

Scientists and [non-governmental organisations](#) from 11 countries have published a list of 88 rivers they consider high priority for protection, urging **Western Balkan countries** that have signed the **Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (Bern Convention)** to **expand the Emerald Network** in the region.

Established by the **Council of Europe** in 1989 under the Bern Convention, the Emerald Network consists of areas of special conservation interest established to conserve wild flora and fauna in their natural habitats.

As signatories of the Bern Convention, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia established the Emerald Network in 2011, when they proposed a small number of sites. However, none of the countries have since expanded their original list of sites. Most sites lack management, consistent data collection, resources and legal protection under national law, leaving most rivers and fish populations unprotected.

[The list of rivers](#) published today results from the Emerald Green seminar organised by CEE Bankwatch Network in December 2022, where participants provided scientific data on fish species and habitats.

As a global biodiversity hotspot, the Western Balkans boasts exceptional freshwater diversity. The region's extensive **mountains, rivers, lakes and coastlines** are home to numerous endangered species and important habitats with many endemic species that can't be found anywhere else. Compared to the rest of Europe, most of the region's rivers are in good or pristine condition and many are ideal candidates for protection, as recognised by the priority list published today.

Andrey Ralev, biodiversity campaigner for **CEE Bankwatch Network**, said: 'River protection and the proper implementation of the Emerald Network is a long-term process, requiring cooperation between governments, scientists, nongovernmental organisations and local communities. Our proposal, which is based on extensive scientific knowledge about fish populations in the region, is an important contribution to this process. The next step is to support the region's governments in preparing official proposals for new Emerald sites.'

Jelena Ivanić, vice president at the Center for Environment Banja Luka, said: 'By signing the Bern Convention, our country made a commitment to protect and manage areas nominated for the Emerald Network. But not much has been done regarding this. Adequate protection of nature and the environment can be achieved through the implementation of the Bern Convention and the Emerald Network. We expect this to happen in the coming years through cooperation of all levels of authorities, local communities, NGOs and the scientific community with the aim of protecting previously proposed areas and new Emerald sites in Bosnia and Herzegovina.'

Strahinja Macić from the Polekol Organization for Political Ecology and Right2Water Initiative said: 'Serbia is characterised by great genetic, species, ecosystem and landscape diversity. As part of the Balkans, it is one of the six centres of European biodiversity. Emerald sites are of great importance for the protection and preservation of wild animal and plant species, but the number of sites in Serbia is too small. No new areas have been proposed for inclusion in the Emerald Network since 2011, which is why the results of this seminar are valuable and present a good basis for proposing new areas with a special emphasis on transboundary river basins.'

Nataša Milivojević, president of the Rzav Ecological Association from Serbia, said: 'Experts who participated in this seminar shared valuable data on the region's biodiversity stemming from years of research. The seminar was a great idea that will certainly encourage decision-makers to speed up declaration of Emerald sites and ensure their sustainable management.'

Jelena Popović, general secretary of the Montenegrin Ecologists Society, said: 'The establishment of a national Emerald Network of areas of special conservation interest while Montenegro is in the process of EU integration is an ideal platform for the establishment of the Natura 2000 network. This is also one of the mechanisms to protect the most valuable natural areas until the official implementation of the Natura 2000 network once Montenegro joins the European Union. Wild rivers in Montenegro are under tremendous pressures due to sand and gravel mining, the construction of hydropower plants and a lack of wastewater management, just to name a few issues. Updating the list of national Emerald sites and properly implementing the network would be a significant contribution to the protection of rivers and other valuable habitats.'

Aleksander Trajce, executive director of Protection and Preservation of the Natural Environment in Albania, said: 'Albania boasts a very rich network of rivers and streams that flow freely to this day and host incredible biodiversity, including rare and threatened species on the European level. The proposal to include these rivers and streams in the Emerald Network is a major step in the right direction for ensuring their long-term protection and safeguarding the invaluable biodiversity that they host.'

Olsi Nika from EcoAlbania said: 'Rivers in the Balkans are amongst the most threatened ecosystems, and at the same time they represent a biodiversity hotspot. In this regard, it is worth including them in a legally protected network.'

Gjorgj Mitrevski, community support coordinator at Eko-svest in North Macedonia, said: 'Rivers in our country are impacted by various infrastructure projects that threaten the life of rare and endemic species that live there. The inclusion of rivers in the Emerald Network



SEE Region, Scientists and NGO representatives call for more rivers
to be protected

is a necessary step forward so that we can provide their protection as our natural heritage',
Bankwatch writes.