

Deforestation in Albania has been going on for so long that it has become a normal state of political consciousness. Instead of increasing efforts to preserve and rehabilitate the remaining fund, the decline in forest cover is accompanied by excessive, sometimes complete, decommissioning.

Albania's long period of transition from a centralized to a market economy has created many challenges for the forestry sector. One of the main problems of the Albanian Forestry Service is the prevention and reduction of illegal logging, according to a 2020 report by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE). Destruction of forests, by illegal deforestation and fires, continues unhindered, although the current government composed of the Socialist Party in 2013 committed itself to reducing the damage by 30 percent.

Companies that deal with forest exploitation are required by law to replace every tree cut down with a sapling, but an on-site inspection shows that this is not the case even in protected areas. In the already mentioned 2013, the Socialist Party in the race for the prime minister's mandate paid special attention to the environment in its program, and as a priority it pointed out the reduction of illegal deforestation by 30 percent:

"To change the situation, the government will initially ban the export of raw materials, firewood and charcoal for a certain period of time, with the aim of reducing the felling of trees in forests by 30 percent. A national strategy for sustainable forest management will be developed and approved. Companies that receive permits for the use of forests will also be responsible for their maintenance, planting saplings for each felled tree. The national forest inventory will be repeated, which will enable the creation of a new forest cadastre".

Although it was promised in 2013 that deforestation would be brought under control, reports show the opposite. The latest data from the Global Forest Watch agency, the American service that monitors forests around the world, show that from 2012 to 2013, the area of forests covering our country fell by more than 0.40 percent. In 2012, according to their database, the percentage of the area covered by forests was 0.83 percent, while a year later it dropped to 0.40 percent. The trend of drastic decline persisted until 2015, when there was a reversal, but it has not yet reached the coverage from 2012.

Not such an ecological solution

Residents of the outskirts of the city and municipality of Librazhda, the area closest to the Shebenik Jabllanica National Park on the border with Northern Macedonia, have been suffering the consequences of building hydroelectric power plants on the river on whose route their villages were built. Currently, according to local institutions and citizens in the area at the entrance to the National Park, 4 hydropower plants are already operational, while 5 new ones are under construction and have already started digging. Rapuni 1 and 2

hydropower plants at the entrance to the protected area affect Shebenik-Jabllanicë Park, but also Kuturman Park located on the west bank of the Shkumbini River, one tributary of which has already dried up and continues to destroy the ecosystem. Experts warn of the damage, and they are heard by residents who are determined to stop the construction of new planned power plants. They say that hydroelectric power plants leave them without the basic resource necessary for life – water.

Hydropower should be part of the solution to climate problems, but it has instead become part of the problem. Hydropower plants are being built without proper environmental studies and in protected areas. They are often privately owned by hidden interests and well-connected individuals who make large profits from them. The construction of hydropower plants in the Librazhd area threatens the ecosystem of the Shebenik-Jabllanice National Park with disaster. In addition, the plants drained a branch of the Shkumbini River, and residents of nearby villages did not have a source of clean water, says Ahmet Mehmeti, executive director of the Elbasan Ecological Club.

Shebenik-Jabllanice is the largest Albanian national park, managed by the city of Librazhd. In Librazhde, there are a total of 130 contracts for the construction of HPPs. If the contracts were to be implemented, as they were written, two things would be certain: first, the environment would be preserved, and second, the residents would not want to leave the city. Togezi is one of the villages where the first hydroelectric power plant in Librazhde was built. Located between 2 HPPs, Rrapun 1 (a tributary of the Shkumbini River) and Rrapun 2 (built in Kuturman, village), the consequences of water intake have created a “desert”. The trees withered leaving farmers with no prospects for their plants and future. Most hydropower plants are located in the high wooded parts of the mountains, and a lot of trees are sacrificed to build these dams, says Enxhi Albrahimi, an environmental engineer at an NGO based in Librazh, at the Environmental Protection Center. HPPs have transformed the lives of residents as well as destroyed rural development. The construction of hydropower plants in the Librazhd area is destroying the ecosystem of the Shebenik-Jabllanice National Park. Furthermore, they dried up the tributary of the Shkumbini River, leaving the inhabitants of the surrounding villages without any source of clean water.

