

Last summer an international expert team of representatives from the Secretariat of the Bern Convention, the European Commission and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) visited Mavrovo National Park in Macedonia on behalf of the Bern Convention Standing Committee. Their mission: to assess compatibility of the projected hydropower plants with the status of protection of the Park.

Their conclusion after the visit: "For these reasons, the general conclusion from the mission is that the proposed hydropower construction planned in the Park is not compatible with the status of protection of the Park (...); the projects, as currently planned, should be abandoned." (Quote from the results of the expert commission, at the bottom of page 16):

Based on this their main recommendations are:

The Macedonian government shall drop its plans to construct 22 hydropower plants in Mavrovo National Park.

Financing institutions like the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the World Bank shall stop their funding and pull out of the projects.

Gabriel Schwaderer, CEO of nature conservation foundation EuroNatur, supports these recommendations: "National parks are there to protect large ecosystems from human interference. The hydropower development plans in Mavrovo National Park would not only destroy its natural treasures, but also constitute an assault on the very idea of national parks. That's another reason why we have to avert these projects!"

"The significance of these recommendations extends far beyond the case of Mavrovo. It's a signal to all national parks in Europe: Hydropower has no place in national parks", says Ulrich Eichelmann of Riverwatch. From Slovenia to Albania alone, 113 hydropower plants are planned or already under construction in the midst of national parks - often financed by Western institutions.

The on-the-spot appraisal by the expert group has been brought about by the persevering dedication of NGOs from Macedonia in cooperation with EuroNatur Foundation, Riverwatch and numerous supporters. 119 scientists from all over the world as well as about 100,000 supporters voiced their protest against the plans of the Macedonian government, the EBRD, and the World Bank.

Following a complaint by Macedonian NGO Eco Svest, the Bern Convention's Standing Committee decided to open a file case against the "the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" and to mandate the expert commission. The findings of this on-the-spot appraisal will serve this year's meeting of the Standing Committee on 2 December as the basis for discussing and deciding on how to proceed.

Mavrovo National Park is among Europe's oldest national parks and its so far identified

1138 animal and 1435 plant species make it a hotspot of Europe's biodiversity. The national park is crucial to the endangered Balkan lynx, which found one of its last refuges there. The planned hydropower plants would threaten this refugium.

source: balkanrivers.net