

The clock is ticking to save national park in Albania.

Since March 2017, Valbona Valley National Park has been shaking from explosions, day and night, as construction continues for Dragobia Energy's hydropower project on the Cerem River tributary. Until now, the inaccessibility of this location has meant that no one has a clear picture of how extensive the damage is.

In April, however, construction on the second of two plants began, which involves plans to place 3 km of the most scenic and virgin stretch of the Valbona River in a tunnel. This construction so far consists of bulldozing the entire northern bank of the river and is much harder to hide. Therefore it is now clear that if this work continues unchecked for even another month, irreversible damage will have been done to this 'protected area.'

Valbona Valley National Park is not only one of the suspected areas of highest biodiversity in South East Europe, it also holds a particular cultural significance to Albanians, being the source of many legends and poetry. It is also the main economic well-spring for all of north east Albania through sustainable tourism and is one of three top tourism destinations in Albania. In 2017 it was declared one of the "Nine Best Places in the World to Enjoy the Great Outdoors" by National Geographic. This could soon all be destroyed.

Yesterday (April 21), in advance of today's Earth Day, the crew of Balkan Rivers Tour 2 — a project of the Slovenia-based Leeway Collective — posted a video appeal on Facebook to halt construction in Valbona Valley National Park. Within the first 24 hours the video has been viewed over 27,000 times, and is being shared worldwide.

It has one unified message: The indifference of the Albanian government to the ongoing destruction in Valbona Valley National Park is not acceptable.

Violation of national and international agreements

In January 2016, residents of northern Albania's Valbona Valley learned of plans to begin construction of a two-plant, 27 MW series of "cascaded, run-of-river" Hydropower plants (also known as the Dragobia Energy projects) in the heart of the National Park. Further investigation by locals revealed that these two plants were in addition to as many as 12 other planned "small" hydropowers for which concessions had been granted.

These will affect 20 km of the 30 km long river. Eight are wholly within the National Park, which has been an International Union for Conservation of Nature Level 2 protected area since 1996, part of the Bern Convention's Emerald Network, and a planned Natura2000 site.

The government failed to hold the required public consultations. Therefore, local people, led by the local NGO TOKA: The Organization to Conserve the Albanian Alps, had only months to launch a desperate campaign to file administrative complaints, draw national and

international media attention, find information (despite the government's refusal to reveal plans and key documents) and build a network of national and international Support. In November 2016, TOKA finally secured representation by one of Albania's leading law firms. Unfortunately, at the same time, a construction permit for the two Dragobia Energy projects was issued in September 2016 and construction commenced on September 28, 2016, with a planned completion date in 2018.

Review of the Environmental Impact Assessment for the project reveals a highly sub-standard document, on which and Integra Study commissioned by the World Wildlife Fund in November 2016 found that "no dependable decisions could be based." The projects have also ignored Aarhus Convention, Espoo and Bern Convention requirements — Albania is a signatory to all.

Still hope

TOKA is prepared to file a suit against the government in the administrative court in the next weeks and our legal representatives believe there is a good basis to cancel the projects due to serious and plentiful irregularities in the projects' planning and implementation.

However, under Albanian Law the work can only be stopped at the discretion of the court if they "recognize that irreversible damage may otherwise occur before legal resolution can be achieved." The court also has the ability to demand that an enormous financial guarantee be posted by the plaintiff to secure the stop-work order.

Therefore, although the lawsuit might well succeed, the National Park could be irreversibly damaged in the meantime.

Luckily, a second avenue for stopping the work exists. The construction permit, issued in September 2016, is due to expire in May 2017. The National Territorial Council and its chairman Prime Minister Edi Rama can deny the application to extend the permit. As the projects are operating without valid environmental permissions, there is an excellent basis for immediately discontinuing the permit.

Given that 2017 is an election year in Albania, we believe that prompt and widespread media attention, both national and international, pointing out the Albanian government's failure to act responsibly could have a powerful effect and result in the halting of construction pending proper investigation, protecting Valbona National Park for future generations to enjoy.

Source: kosovotwopointzero