation and local identity can go hand in hand.





Stretching across more than 24,600 hectares, Zagori is designated as a Nature Park (Category IV) within Albania's protected areas system, with its boundaries and surface updated through a decision of the Council of Ministers in 2022 . This legal status recognizes the area not only for its ecological value, but also for its role in supporting sustainable use, traditional livelihoods, and long-term conservation.

What makes Zagori truly unique is the way its natural systems and human history are deeply intertwined. Traditional stone villages, terraced landscapes, and pastoral practices have shaped the territory over centuries, creating a mosaic of habitats that support rich biodiversity. In this sense, Zagori is not just a protected area, it is a living landscape, where conservation depends as much on people as it does on ecosystems.

At the heart of Zagori's ecological values are its pristine water systems. Its rivers and streams provide refuge for species that depend on clean, well-functioning freshwater habitats. Among them is the European eel (Anguilla anguilla), classified as Critically Endangered, alongside endemic Balkan fish such as Oxynoemacheilus pindus and Barbus prespensis. These species are more than biological records, they are indicators of ecosystem health, reflecting both the purity of Zagori's waters and their vulnerability to environmental change .

Above the valleys, Zagori's skies tell another story, one of survival and refuge. The park is a key habitat for birds of prey, including some of the most threatened species in the region.. Their presence confirms Zagori's importance as a stronghold for bird conservation in Albania and the wider Balkans .

The richness of Zagori extends to its plant life as well. Endemic and sub-endemic species such as Solenanthus albanicus and Abies cephalonica reveal the area's geological and ecological uniqueness, while threatened plants like Sideritis raeseri and Juniperus foetidissima further highlight its role as a biodiversity hotspot. Together, these species form a delicate ecological network shaped by altitude, climate, and centuries of low-intensity land use .

As part of the EU4Nature programme, Zagori has been selected as a pilot site to support the strengthening of protected area management, biodiversity monitoring, and alignment with EU Nature Directives. This includes efforts to improve data collection on habitats and species, support the preparation of Natura 2000 datasets, and enhance the capacity of institutions responsible for managing the park.

In this context, Zagori plays an important role in Albania's broader efforts to establish its Natura 2000 network. The information generated through pilot site activities, such as species inventories, habitat mapping, and monitoring, will contribute to the scientific basis required for future site designation and reporting under the EU Birds and Habitats Directives.

At the same time, the park offers growing opportunities for sustainable development. Ecotourism, nature-based activities, and cultural tourism are increasingly attracting visitors, creating new income sources for local communities while reinforcing the value of conservation. The challenge and opportunity lies in ensuring that this development is carefully managed, so that the very qualities that make Zagori unique are preserved for future generations.

Zagori Nature Park stands today as a living example of Albania's natural and cultural heritage. It is a place where rare species still find refuge, where traditional landscapes continue to shape biodiversity, and where conservation is not only about protection, but about maintaining a balance between people and nature.

Zagori is more than a protected area. It is a reminder that safeguarding biodiversity also means safeguarding identity, history, and the landscapes that connect them.



The EU4Nature team

BRIEFLY ON THE PROJECT VJOSUSDEV 2022-2026

University of Tirana is leading the APPEAR VjoSusDev project (2022-2026), focused on the environmental assessment of the Vjosa riverscape as the basis for an integrated water management and sustainable catchment development. It aims at a comprehensive, interdisciplinary and inter-institutional and long-term scientific study between three Albanian universities: Faculty of Natural Sciences (Departments of Biology and Chemistry), University of Tirana (UT); Faculty of Geology, Polytechnic University (UPT); and Agricultural University of Tirana (UBT); and three Austrian universities: University of Vienna; University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences – BOKU, Vienna; University of Innsbruck. The project is funded by the Austrian Development Agency (ADA) under the APPEAR program (Austrian Partnership Programme in Higher Education and Research for Development) and facilitated by the Austrian Agency for Education and Internationalization (OEAD) (https://oead.at/de/kooperationen/internationale-hochschulkooperationen/austrian-partnership-programme-in-higher-education-research-for-development-appear/projects/current-projects/project251-vjosusdev).

