

What will it take to save the world's rivers? Experts say we need only look to the [Vjosa River](#) in **Albania** for a model of conservation.

On its journey to the Adriatic Sea, the Vjosa River's turquoise waters, threatened for decades by dams and mining operations, shimmer and shine uninterrupted through southern Albania's dramatic mountainscapes. The river, newly protected by its unique status as a "[wild river national park](#)," is fueling a movement to save other pristine rivers by giving them that designation.

The problem of how to best protect rivers has long vexed conservationists. Historically, rivers have been treated as part of land protections. But studies show that rivers do not benefit from this approach, in part because they may flow in and out of protected areas and sometimes cross borders. What happens at the unprotected end of a river can have a profound impact on the same body hundreds of miles away.

"To protect a river you must focus first on the river itself," says **Ulrich Eichelmann**, an ecologist and conservationist with the Vienna, Austria-based Riverwatch and a leader of the Save the Blue Heart of Europe, the international coalition that spearheaded the Vjosa effort. He and other activists are now taking their river-first approach to other countries in the Balkans—the southeastern European region of **11 countries** that includes [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#) and Montenegro—where the battle to protect other pristine waterways from environmental pressures is ramping up.

"We want this type of river protection to be the rule rather than exception," says Eichelmann.

### **What it takes to save a river**

Although freshwater sustains much of life, rivers, lakes, and wetlands are on average more degraded than marine and terrestrial ecosystems, studies show, often driven by dams that alter river flows and interrupt fish migrations.

While [European rivers](#) overall are the most dammed of any continent's, many in the Balkans remain relatively pristine, though thousands of hydropower projects are planned. At one point, there were eight dams proposed on the Vjosa's main stretch and dozens more on its tributaries.

The campaign to protect the Vjosa, which enjoyed overwhelming public support, involved years of protests, lawsuits, and international pressure on Albania to scrap the dam plans. The government, which has struggled to improve economic conditions in one of Europe's poorest countries, long resisted, especially since Albania relies almost exclusively on hydropower for electricity.

### **Threatened rivers**

European rivers are some of the most fragmented in the world, with high demand for hydropower provided by dams. The **Vjosa River** and other rivers in the Balkan Peninsula are relatively undisturbed, and campaigns are mounting to protect the region's **bio-diversity** by blocking proposed dam projects.

But the U.S.-based outdoor outfitter Patagonia, which has spent close to a million dollars on the Vjosa campaign, is said to have played an important role in convincing the government that a national park would help grow its tourism industry. "It [shows] what civil society, government, and industry can do when we work around a shared set of goals," says Ryan Gellert, Patagonia's CEO, who is based in Ventura, California.

According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Vjosa's category II national park status protects it from damaging activities such as dam building and gravel extraction, while allowing for human use.

In addition to the main river basin, home to more than 1,100 species of animals, the new park includes three large tributaries and will cover more than 250 miles of waterways, as well as the land immediately adjacent.

There has been some hesitation among conservationists to call Vjosa the world's first river national park when other rivers may be interpreted as such. But James Hardcastle, who heads the protected and conserved areas program for IUCN in Gland, Switzerland, says the Vjosa represents "the first time a river system is the focus of the national park."

### **Promising rivers to protect**

Most rivers in the **Balkans** are so ecologically valuable they should be completely off limits for hydropower development, conservationists say. Among them are two candidates for future river national parks—the Una, which runs mostly through Bosnia, and the Morača in Montenegro.

While the Una is home to one of the few healthy populations of Danube salmon, Europe's largest salmon species, the Morača feeds Lake Scutari, the biggest lake in the Balkans and a vital bird sanctuary. Despite planned hydropower projects, both rivers' basins remain largely undammed, and the river network runs for hundreds of miles through stunning scenery.

Vladimir Topić at the Center for Environment in Banja Luka, Bosnia, says that Vjosa's new status "should be the beginning of similar protection for other rivers in the Balkans."

Patagonia's European director of environmental action, Beth Thoren, says her company plans to invest \$4.6 million to help create more such parks in the region.

There are many rivers there that conservationists say are in dire need of protection, but that may not qualify for wild river national park status. One is the Neretva, which flows through

Bosnia and Croatia. While the middle parts of the Neretva have already been dammed and construction is far along on dams in other parts of the watershed, the upper section of the river, which is dotted with spectacular waterfalls and lined with pristine forest, still flows free.

“A wild river national park would not work for the Neretva, but it doesn’t mean there should be no protection,” says Eichelmann. “There are sections of the river that must be protected, even as a national park.”

### **More to come?**

Some people hope the Vjosa’s change of status, declared on March 15 by Albania’s Prime Minister Edi Rama, will inspire protection efforts for other pristine rivers around the world. Hardcastle, the IUCN official, points to the Patuca River in Honduras, the second largest (and so far undammed) river in Central America, as a possible candidate.

Michele Thieme, the lead freshwater scientist for the World Wildlife Fund in Washington, D.C., would like to see more protections for some of the world’s largest free-flowing rivers, which her organization focuses on, such as the Salween River in Southeast Asia and several African rivers. “There’s still a window for keeping some of these systems relatively intact,” she says.

Terrestrial national parks, Thieme says, don’t always protect rivers that run through them from dam building. A 2020 study she authored identified at least 1,249 large dams located within protected areas in the world, with more than 500 dams planned or under construction in protected areas, many of them in the Balkans.

That’s why the Vjosa designation is key, activists say, because it protects the river specifically. But they caution that much work remains before the park can become operational, from figuring out how to deal with existing land uses and titles to building a visitor center and manning the park with trained rangers. The goal is to extend protection across the border into [Greece](#), where the river is called **Aoös**, as well as include more of the drainage basin.

Besjana Guri of EcoAlbania, a nonprofit organization in Tirana, Albania’s capital, that was instrumental in the campaign, says the **Vjosa can “be an inspiration for all communities who are fighting to save their rivers.** Our message to them is that it is possible to win this fight no matter how difficult it may seem.”

Source: National Geographic