Destroyed landscapes: logging, debts and lawsuits

A team of 20 experts working for the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) noted in their field research the alarming situation that does not work in any part of the process: from planning, through licensing, to construction. Although a large number of hydropower plants are located far from residential areas, they cumulatively have such a large impact that they are rapidly changing the landscape.

The construction of access roads causes the degradation of environmental features on several levels. The direct impact is the removal of natural vegetation, followed by digging on steep slopes and consequently their landslide, which is without a doubt a direct consequence of the construction of hydropower plants. Experts believe that landscape features may diminish over time. Of the 71 hydropower plants built, 44 caused soil erosion. Improper management of construction waste, such as excavation materials, has also had negative consequences for the landscape. Of the 43 power plants inspected, only 16.3 percent handled the excavation material properly. In other examples, deposition of material is evident and often on river banks or in riverbeds. Experts noted that 65 percent of the projects have plans to rehabilitate the terrain, but none of those built have completed remediation. Opinions are divided over the long-term impact of power plants, while some point out that this makes tourism impossible, others point out the long-term benefits of renewable energy.

Works to build a hydroelectric plant supplied by a group of lakes between Valikardha and Martanesh, including the Black Lake nature monument, have created a series of conflicts and lawsuits between a private company, Albanian authorities and residents. In December 2018, the municipality of Bulqiza sued Teodori 2003 claiming that it owed it 34.5 million of all unpaid rents and overdue interest. According to the lawsuit, the company, which has a contract to build the power plant, received a concession from the government to exploit the water of nearby glacial lakes, and had to pay rent to the municipality to use the forest fund the company had with Bulqiza's previous forestry administration. The municipality claims that the rent has not been paid and refuses to sign a new contract with the company for other parts of the forest, to which the company wants to expand. In a statement to the media, representatives of Bulqiza municipality said that "the development of these acts affects the Martanesh area and consequently brings negative social impact in this province", adding that the second contract cannot be signed without settling the obligations of the previous one.

There seems to be no moratorium

While the municipality is not concerned with deforestation, but only unpaid rent, recent data from the Institute of Public Statistics suggest that similar treatment across the country over the past five years has resulted in the disappearance of at least 410 hectares of forest. According to them, the fund of forests and pastures in 2019 consisted of a total area of 1.7 hectares or 60.5 percent of the total land area. However, 590 hectares of forests and pastures were lost from 2015 to 2019. As elsewhere in the world, trade and agriculture are the main causes of forest loss. Illegal deforestation and forest fires, mostly intentional, are

the biggest causes of deforestation. Although there is a ban on logging, there has been little success in combating illegal logging.

Although punishable by law, intentionally causing a fire is a major problem because they easily get out of control. Forest fires are not managed, roads are not maintained, which is why they pose a serious threat to protected areas and wildlife habitats. In recent years, Albanian authorities have launched various campaigns to rehabilitate forests and national parks, but much seems to need to be done to raise awareness and promote forestry activities that mitigate climate change. Despite a 2016 moratorium on deforestation, Albania has managed to lose about 378 hectares of forest since its introduction.

As the area under forests decreases, so do the funds allocated for their maintenance. In 2016, Albania had 1,052,237 hectares of forest, which by 2018 had decreased to 1,051,859 hectares. The reason for this decrease is attributed to exploitation and fires. According to the Institute of Public Statistics, 2.8 million euros were invested in forestry in 2014, but in 2016 and 2017 that figure was zero. In 2018, only 220,000 euros were allocated for reforestation.

The moratorium on forests was enacted by law in 2016 and limited their depletion to a period of 10 years. It was considered necessary because of the great damage in Albanian forests due to over 25 years of illegal logging. It is often carried out in cooperation with officials entrusted with the care of forests. If forests are the lungs of the earth, if they purify the air and allow people to breathe, what do we think of a government that lies on promises for a little over ten years while the last free resources – water and clean air of forests – disappear under the excavator of private capital?

Source: Bilten