

Endangered species, pollution, climate change and mounting hydropower demands all threaten rivers' countless ecological and socio-economic benefits, necessitating their urgent protection. Even when terrestrial protections do benefit freshwater biodiversity, they often lack durability, as evidenced by the globally widespread development of dams in protected areas.

The Zeta River ("Zeta") in Montenegro is one site where the burgeoning freshwater protection movement has achieved victory. A biodiversity hotspot, Zeta's clear waters are home to unique species of endangered mollusks and freshwater fish, such as the Zeta soft mouth trout. The 65-kilometer river supports more than 20 percent of Montenegro's bird and plant species.

Despite Zeta's abundant nature, until recently water pollution, poaching, and unplanned urbanization threatened the river's biodiversity. Left unchecked, these problems would threaten Zeta's wildlife and hinder the river's ability to provide diverse habitats, mitigate climate and erosion impacts, and offer opportunities for recreation, tourism, and research. These invaluable benefits inspired local campaigns to call for the river's protection. In early 2019, the Podgorica and Danilovgrad municipalities collaborated with a local NGO coalition to launch an initiative to protect the Zeta River's lower course. By year's end, TNC had co-hosted the first International Conference on River Protection in Podgorica and the Montenegrin government had launched the River Zeta Nature Park.

Resultant progress flowed rapidly and in only ten months Zeta was designated a Category V protected area. The park signifies a major milestone for freshwater conservation in the Balkans and serves as a model for policymakers to integrate freshwater protections into development and conservation planning. While the Balkans need to pursue sustainable development to protect nature and people from climate change, development should avoid unnecessary damages to freshwater habitats such as Zeta.

The River Zeta Nature Park illustrates how conservation can simultaneously reduce negative development impacts, give back to human livelihoods, and safeguard biodiversity and ecological services. Because of responsible planning, Zeta's boundless biodiversity and cultural heritage are protected from development and its waters will continue to flow freely for generations to come, ETN writes.