



## Declaration: Save the Wild Rivers October 2019

Free-flowing rivers are among the most valuable ecosystems on Earth and provide a wide range of societal and economic services and benefits. During the past 50 years, many rivers have deteriorated heavily. Within the European Union, for instance, only four out of ten rivers are in a good ecological state – most of these are located in remote and high-altitude areas. Across Europe, historic and ongoing construction of hydropower dams has been a major driver of an unprecedented decline of freshwater life and ecosystem functions.

Fortunately, the mountainous portions of Balkan rivers remain in an outstanding condition, making them hotspots for freshwater life of global importance. However, about 3,000 new hydropower projects are in the planning state, putting this unique natural heritage at risk.

The Vjosa River in Albania is one of the most iconic rivers in the Balkans and in all of Europe, prominent for its near-natural state.

Keeping in mind the enormous value and importance of the last wild and free-flowing rivers of the world as well as the immense threats they face, we urge the **representatives of the European Commission and the members of the European Parliament** to:

- *safeguard the protection of the remaining intact rivers in Europe from being dammed, diverted, channelized or polluted;*
- *facilitate the restoration of rivers and streams that have been impacted in the past;*
- *ensure the implementation of the European Water Framework Directive, EIA Directive, the Habitat and Bird Directives and related guidance documents in EU countries as well as in EU accession states.*

In addition, we ask the **political leaders of the Balkan countries** to pay special attention to their rivers, as they form the cultural and natural backbones of the entire region. Protecting the rich cultural and natural life associated with river landscapes provides a unique opportunity for sustainable economic development in this region. Therefore, we urgently call on leaders in South-East Europe to:

- *strictly follow EU standards and directives; especially to carefully monitor and improve the rules, methods and standards of the Environmental Impact Assessment in the planning phase of projects that impact rivers.*
- *establish and enlarge protected areas along rivers, such as national parks and nature reserves.*

With respect to the Vjosa we urge the **Albanian Government** to:

- *respect and implement the standards of the European Union in the planning of hydropower projects (EIA, WFD, the Birds and Habitat Directives and related guidance documents).*
- *ensure international standards in river management.*
- *protect the Vjosa and its tributaries for their full length in Albania and support the vision to establish Europe's first Wild River National Park.*
- *support research programs to assess the ecological properties and cultural values of the river as a natural heritage of European importance.*

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