The study is focused on the assessment of hydrodynamic connections (sediments, hydrogeology, floods, erosion, etc.), river biodiversity (algae, river flora and vegetation), water quality (physico-chemistry, nitrogen and phosphorus nutrients, heavy metals, organic pollutants, PAH, PCB and OCP, and microbiology, coliforms, etc.). Some activities were partially supported and in synergy with the ESPID4VJOSA project (2022-2024) (https://ecoalbania.org/espid4vjosa-zhvillimi-i-nderlidhjes-se-shkences-dhe-institucioneve-vendimmarrese-per-vjosen/?lang=en), implemented by the Euronature/Ecoalbania consortium, and supported by the Austrian Development Agency (ADA).

Aims of the Project

Comprehensive, catchment- orientated research program as a basis for an in-depth evaluation of management options, in the light of Sustainable Development goals.
Provide evidence-based guidance towards integrated management of a valuable water resource to ensure its long-term use.
Mutual strengthening of an interdisciplinary and translational approach at all involved research institutions.

Main Work packages, WPs & Study River reaches

There are 4 cross-cutting research topics (Work packages, WPs), and related working groups working in an interdisciplinary and translational approach: WP 1: Monitoring and understanding the fundamental physical regime governing the Vjosa riverscape; WP 2: Maintaining the Vjosa riverscape´s ability to support biodiversity; WP 3: Ecosystem dimensions behind clean water provisioning, a key fluvial ecosystem service; WP 4: Science and Society interactions for sustainable development.
Regular assessments are going on in 10 river segments (hydrodynamics and river biodiversity) (Fig. 1). Up to 23 stations were designated for water quality (Fig. 2), of which 13 stations are undergoing regular assessments every 2 months to monthly by chemists and microbiologists. The stations represent river habitats not only of the Vjosa River, but also of its tributaries, Drino, Shushica, Bença, Kardhiqi, Zagoria, Langarica and Sarandaporos.



Figure 1. The map of the study river reaches under the VjoSusDev Project. Vjosa 1, meandering stretch (Mifoli, rkm 19-29, length 10 km); Vjosa 2, (upstream of the Shushica confluence, rkm 41-50; 9 km); Vjosa 3 (Poçemi-Kalivaçi, rkm 68-78; 10 km); Vjosa 4 (Tepelena); Vjosa 5 (Kelcyra downstream, rkm 118-124; 6 km); Vjosa 6 (Permeti upstream, rkm 131-150; 19 km); Sarandoporos 7 (rkm 0-9; 9 km); Shushica 8 (rkm 30, 4 km); Drino 9 (rkm 21-34; 13 km); Bença 10(rkm 5-14; 9 km).

The study follows the work started several years ago (2014) with most of the experts and the same institutions, to protect the Vjosa River from dams, but this time in a more regular and extended approach in time and space. It was a long-standing international campaign led by NGOs like EuroNatur (Germany), Riverwatch (Austria) and Ecoalbania as part of the Save the Blue Heart of Europe initiative (https://www.balkanrivers.net/en), which aims to protect free-flowing rivers in the Balkans. On March 13th, 2023, the Albanian government declared the Vjosa and its tributaries (Drino, Bença and Shushica) as Wild River National Park (Category II according to the IUCN and Albanian law) (DCM 155/2023). There are about 12,727 ha, including the whole aquatic, riverscape area (more than 400 km of riverine flow in total) (There are 4 cross-cutting research topics (Work packages, WPs), and related working groups working in an interdisciplinary and translational approach: WP 1: Monitoring and understanding the fundamental physical regime governing the Vjosa riverscape; WP 2: Maintaining the Vjosa riverscape´s ability to support biodiversity; WP 3: Ecosystem dimensions behind clean water provisioning, a key fluvial ecosystem service; WP 4: Science and Society interactions for sustainable development.

