

# A vision for the Vjosa: Europe's first Wild River National Park



*The Vjosa at a cross road: creating Europe's first Wild River National Park or destroying it by dams. © Piotr Bednarek / Wolne Rzeki*

## 1 What is so unique about the Vjosa?

The Vjosa river flows freely from the Pindus mountains in Greece into the Mediterranean Sea in Albania - largely without artificial obstacles. On its course, the river provides all types of river ecosystems, including canyons, wide sections with huge gravel islands, meandering stretches and an estuary with a lagoon.

However, what makes the Vjosa particularly unique is the fact that most of its tributaries – such as the Bence, Shushica, Drinos – are also free-flowing. Main river and tributaries together form the most intact river system that remains in Europe outside Russia.

As such, the river is of outstanding value, which makes it worthy of a special protection designation: **Europe's first Wild River National Park.**

## 2 What is a Wild River National Park (WRNP)?

A "Wild River National Park" is an unofficial label that refers to the special character and the uniqueness of the park. According to IUCN, there is no defined "WRNP" category, in fact, there is no protection category which is designed to explicitly protect a river along its entire course.

The IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) is an organisation with governmental and non-governmental members in charge of standards for protected areas world-wide. **In regards to the IUCN designations, it would be a "regular" national park.**

### 3 What is a national park?

A national park is the “crown” protection label for a landscape and natural areas in the world.

Our aim is to establish a Vjosa National Park in line with international standards. According to IUCN protection categories, a national park (category II) protects large natural or near-natural areas for the benefit of biodiversity and environmental processes, and promotes education and recreation.<sup>1</sup>

The Vjosa National Park will need proper management concepts for nature (e.g. re-forestation programs, improvement of water quality, etc.), as well as for touristic and educational programs (information centers, “Rangers”, trails, guided tours, courses for adults and kids, school programs etc).



“Hanging bridges” at the river Lech in Austria, an example for recreational infrastructure in a river national park.  
Credit see <sup>2</sup>

### 4 Are there river-related national parks in Europe?

Yes, there are, however, they either only cover rather short river stretches or – to a larger extent – merely headwaters within a broader (mostly mountainous) landscape.

In Austria, the most famous national park is the *Donau-Auen National Park*, which was born out of the famous and successful opposition against a large-scale hydropower project in the mid-1980s (“Battle of Hainburg”). The dam project was stopped and instead a national park was established in 1996, protecting 40 kilometres of the Danube east of Vienna. Downstream, there are two more national parks, the *Duna-Ipoly NP* and the *Duna-Drava NP*, both in Hungary.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://portals.iucn.org/library/sites/library/files/documents/PAG-027-En.pdf>

<sup>2</sup>Left: <https://www.bergfex.at/sommer/tirol/touren/wanderung/46534,stanzach-haengebruecke-forchach-rundwanderweg/#images-bergfex.touren.46534>;

Right: <https://www.outdooractive.com/de/route/wanderung/lechtal/ueber-die-holzgaue-haengebruecke-zur-rossquempenal/30309838/#dmlb=1>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.danubeparks.org>

The *Thayatal-Nationalpark* is a joint national park of Austria and the Czech Republic.<sup>4</sup> <https://www.np-thayatal.at/en/pages/default.aspx> This park, similar to the Greek *Vikos-Aoos NP*, is a mountainous region with the river flowing deep down in the valley.

River-related national parks in Croatia include the *Krka National Park*, or - to some extent - the *Plitvice Lakes National Park*. Other examples are national parks protecting deltas or estuaries, such as the *Coto Donana National Park* in Spain, at the mouth of the Guadalquivir river.<sup>5</sup>

## 5 Do “Wild River National Parks” already exist?

Yes, but not in Europe. One of them is the *Franklin-Gordon Wild Rivers National Park* on Tasmania, Australia.<sup>6</sup> Very much alike the *Donau Auen National Park* in Austria and the Hungarian *Danube-Ipoly National Park*, the establishment of the Franklin-Gordon Wild River National Park was the direct result of a successful fight against a hydropower project.



