

Fighting the disappearance of Balkan rivers

If you follow a wild river from its source in the mountains to its mouth to the sea, the river reveals a variety of characteristics. In its upper course it is fast-flowing, steep and narrow, carving its way through deep gorges. In its middle section it slows and widens into a braided river section, dividing into anabranches as it finds its ever-changing paths through huge amounts of pebble carried from the mountains. Even further down its course, the river starts to meander, flowing slowly through the plains and providing the river's floodplains with water. Each of these characteristic stages of a wild river comes with its own unique ecosystem, providing habitat to a vast number of species.

Such a river is the Vjosa in Albania – one of the very last big wild rivers in Europe, and probably the very last river whose tributaries are also unimpaired. As such, it forms an intact river system that is without par in Europe.

Wild rivers are disappearing at an alarming rate (Yaggi, 2018), and many of us living in industrialized countries no longer know what such a river actually looks like. The characteristics of a wild river are lost when it is dammed and put into an artificial corset. A dynamic river turns into a stagnant water body above a dam; its sediments are trapped behind the dam walls and no longer reach the sea; fish cannot migrate to their spawning grounds. Embankments restrict the river to a fixed rather than dynamic riverbed and disconnect it from its floodplains. We grow up thinking that the embanked channel in our backyard constitutes a river.

Most of Europe's last natural or near-natural rivers can be found in the

Balkans. The volatile political situation and economic stagnation that followed the Yugoslav Wars have kept these rivers safe from 'development' for decades. Thus, the rivers have remained widely unimpaired and have become the most important freshwater biodiversity hotspot in Europe: they host 113 endangered fish species and 40% of the continent's endangered freshwater mollusc species, such as mussels and snails (Neslen, 2018). Furthermore, the Balkan rivers constitute Europe's El Dorado for outdoor lovers: fly fishing, kayaking, climbing, exploring waterfall spectacles or untouched gorges – the rivers in the Balkans provide all of it.

However, the situation of these rivers has recently changed for the worse. A gold rush atmosphere for hydropower has emerged in the region: 2800 dams are planned to be constructed between Slovenia and Greece (Figure 1), leaving virtually no river undammed (Neslen, 2017). Thirty-eight dams are projected in the Vjosa catchment alone. Corruption and weak environmental laws (or weak implementation thereof) have nourished this spate of destruction. Without respect for nature and endangered species, rivers are being destroyed, their water is being diverted and whole landscapes are drying up. Not even national parks are to be spared, with more than a third of the dams planned inside protected areas. Affected residents are rarely consulted or even informed. Many projects are funded by multilateral development banks such as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development or the European Investment Bank, as well as by commercial banks (Vejnović and Gallop, 2018).

