



## Major success: River Vjosa becomes National Park

**++ Today the Albanian River Vjosa has been proclaimed Europe's first Wild River National Park ++ EuroNatur, Riverwatch and many other partners have been working towards this day for many years ++ The River Aaos on the Greek side, the Vjosa Delta and its tributaries also need to be granted extensive protection ++**

**Radolfzell, Vienna, Tepelena - 15 March, 2023** At a formal ceremony in Tepelena this morning, Albania's Prime Minister Edi Rama and his Minister of the Environment and Tourism Mirela Kumbaro declared the River Vjosa a [Wild River National Park](#). As from today, the entire River Vjosa in Albania from its border with Greece to the Adriatic sea and its free flowing tributaries – a river system totalling more than 400 kilometres in length – have the very highest level of protection. This is something unique in Europe.

After more than ten years of unstinting efforts working for the preservation of one of the last wild rivers in Europe, EuroNatur, Riverwatch, EcoAlbania and many other conservationists and river activists are rejoicing over this great milestone. However, the river conservationists have not yet finished.

"We have fought long and hard with our partners for this day, with court hearings, petitions and discussions with those responsible in government and with local communities. Today we can celebrate," **says Annette Spangenberg, EuroNatur's Head of Conservation.** "Now we will continue campaigning for the other free-flowing tributaries and the river delta to be given protection so that the entirety of the Vjosa's unique river eco-system can be preserved for ever."

"This Wild River National Park is not just an important milestone for the Vjosa and Albania but for river conservation across the whole of Europe. It establishes, for the first time, a conservation concept where an entire river system is protected and not just individual sections of a river," **says Ulrich Eichelmann, head of Riverwatch.** "The concept of a Wild River National Park should act as a model for other rivers in Europe, such as along the Moraca in Montenegro and the Rivers Neretva and Una in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The River Vjosa is Europe's first Wild River National Park, but it should not be the only one. Today sees an important message going out from Albania to the whole of Europe."

"The declaration of Vjosa Wild River National Park is the culmination of ten years of efforts by a wide group of actors. Today, with the declaration of a national park, not only the civil society but also Albania sets a new standard in nature conservation, as for the first time around 400 km of natural river flow are protected, which is a unique initiative for Europe and the world", **says Olsi Nika, Executive Director of EcoAlbania.**

"The time is now ripe also for Greece to take the extra mile towards this. Most of the Aaos river basin in the Greek territory falls within the boundaries of the existing Northern Pindos National Park. However, a small part between the National Park and the borders with Albania is to date unprotected, leaving almost 70km of river stretches exposed to threats, such as hydropower', **says Alexandra Pappa, Freshwater Programme Manager of MedINA.** 'The institutional protection of Aaos in its entirety will be the way

forward for the creation of the first Transboundary Wild River National Park in Europe with remarkable benefits for people and nature. ”

### **Background information:**

- **About the River Vjosa/Aoos**

The Vjosa/Aoos River is one of the last great wild rivers in Europe outside of Russia. It flows from the mountains in Greece, where it is called Aoos, to the Adriatic Sea in Albania. Together with its tributaries, the Vjosa/Aoos forms an ecosystem with a considerable level of biodiversity of both national and global significance. Yet the region also offers economic prospects. Ecotourism along the River and its tributaries is continuously growing, particularly over the last few years when the potential for activities such as rafting has been recognised and developed.

- This is a **joint press release** by [EcoAlbania](#), [Riverwatch](#), [EuroNatur](#) and [MedINA](#).
- **Wild River National Park:** The addition of Wild River reflects the character of the protected area. This is a national park that exclusively protects rivers and does so over a large area, i.e. entire river systems. Rivers are among the most threatened habitat types worldwide. The example of migratory fish species in Europe shows how endangered they are. Since 1970, their populations (e.g. eel, grayling, river herring, sturgeon) have declined by 94 percent, mainly as a result of river straightening and dam construction.
- The ["Save the Blue Heart of Europe"](#) campaign aims to protect rivers of high natural value in the Balkans, which are threatened by more than 3,400 hydropower projects. The campaign is coordinated by the international NGOs Riverwatch and EuroNatur and implemented jointly with partner organisations in the Balkan countries. The local partner in Albania is EcoAlbania, in Greece MedINA.
- The campaign is supported amongst other by the Manfred Hermsen Foundation. The outdoor company Patagonia has also strongly supported our commitment to the Vjosa National Park. Other partners that have contributed to the fight for the protection of the Vjosa/Aoos transboundary river are IUCN ECARO, Pindos Perivallontiki and The Green Tank from Greece, the Tour du Valat, Wetlands International and the MAVA Foundation for Nature.
- **Photos attached:** The attached photos can be used once in connection with this press release and indicating credits.

1. Prime Minister Edi Rama, Patagonia CEO Ryan Gellert, and Minister for Tourism and Environment Mirela Kumbaro, holding the just signed official declaration of Vjosa Wild River National Park © Anika Konsek

2. Vjosa River in Tepelene, just declared Wild River National Park © Anika Konsek

3. National Park planning team with among others Minister for Tourism and Environment Mirela Kumbaro, representatives of the Albanian Government, Patagonia, IUCN, NGOs, Greek Ambassador in Albania, mayor of Tepelene © Elton Baxhaku

**Media Contacts:**

Christian Stielow – EuroNatur, [christian.stielow\(at\)euronatur.org](mailto:christian.stielow@euronatur.org), Tel.: +49 (0)7732 – 92 72 15

Ulrich Eichelmann – Riverwatch, [ulrich.eichelmann\(at\)riverwatch.eu](mailto:ulrich.eichelmann@riverwatch.eu), Tel.: +43 676 6621512

Besjana Guri – EcoAlbania, [b.guri\(at\)ecoalbania.org](mailto:b.guri@ecoalbania.org), Tel.: 0035/692954214

Alexandra Pappa – MedINA, [alexandra@med-ina.org](mailto:alexandra@med-ina.org), Tel.: +306943892985