Wild River National Park in Tasmania, Australia. Credit see <sup>7</sup>

Another example is the *Oxley Wild Rivers National Park* in Australia.<sup>8</sup>

In the United States, there are no Wild River National Parks, but a similar concept has been introduced in form of Wild River State Parks and the label *Wild & Scenic rivers*. This label, established in 1968, is a specific protection category for rivers which only exists in the US so far<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.np-thayatal.at/en/pages/default.aspx>

<sup>5</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doñana\\_National\\_Park](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doñana_National_Park)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.parks.tas.gov.au/index.aspx?base=3937>

<sup>7</sup> <http://durninsonsafari.blogspot.com/2011/02/four-amazing-wilderness-walks.html>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.nationalparks.nsw.gov.au/visit-a-park/parks/oxley-wild-rivers-national-park>

<sup>9</sup> <https://rivers.gov/wsr-act.php>



## 6 What would be so unique about a Vjosa WRNP?

The Vjosa Wild River National Park would be the first purely river-related national park in Europe – perhaps globally – covering not only short stretches of a river, but all the crucial section, from the mountains to sea, including its tributaries.

## 7 Which areas would be part of a Vjosa WRNP?

This national park in Albania could comprise the main river and its tributaries, from the border with Greece downstream to the mouth into the Adriatic Sea, including the Narta Lagoon. Primarily, the riverbed with its floodplains should be the *Core Zone* of the future park. **From an ecological point of view, the most important sections are the braided stretches of the river – starting near Tepelena downstream to Selenica – as well as the mouth into the Adriatic Sea.** The areas adjacent to the floodplains could either be part of the so-called *management zone* or excluded from the park. The same applies to the adjoining hills in the Vjosa basin. The park's boundaries as well as the final zoning have to be determined through a wide consultation process with all landowners and relevant stakeholders in the national park planning phase.



*The large gravel sections from Tepelena to Selenica should become the core area of the national park.*  
© Ulrich Eichelmann

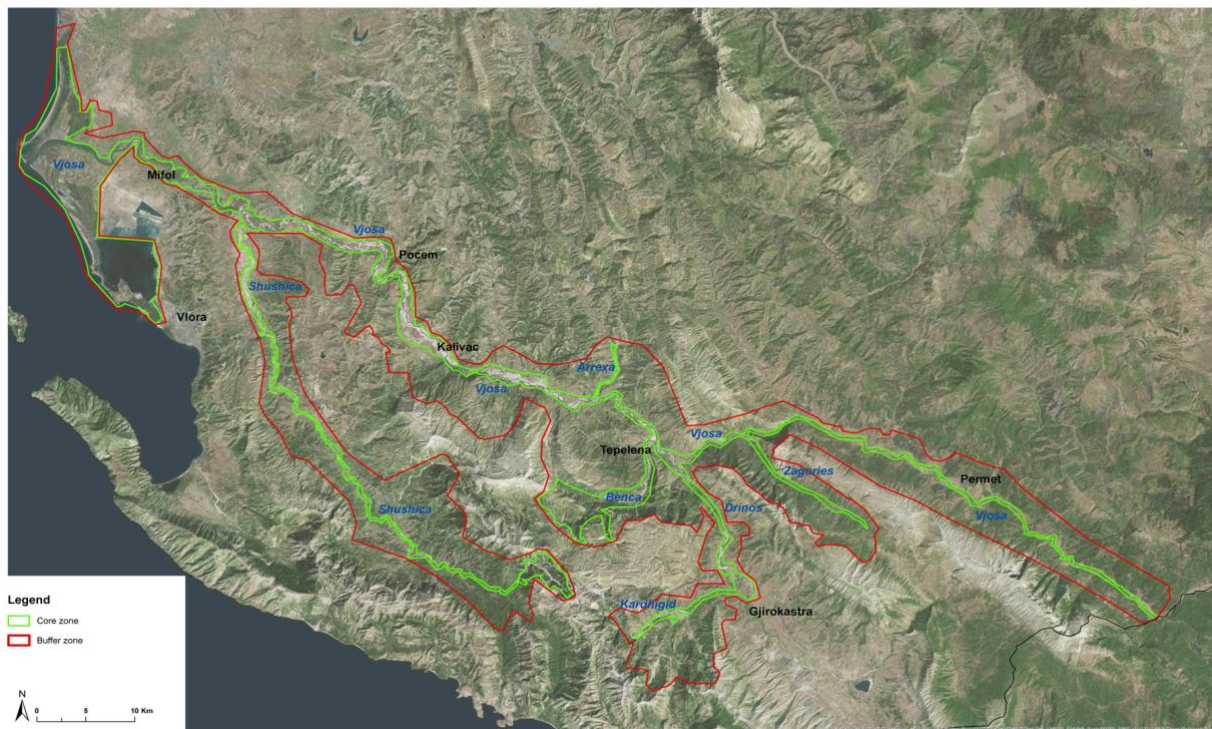
## 8 Which areas could NOT be part of a Vjosa WRNP?