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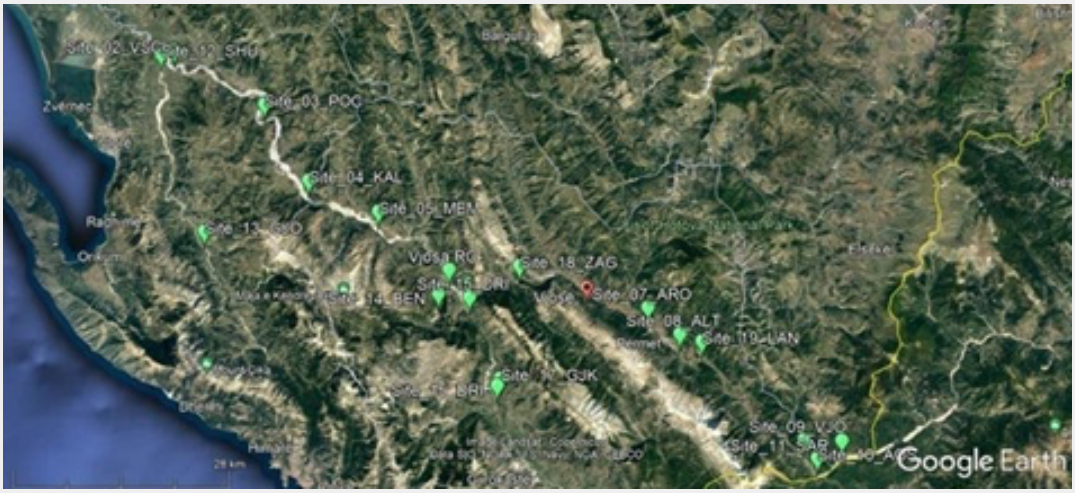


Figure 2. Map with 23 WP3 Water Quality Stations. Site_01_MIF, Vjosa River, Mifoli Bridge; Site_02_VSC, Vjosa River above the confluence with Shushica (Mesaraku); Site_03_POC, Vjosa River, Poçemi Bridge; Site_04_KAL, Vjosa River at Kalivaçi; Site_05_MEM, Vjosa River, downstream Memaliaj at the confluence with Luftinja; Site_06_DRA, Vjosa River upstream the confluence with Drino, near Dragoti; Site_07_ARO, Vjosa River at Hotel Aroma, downstream Permeti; Site_08_ALT, Vjosa River at Albturist, upstream Permeti; Site_09_VJO, Vjosa River just where it reaches Albania; Site_10_AOS, Vjosa/Aoos River at the Greek border; Site_11_SAR, Sarandoporos River at the Tre Urat border post; Site_12_SHU, Shushica River, before joining the Vjosa (Picari); Site_13_GJO, Shushica River downsteram the Gjormi village; Site_14_BEN, Bença River, at the Ali Pasha Aqueduct Bridge; Site_15_DRI, Drino River, before joining the Vjosa (Lekli); Site_16_KDQ, Kardhiqi River, before joining the Drino (Andon Poçi); Site_17_GJK, Drino River, downstream Gjirokastra, above joining the Kardhiqi River (Andon Poçi); Site_18_ZAG, Zagoria River, before joining the Vjosa; Site_19_LAN, Langarica River, before joining the Vjosa; Site_20_KDQ_up, Kardhiqi River, upper part; Site_21_Kroi-Bratit, Çajupi, Kroi i Bratit; Site_22_ZAG-up, Zagoria River, at the Doshnica Waterfall, Zhej; Site_23_DRI-GJIR, Drino River, in Gjirokastra (downstream Towns Bridge).

The Vjosa Research Center Fritz Schiemer (VRC) (Fig. 3) was established in Tepelena at the riverbanks of Vjosa, on September 25th, 2020, as a joint initiative of professors from the Department of Biology of the University of Tirana and the working experts in Albania of the campaign 'Save the Blue Heart of Europe'. It is currently under the administration of the Ecoalbania Center (https://ecoalbania.org/vjosa-research-centre/). The house functions as a science hub in the region and offers accommodation and working facilities for students and senior scientists from Albania and abroad. Experts suggest that VRC and its Name could be included in the future Vjosa Multifunctional Centre planned to establish in Tepelena by the Albanian Government.



Figure 3. Research visit in Vjosa – September 19th-24th, 2022: above, working meeting in Vjosa Research Center 'Fritz Schiemer', Tepelena (https://vjosa-research-centre.ecoalbania.org/); below, data sampling in Vjosa.

VjoSusDev activities

Regular weeks of field trips were spent in Vjosa and Vjosa Delta during 2022-2025, either from each WP group in wet season (spring) and dry season (late summer); only chemists and microbiologists visited the region 4-6 times per year.

Most of samples and other collected material in the field are processed, analyzed or still under examination process, in the related labs, by each separated WP group or in cooperation, either in Albania or Austria. About 10 MSc students from Albanian or Austrian universities sustained or in process in their master degrees; 4 PhD students are working either in Austria or Tirana.

