

Multiple communities in Albania that are suffering the impact of hydropower plant construction will be brought together for the first time in one place to form a coalition to work towards protecting all rivers in the future.

The upcoming Students For Rivers event will kick off in Tropoje. It will be attended by river activists, media, Albanian and international students, scientists and professionals in their fields, and most importantly, members of local Albanian communities. One of the core elements of the event is involving the communities in the form of a “mini-conference.” This will take place within the camp context, and it will give members of rural communities who are impacted by the devastation HPPs bring the chance to tell their story. It will also seek to foster discussions between all stakeholders, find better ways to participate in decision-making and find solutions that could help change their lives. They will share stories and their experiences and have the chance to interact with experts and students. Many local people have been excluded from any meaningful consultation on the projects that impact their lives and have been left unable to protect their homes and rivers.

One of the organizers, Catherine Bohne, said “we will support each other in our mutual causes; there will be no more fighting alone. The rivers are draining, so the north is rising!” She added:

“At the heart of all the activities is this idea: To break down isolation and create productive synergy. There are many forms of isolation: academic isolation, or role-isolation, or community isolation. For one week, on the banks of the beautiful Valbona River, people from across Europe, from across disciplines, and from across educational and professional, and social structures will join together to recognize their commonality and move forward together strengthened by what we all learn from each other.”

On the agenda is a free rafting day for community members, and those attending the camp. “It will ensure that people living here have a chance to experience the river in a completely new way, learn about new tourism and economic possibilities, and even see their beloved river with new eyes,” Bohne said.

Other events taking place during the week include camping, activities, workshops, movie nights, informal lectures and discussions, and sessions to raise awareness of the corruption that all too often surrounds HPP projects.

In addition to the mini-conference and the full week of events, a new tourism shop operated by TOKA will be opened for the first time. Located on the pedonale in Bajram Curri, it will supply a range of items such as camping supplies, maps, t-shirts, bags, postcards, and locally made and sourced products. Through a network of local people, they hope to encourage sustainable creations and the financial empowerment of local people.

Tropoje is one of the poorest parts of Europe, where around 60% of people live off the land. Some receive public assistance, a meager EUR 30 a month per family, not enough to cover an electricity bill.

While some activities are for specific groups, the camp itself is open to the public for the whole week. There are no fees for any of the activities organized by TOKA, including the day of rafting and the mini-conference.

“It’s open to anyone who wants to participate- we want people to connect with as many people as possible,” she added.

Valbona is currently threatened by several HPPs. The area which hopes to enjoy plentiful tourism is at risk of devastation as large swathes of its river are set to be dammed. Locals and TOKA are currently fighting the construction of the plants, alleging they are illegal and done without a valid permit. Such actions cost some of the threats, visits from police, and intimidation of family members.

Nevertheless, they persist in the hopes that they can save Valbona and the surrounding area, preserving the habitat and ensuring the families who’ve lived there for centuries can continue to do so.

Source: exit.al