Severely modified tributary rivers or river stretches - especially those affected by hydropower plants – would not be included in the Vjosa NP. To this date, only the tributaries Langarica and the Carshove cannot be included in a national park, as they are already altered by hydropower plants.

The most imminent threats to the national park vision are the planned hydropower plants Kalivac and Pocem on the Vjosa main river. If only one of them were to be constructed, the national park idea would collapse as a whole, as the uniqueness of this area (completeness, uninterrupted flow from mountain to sea...) – would be lost in one blow. Hydropower plants on tributaries would exclude the tributary from the national park area. Hence, when it comes to the foreseen hydropower plants, it is a “either-or” decision: destruction by hydropower or preservation and sustainable development through a national park.

The following maps depict the potential boundaries of the Vjosa WRNP, as well as a zoom into the special areas of interest.

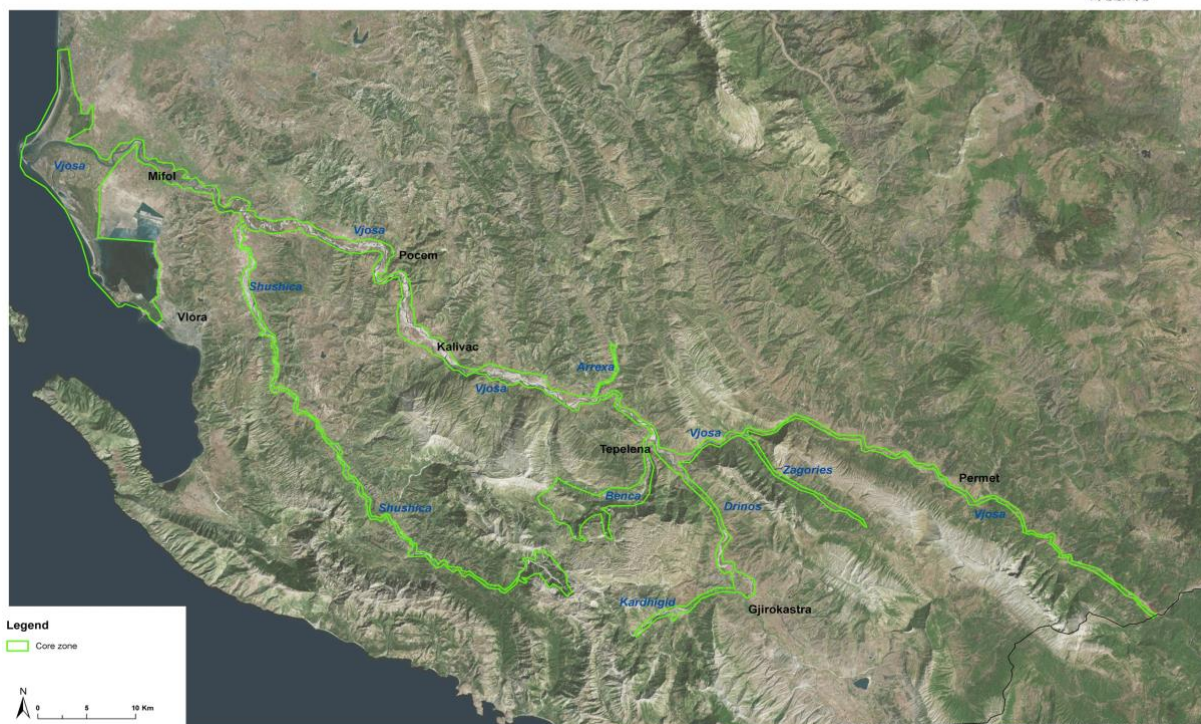
## Potential Vjosa National Park



*Potential boundaries of Vjosa WRNP in Albania: national park boundaries (red), minimum core area (green). Total size: 111,600 hectares. Map prepared by Fluvius*

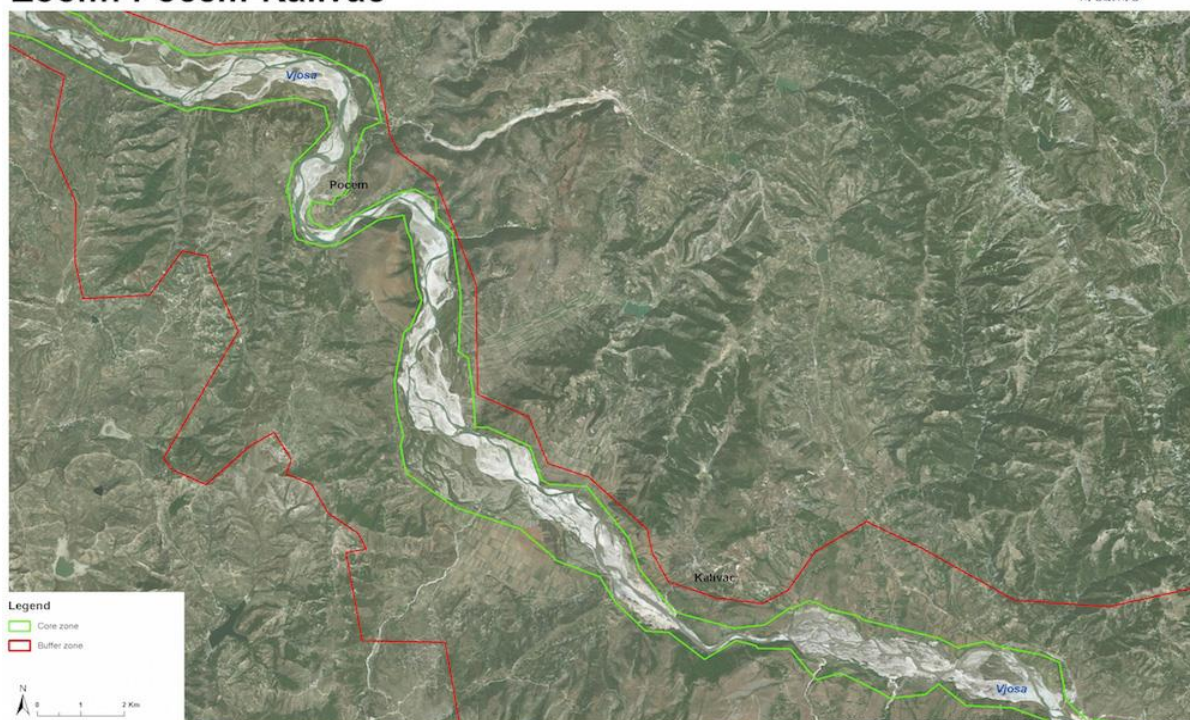


## Potential Vjosa National Park



*The riverbed plus adjacent floodplains of the Vjosa and its tributaries comprising the core area of the "Vjosa WRNP. Total size: 34,850 hectares. Map prepared by Fluvius*