More than 10 published / presented contributions to academic conferences and related proceedings or papers (i.e. Karaman, 2023; 2024a,b; 2025; Malicky & Graf, 2024; Martini et al., 2023; Murányi & Kovács, 2023; 2024; Schöffmann et al., 2022; Schwarz & Dobbelsteijn, 2024; Schwingshackl et al., 2024; Shumka et al., 2023; Teufl & Graf, 2024; etc.).

More than 10 joint activities: WP representatives presented the VjosSusDev project outcomes either in Tirana, Vjosa region or Vienna; translating it into basic information finding the most proper means to communicate, exchange and discuss with governmental institutions, the local representatives, and NGOs in Albania (e.g. AMBU, NAPA, NEA, and related affiliated local agencies, VBMP & VWRNPMP experts, EcoAlbania, etc.); as well as raise the knowledge base for decision making and public and institutional awareness on water governance; about 10 writings in local newspapers, TV interviews, podcasts dedicated to Vjosa issues and VjosSusDev project.

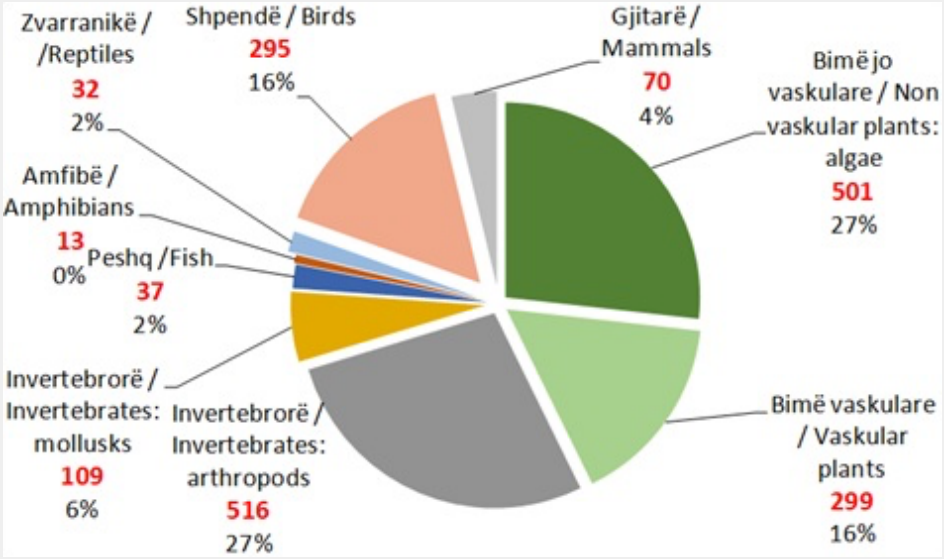


Figure 4. Updated graph on biodiversity on Vjosa Wild River NP. (Data from Meulenbroek et al., 2020; updated by Miho, -; Bino et al., 2023; and Shumka et al., 2018).

Updated data on habitats & biodiversity on Vjosa Wild River NP

Up to now there are noted 16 habitat types in the riverbed of the Vjosa river, at low to mean flow, maintained by periodic flood conditions: 7 aquatic habitats (A1-A7); 3 terrestrial habitats within the active channel (AC) on coarse grained sediments (B0-B2); 3 terrestrial habitats within the AC on fine grained sediments (C0-C2); 2 habitats at elevated islands within the AC and on the floodplains (BC3 & BC4); and 1 degradation habitat (D). Four are priority habitats after FFH-Annex I/Natura 2000, EUNIS habitat classification 2004/2012 and EU Red List (Schiemer et al., 2020): Gravel/sand bars (3220; C3.62; VU); Initial vegetation (3250; C3.553; VU); Mediterranean riparian scrub (92D0; F9.31; LC). More than 1,820 species are known for the Vjosa River to date (750 plants and 1,072 animals) (Fig. 4); ca 40 species are endangered according IUCN, and 119 are on the Albanian Red List (2013). 148 species are listed in Annex 1–3 of the Berne Convention; 41 species in the Bird Directive; 78 species in the Habitats Directive (Meulenbroek et al., 2020; updated by Miho, -; Bino et al., 2023; and Shumka et al., 2018).

