

Unspoiled rivers in the Balkans are facing new dangers from small hydropower plants that have sprouted up across the region in recent years, environmental experts warned. In a declaration issued after a meeting in the Bosnian capital Sarajevo, they urged Balkan governments to halt any further construction of hydro dams.

“We want everybody to see that it is bad, and it is wrong and that we are devastating our natural beauties,” said Irma Popovic Dujmovic, from World Wide Fund for Nature Adria group, one of the organizers of the Sarajevo gathering. Concerns have been raised that small plants are being built for profit without any regard for the local community and local eco-systems.

“Nature is losing, and local people are losing,” Dujmovic said.

In Bosnia alone, participants at the meeting said there are plans to build 300 dams on 244 rivers. In the region, some 2,700 hydropower plants are envisaged in the coming years.

EuroNatur and Riverwatch groups said in a report that small hydro power plants are putting “immense pressure” on rivers throughout Europe.

In addition to the 21,387 existing hydropower plants, another 8,779 are planned, mainly in the Alps and the Balkans. According to the report, this proliferation could destroy previously untouched rivers especially in the Balkans.

Anger over crystal clear rivers being turned into building sites has fueled citizens’ movements throughout the Balkans. Residents of small villages have held protests and sought to bring the work to a halt.

In the central Bosnian village of Merdani, residents said a small hydro plant under construction on the river Lasva has led to problems with water supplies and damaged roads.

“It was a peaceful river before,” said villager Mehrudin Halilovic. “I am totally against the building of this plant.”

Countries in the Balkans are lagging the rest of Europe in environmental standards. Many rivers in the area also are heavily polluted with waste from factories or clogged with garbage washed away from the riverbanks.

Martin Skalsky, from the Czech Republic’s ARNIKA group, said in Sarajevo that it is important to preserve the Balkan nature because there are not many other regions in Europe so untouched and unpopulated.

“If you will build hundreds or thousands of small hydropower plants on your rivers, you can just lose everything in very few years,” he said. “So, it’s really dangerous.”

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