## Potential Vjosa National Park Zoom: Pocem-Kaliyac



*The Kaliyac/Pocem region is the heart of the future national park. In this area, in only a few days of survey, scientists discovered 40 species for the first time in Albania while two of them were completely new to science. Minimum core area in green, the potential national park borders in red. Map prepared by Fluvius*



## Potential Vjosa National Park Zoom Tepelena - Benca



*Potential national park boundaries in the Tepelena region. The Benca river must be included in the park. Potential WRNP boundaries in red, minimum core area in green. Map prepared by Fluvius*

### 9 The planning period – A joined process

The national park has to be planned and implemented in close collaboration with local communities, landowners, ministries and NGOs. The planning phase for the Vjosa Wild River National Park is expected to last about three years, starting with a political commitment of the federal government of Albania to establish the park.

National and international experts must be involved in the planning. The first step should be the establishment of a “Vjosa WRNP planning association”, consisting of experienced experts, representatives of the Albanian ministries, municipalities, NGOs and other stakeholder groups. This association would prepare a plan for the Vjosa WRNP, including the definition of boundaries, the development of a zoning concept and a broad stakeholder involvement as well as governance and financing the park.

### 10 How to establish the Wild River National Park? Step-by-step approach

In a first step, the Vjosa Wild River National Park could be established on public land only, which means the riverbed and its tributaries. In a second step, the adjacent fields and hills could become part of the WRNP if the landowners agree, based on mutual agreements.

It is also possible to establish the WRNP along the full length of the river in a step-by-step approach, starting with the most crucial stretches and then expanding its boundaries to the entire river course in a later stage. However, it is important not to lose sight of the main idea, which is the preservation of the entire intact river from its source in the mountains to the sea.



*Recreation and education are important objectives of a national park and could play a major role at the Vjosa. © NP Donau-Auen/Kovacs.*

## **11 Outlook – Transboundary national park with Greece**

A next step would be a bilateral extension of the Vjosa WRNP by combining the Aaos and the Vjosa to a transboundary Wild River National Park. For that purpose, the existing “Vikos-Aoos NP” in Greece should be enlarged downstream towards the border with Albania. Similar to the WRNP on Albanian side, the future Aaos WRNP should also cover important tributaries such as Voidomatis and Sarandaporos.

## **12 Financing**

The development of a concept for the WRNP according to international standards as well as its operation requires substantial funding.

Due to the uniqueness of the river system, it seems likely to obtain financial support from international organisations and bodies such as development agencies or the EU, in order to cover the costs for the planning of Europe’s First Wild River National Park.

The operational costs could be covered by a mix of federal money and a trust fund, following the concept of the “Prespa Ohrid Nature Trust”. With the revenues of this trust fund, national park projects in regards to monitoring, research, educational programs and touristic services could be financed.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.pont.org>



### 13 Timeline

We expect that the Vjosa Wild River National Park could be operational within three years after the political decision to establish such a park.

- **2020:** Start the planning process. Team of experts is established, consisting of Albanian and international experts, stakeholders etc.
- **2023: Opening of the Vjosa Wild River National Park on the Albanian Independence Day, November 28<sup>th</sup>:** Europe's 1<sup>st</sup> Wild River National Park will be inaugurated by the Albanian Prime Minister, MoE, mayors and EU delegation.



*One of the potential core zones of the Vjosa NP, the river system at Tepelena. The Wild River National Park would create jobs and income for local communities. © Christian Baumgartner*