Some exiting examples: Vjosa river and its pristine tributaries are the last refuge of the almost extinct, rare or new invertebrates species (Fig. 5). The stonefly Isoperla vjosae (Plecoptera) is first decribed as new species for science from Poçemi waters, Vjosa River (Graf et al., 2018); Vjosa River is the last refuge of the almost extinct tiny but mighty mayfly Prosopistoma pennigerum (Ephemeroptera,); it is suggested as the flagship species for the Vjosa Wild River NP by Schwingshackl et al. (2024). Additionally, the amphipods (crustacean) Niphargus griebleri, N. lepushensisare reported as new for science by Karaman (2023 & 2025 respectively); the amphipod genus Fingerhadziaand species Fingerhadzia zorae also reported as new (Karaman 2024b); in addition, another amphipod species, Salentinella angelieri was first described for Albania (Karaman 2024a); all were from subterranean (interstitial) waters of the upper part of River Shushica. Two other new species for science were recently recorded: Protonemura eclyisis (Plecoptera) from Bença River (Teufl & Graf 2024), and Oxyelhira eichelmanni (Trichoptera) in undisturbed torrent in Tepelena (Malicky & Graf, 2024). Further descriptions of new species are in progress.

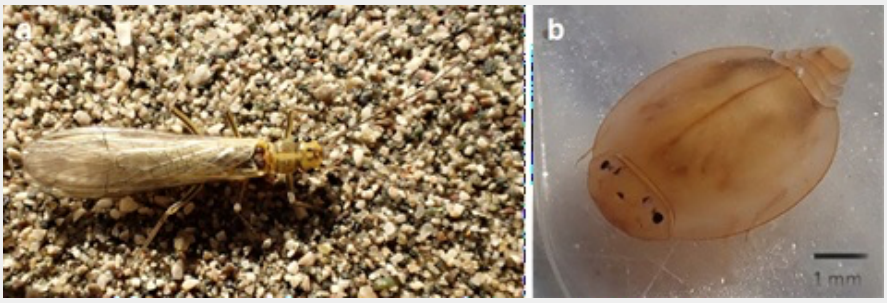


Figure 5. b, The stonefly Isoperla vjosae (Plecoptera) a new species for science from Poçemi waters, Vjosa River (Graf et al., 2018); b, Vjosa River is the last refuge of the almost extinct tiny but mighty mayfly Prosopistoma pennigerum (Ephemeroptera,), suggested as the flagship species for the Vjosa Wild River NP by Schwingshackl et al. (2024).

Experts from each group are working on manuscripts with detailed descriptions of scientific findings and more in-depth interdisciplinary discussions, which will be part of a special volume dedicated to the Vjosa River.

Science-Society interactions for sustainable development – important events

Several facts are worth to note related with Science and Society interactions for sustainable development where VjoSusDev experts were involved: The Vjosa Wild River National Park – A Management Plan – the VjoSusDev data were considered in March 2024. AMBU & EU4Rivers Project – participation in meetings (June, October 2024 & February 2025) and workshop (October 2024). AKZM & EU4Nature – Key Species Status Update & Inventories, and Vjosa Park is selected as PA pilot, January 2025.

Statement of Scientists: Water abstraction project on Shushica river (Lepusha spring, Kuçi; Himara Water Supply Project)- Review of the Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) of the Water Supply component within the Water Supply Program – prepared and signed by 24 scientists in January, 2024. Scientific evidence and the basic requirements for an EIA – a letter sent to German Embassy BMZ in Berlin, KfW, WBIF and other relevant stakeholders in Albania in 20 February 2024. The Shushica – ecological risks of the water abstraction project, information sent to lawyer for Lepusha case in December 2024. The IUCN Report the mitigation hierarchy on Shushica, during the past summer – as cooperation with VjoSusDev experts and other experts, in January 2025 (Döbbelt-Grüne et al., 2025a&b).

Science Weeks in the Pishë Poro – Narta Protected Landscape (April 2023, April 2024, April-May 2025). The International Vjosa Delta Symposium – An Ecosystem in Transition (Vlora, October, 2023). Vjosa Delta Volume, printed & online versions – Promoting ceremony, April 23d, 2025, FNS, UT (Miho et al., 2024; https://fshn.edu.al/Info/delta-vjose).

