



Convention on the Conservation
of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats

Recommendation No. 202 (2018) of the Standing Committee, adopted on 30 November 2018, on the planned hydro-power plant developments on the Vjosa river (Albania)

The Standing Committee to the Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats, acting under Article 14 of the Convention,

Having regard to the objectives of the Convention to conserve wild flora and fauna and their natural habitats;

Recalling that Article 3 of the Convention provides that each Contracting Party shall take steps to promote national policies for the conservation of the habitats of wild flora, wild fauna and natural habitats, with particular attention to endangered and vulnerable species, especially endemic ones, and endangered habitats;

Recalling that Article 4, paragraph 1, of the Convention provides that each Contracting Party shall take appropriate and necessary legislative and administrative measures to ensure the conservation of the habitats of the wild fauna species, especially those listed in Appendix II to the Convention;

Noting that a complaint on the presumed negative impact of hydro-power plant development on the Vjosa River in Albania has been filed with the Convention in 2016 (Complaint No. 2016/5);

Noting the unique ecosystem of the Vjosa River, in particular its central section where two HPPs (Poçem and Kalivac) are planned, alternating narrow gorges and wide valleys within which the river is braided with highly dynamic channels containing sediment bars and shoals of varying grain size (boulders, cobbles, sand), vegetated islands (often *Salix* spp.) and alluvial floodplains;

Noting the rich variety of wildlife reported to inhabit the river, the areas of the planned catchments and their terrestrial environment, including a population of the Eurasian otter (*Lutra Intra*) and many rare or endangered fish species type, such as the European eel, and various loach, salmon and sturgeon species;

Noting as well that the Vjosa river gravel bars in the braided river reaches provide breeding habitat for many bird species, such as the stone curlew (*Burhinus oedicnemus*) and little ringed plover (*Charadrius dubius*), although population numbers and their dynamics are uncertain due to lack of systematic surveys;

Recalling that the Vjosa-Narta Protected Landscape has been officially nominated as candidate Emerald site in 2011, in accordance with national legislation, and - as such - it is subject to Recommendation No. 157 (2011) on the status of candidate Emerald sites and guidelines on the criteria for their nomination, requiring national authorities to “take the necessary protection and conservation measures in order to maintain the ecological characteristics of the candidate Emerald sites” until their full inclusion in the Emerald Network;

Recognising that the area of the catchments for both Kalivach and Poçem HPP is not a designated protected area at national or international level;

Noting the Bern Convention on-the-spot appraisal (OSA) held in Albania on 12-15 June 2018 which had five specific objectives agreed by all concerned parties prior to the mission;

Taking note of the report [document T-PVS/Files (2018)43] of the OSA mission carried out;

Worrying that the unique river ecosystem of the Vjosa is in immediate danger due to the planned hydro energy developments,

Recommends that the Government of Albania:

1. Uses the precautionary approach and suspends both Kalivac and Poçem hydropower plant projects - as their implementation would pose compliance concerns with the Bern Convention - until the necessary strategic planning and additional assessments are carried out in conformity with Recommendations 2-10 below.
2. Urgently prepares an integrated River Basin Management plan, and strategic environmental impact assessment including social aspects, for the Vjosa river basin (including collaboration with Greece), particularly the potential for ecotourism.
3. Develops a study of the potential impacts of Poçem and Kalivac HPP schemes on the sediment regime of the Vjosa River and implications for the environment as an essential requisite to a comprehensive EIA, also taking into account other points of concern expressed under chapter 5 of this report. This should include potential negative impact on the Vjose – Narte Protected Landscape and candidate Emerald site;
4. Taking into account that the Albanian Emerald network of areas of special conservation interest (and ultimately the Natura 2000 Network in the country) still needs to be completed, considers areas along the Vjosa River, including reaches at Poçem and Kalivac based on available scientific knowledge, for possible designation under the Bern Convention Network;
5. Repeats the EIA study for the Poçem HPP project taking into account the River Basin Management Plan (Rec 2), the sediment study (Rec 3), any revision of the Emerald network (Rec 4), data from NGOs and any local or indigenous knowledge (Recs 6 & 10), taking a precautionary approach to data uncertainty;
6. Undertakes a thorough consultation with local people to discuss development plans and EIAs. Meetings should be advertised by direct contact with local government (such as Mayors) and other community representatives and local people by putting-up posters in villages throughout the potentially affected area;
7. Reviews the existing Albanian EIA training programme to ensure that it meets international standards. The environmental impact of dams should be an important component and should feature guidance being produced for National Agency for Protected Areas on dams and international best practice, such as from the World Bank, the European Commission and International Hydro-power Association;
8. Undertakes a strategic energy assessment for Albania to consider the merits of other energy producing options, such as wind and solar-based production;
9. Jointly organises a workshop between the Ministry of Tourism and Environment and NGOs in late 2018/early 2019 with presentations on evidence of wildlife species and ecological process, such as sediment transport, in the Poçem - Kalivaç area. This should have a wide invitation list including other Ministries and relevant Agencies (e.g. Energy and Infrastructure, National Environment Agency, etc.), Albanian and international scientists, the Network of NGOS for Nature Protection and local people with wildlife knowledge;
10. Improves collaboration between government ministries (and their agencies) and independent experts, this includes better use of local and indigenous knowledge. There is an urgent need to build capacity in Albanian scientists by their closer involvement in environmental projects. The Ministry of Tourism and Environment should stimulate this by supporting proposals to EU for research funds for Albanian partners. The Ministry should also approach research funders (Academy of Sciences, National Council for Research, National Agency of Research) and recommend prioritisation of freshwater science.

11. Prepares a schedule and programme of work to implement the above recommendations, including details of the person/actors responsible, along with the timetable with clear milestones and deadline for each recommended action.
12. Regularly reports on progress in the implementation of the Recommendation, as requested by the Bureau to the Standing Committee to the Convention and the Committee itself.