

For more than 10 years, local activists, international groups, scientists and artists have fought against a 'tsunami' of planned hydropower projects in the Balkans. In September 2020, Albanian politicians publicly announced the establishment of a Vjosa wild river national park, which would protect the entire network of tributaries. However, since then, local citizens and activists have become increasingly alarmed that, behind closed doors, compromises are being made, and, in fact, the river is in imminent danger.

The Vjosa, Europe's largest wild river outside of Russia, faces its greatest danger yet, due to political uncertainty and opportunistic greed. Ahead of upcoming Albanian parliamentary elections, citizens, activists and conservationists are demanding political support for the establishment of Europe's first wild river national park, thus protecting it forever. As part of this action, the launch of Vjosa Forever, a new documentary short film asking people everywhere to join the fight to preserve the future of the Vjosa.

With national elections on 25 April 2021, Albanian and international nature conservation groups such as EcoAlbania, Riverwatch and EuroNatur are calling on the public and political leaders to enshrine the future of the Vjosa and make this wild river national park a major priority for any winning party. Recent research shows that 94 percent of Albanian people are in favour of establishing this wild river national park. If successful, this will be Europe's first wild river national park and unparalleled in Europe in terms of ecological importance and scale. The designation would protect over 300km of rivers and streams, host to over 1,100 species, many of which are considered threatened. The launch of Vjosa Forever follows the 2018 Blue Heart film and campaign which depicted the fight to protect the wild rivers of the Balkans – the 'Blue Heart' of Europe – from 3,400 proposed hydropower projects which would destroy the culture and ecology of this entire region. Within the Blue Heart, the Vjosa is the largest and most untamed river system.

The six-minute film, created by Patagonia, asks concerned citizens everywhere to show their support for a Vjosa wild river national park and bring international attention to the environmental disaster that could ensue if it remains unprotected.

Ryan Gellert, CEO, Patagonia Works, says: "Grassroots activism, supported by legal action, have worked to get this historic decision on the table. Now is the time for Albanian politicians to step up. They will be doing something that's never been done before and protecting this last, pristine river system, forever."

Ulrich Eichelmann, CEO, Riverwatch, says: "The Vjosa miraculously survived the decades of destruction in Europe; it's a gift to all of us. And it is, therefore, not only an Albanian responsibility to protect it, but also a European responsibility. This wild river national park would be an immense achievement for conservation efforts in Europe, and, at an EU level, it

will make a real and significant contribution to the EU Biodiversity Strategy and the EU Green Deal."

Besjana Guri, Communications Officer, EcoAlbania says: "This is a moment for all Albanian citizens to feel real pride. Not only are we protecting our country, our culture and our future, but, in the Vjosa, we have something of precious beauty that is unparalleled in Europe."

Annette Spangenberg, Head of Project Unit, EuroNatur, says: "You will hardly find another river in Europe that deserves to be a national park more than the Vjosa. No other protection category will do this river justice. A weaker category that keeps the backdoor open for further hydropower projects cannot be the solution."

Source: euronatur.org