Strong erosion, urban, agricultural, oil spill pollution: High turbidity of Vjosa and TSS values (especially in tributaries) as evidence of the strong erosion in the area – bare areas, the scarce plant cover (only 22%) and the forests. Excessive use of riverbanks for construction and agricultural land. High content of nutrients (N & P), organic pollution (PAHs, PCBs, OCPs), and organic matter, micro- & macroplastics, coliforms green nitrophilous algae, cyanobacteria (some also toxic) – Vjosa, Drino (Gjirokaster – Lekli), Kardhiqi (Bridge), Bença (Tepelena) – high content of – untreated waters: urban, agriculture livestock and aquaculture & poor solid waste management. Observed crude oil spills and leaching from old industrial infrastructure directly into the Vjosa near Poçemi.

Significant water abstraction for agricultural irrigation is particularly observed in the Fieri and Gjirokastra lowlands; it has led to reduced river flows and negatively impacted the ecosystem of the Vjosa Wild River National Park, threatening its ecological integrity and biodiversity.

Other observations in the zone – unfriendly urbanization: Growing urban & touristic infrastructure close to the riverbanks and other hydromonuments; River mining (Shushica).

Threats to nature conservation in Shushica River: Himara Water Supply Project – Big concern from experts and environmentalists: Protection of the Lepusha Spring, in Shushica.

The Vjosa Delta – an indivisible part of the Vjosa/Aoos Wild River National Park (VWRNP): Vjosa Delta area was ignored in the zoning process of the new Vjosa Wild River NP. The protecting state of the existing PA Landscape Protected Pishe Poro – Narta (Vth cathegory) was reduced and partially mitigated by DCM 694/2022 (Fig. 2). Vlora Airport was constructed within the protected zone. There are tourist infrastructure development plans in the area, supported also from the amendments of the existing Law on PAs (Law 21/2024).

Recommendations on the Vjosa River Basin Management Plan & the Vjosa Wild River NP Management Plan

Integrated Management Plans are strongly suggested: Defining Critical Areas; Surveying the Vjosa Basin to Inventory the Critical Areas; Prioritizing Pollutants, Sources and Causes.

Decrease the pollution from point & non point sources: Waste water treatment: with centralized or decentralized/distributed systems for areas outside the sewage system; Solid waste management: urban solid waste disposal sites; incineration; Environmental friendly detergents; Collection and treatment of hospital waste; Control the oil spills and leaching from old industrial infrastructure; Treatment of industrial waters; etc.

Sustainable use of natural resources water, sun, forests... & Sustainable tourism: Sustainable water use: Drainage & irrigation system; Drinking water supply system; Bottled water; Ban river mining; Sustainable energetic system: HPPs, Solar; grid-connected photovoltaic's; Forestry: forest nurseries and forestation; voluntary work; livestock structure; Sustainable tourism – Responsible tourism; Ecotourism; Nature Positive Tourism; Family tourism; Agro tourism; Cultural & Heritage tourism; Culinary tourism; Hiking & Nature tourism; etc.

Sustainable agriculture, livestock...: Quality of crops, cereals, vegetable, fruit- & vineyards; Farming; Processing; Organic farming, etc.; Agro-industry; Harvest, cultivation and trade of aromatic-medicinal plants; Crafts; Livestock structure; Ban the goat keeping; Soft loans for: Agriculture and livestock; Agro-industry; Aromatic-medicinal plants; Crafts; Family tourism; etc.

Sustainable Management of Fisheries, Aquaculture and Hunting: Fishery & Aquaculture; Sportive fishing & sustainable aquaculture; Conservation of important river habitats in accordance with 1st protection category according to IUCN criteria; Adaptation of hunting legislation to that of the EU; Ban hunting; etc.

The Vjosa case, a model for cooperation between management and research.

The required next steps: Develop a comprehensive “monitoring board“ between governmental institutions and science; Develop and maintain international research cooperation on water management issues; Develop an international research program on the Vjosa Delta area; Develop a science – policy bridge.

Author: Prof. Dr. Aleko Miho

YOUTH4NATURE: EMPOWERING YOUNG PEOPLE FOR ALBANIA’S PROTECTED AREAS

Albania’s rich landscapes, unique ecosystems, and exceptional biodiversity make nature conservation a national priority and a shared responsibility for future generations. In this context, the *Youth4Nature* initiative, implemented by the National Agency of Protected Areas (NAPA) with the support of United Nations Development Programme, is creating new opportunities for young professionals to actively contribute to the protection and promotion of Albania’s natural heritage.

During 2025, the project engaged 20 young professionals who worked alongside the Regional Administrations of Protected Areas in 10 National Parks and Natural Areas across the country. Their activities focused on environmental education, awareness-raising campaigns, nature-friendly tourism promotion, and clean-up initiatives in protected areas. Through direct engagement with schools, local communities, and visitors, the young participants promoted the importance of biodiversity conservation and sustainable development approaches.

The initiative combines youth employment, environmental stewardship, and hands-on learning, helping participants strengthen their technical knowledge and practical skills in protected area management. By working closely with park staff and local stakeholders, the programme also encourages stronger connections between young people and nature, while promoting long-term environmental responsibility.

EU4Nature – Youth Program has three common program elements:

- Immersion in nature: Programs range from fully residential, offering multiple-day stays in parks and reserves, to visitor center-based, with expeditions to natural settings
- Relationship based: Programs have a RAPA staff – to-youth cooperation and are committed to learning through co-inquiry with staff and youth in the program.
- Environmental stewardship: Nature is a setting for learning and being in nature can spark a commitment to environmental stewardship and th e preservation of natural places

One of the key moments of the year was the national event “Nature: The Success of a Vision”, held in Tirana on 5 December 2025. The event brought together policymakers, conservation experts, protected area managers, development partners, and the young professionals participating in the programme. It provided an opportunity for participants to exchange experiences, discuss environmental challenges, and gain deeper insight into Albania’s priorities for biodiversity conservation and sustainable management of protected areas.

An important component of the programme was also the introduction of participants to the NAPA e-learning platform, which offers courses and information related to protected areas and environmental protection. Most participants are now actively registered on the platform and continue to follow the available training modules, strengthening their capacities and expanding their knowledge on nature conservation topics.

Through Youth4Nature, young people are becoming important ambassadors for nature conservation in Albania. The programme demonstrates how youth engagement, environmental education, and institutional cooperation can contribute to building a greener, more resilient, and nature-positive future.

National Agency of Protected Areas

LATEST PA'S NEWS

“OBSERVATION TOWERS” WINNING PROJECTS TO BE PUBLICLY PRESENTED

The winning projects of the National Competition “Observation Towers – Natural, Artificial and Collective Intelligence” will soon be showcased to the public!

Out of 11 outstanding submissions, 3 winning concepts were selected by a jury of experts in architecture, landscape architecture, ecology and tourism, and are now being developed into detailed architectural projects under the EU4Nature programme.

Designed for wildlife monitoring and early forest fire detection, the towers will also serve as environmental interpretation hubs within protected natural areas.

PROMOTIONAL VIDEOS FOR PILOT SITES ARE OUT NOW!

The pilot sites are now featured through a new series of promotional videos highlighting their natural beauty, cultural heritage and sustainable tourism potential.

A visual journey through breathtaking landscapes, biodiversity and local stories, bringing nature and communities closer together.

https://www.facebook.com/share/r/1Xhj9KoWCp
https://www.facebook.com/share/r/18cGDTaPz6
https://www.facebook.com/share/v/1F6iFbBYbm
https://www.facebook.com/share/v/1BJQaH95iu
https://www.facebook.com/share/v/18naMbRe6C
https://www.facebook.com/share/v/1CkWGQAe

NEW SCIENTIFIC PUBLICATION RELEASED

A new scientific publication documenting the results of OPTIMA's 13th "Iter Mediterraneum" expedition in Albania has now been published, highlighting the country's extraordinary plant biodiversity and the discovery of a newly identified species. The research, carried out across several protected mountain areas in Albania, represents an important contribution to botanical science and biodiversity conservation. 🌿📚
Read the publication here:

https://herbmedit.org/papers/9a32c3ef-c72b-4e84-831b-9f4e32e8b850

GENDER EQUALITY SURVEY LAUNCHED AT NAPA/RAPA

A new survey on gender equality and workplace relations has been launched within the National Agency of Protected Areas (NAPA) and Regional Administrations of Protected Areas (RAPA).
The survey aims to better understand the experiences, challenges and opportunities faced by women and men working in nature conservation, while helping identify practical ways to strengthen gender equality and inclusion within the institution.
Participation is voluntary and all responses will remain confidential. Every contribution matters in building a more inclusive, fair and supportive working environment for all.

Survey link: Pyetësor për barazinë gjinore dhe marrëdhëniet me punën në AKZM/AdZM