The absurdity of this situation becomes evident if one considers that millions

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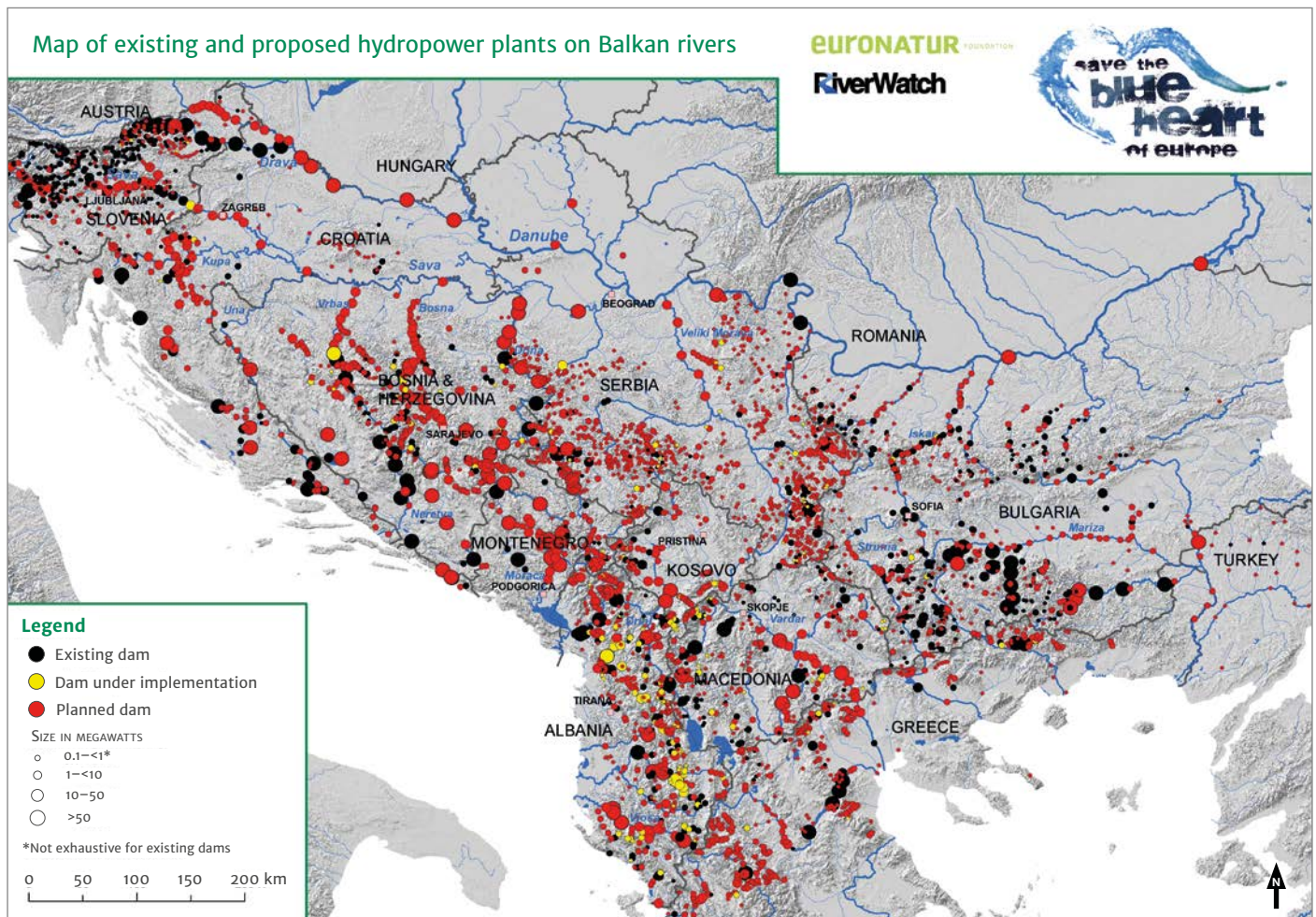


Figure 1. Map of existing and proposed hydropower plants on Balkan rivers (modified from a graphic produced by Fluvius in 2017).

“The absurdity of this situation becomes evident if one considers that millions of euros are being invested in river restoration in the rest of Europe.”

of euros are being invested in river restoration in the rest of Europe, as the EU has stipulated that freshwater systems are to be restored to a good status by 2020 (European Commission, 2016). Restoration scientists need river systems like the Vjosa as a reference point in order to study the functioning of natural, intact river dynamics.

Call for action: Save the Blue Heart of Europe

The Vjosa and other natural river systems in the Balkans need our protection. Together with local partners and affected communities in the respective Balkan countries, the conservation organizations EuroNatur (<https://www.euronatur.org/>) and RiverWatch (<https://www.riverwatch.eu/>) are trying to stop the destruction. Our campaign ‘Save the Blue Heart of Europe’ (<https://www.balkanrivers.net/>) aims to

protect the most valuable rivers in the Balkans.

There are several ways you can help us to protect the Balkan Rivers.

- 1 Please sign the petition that is calling on international banks to stop funding the destruction of Europe’s last wild rivers: <https://blueheart.patagonia.com/take-action>.
- 2 And please spread the news about both the beauty of, and the threat to, these rivers by sharing our Facebook posts: <https://www.facebook.com/balkanrivers/posts>.
- 3 You can also donate to our campaign at <https://balkanrivers.net/en/donate>. Your donation will be used to hire lawyers to support local communities in their fight against these proposals and to continue our lobbying on behalf of Europe’s last wild rivers.

It will require a major effort from many people if Europe’s blue heart is to be saved. ■

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The 'queen' of European rivers, the Vjosa in Albania. If the Albanian government has its way, this braided river section will be drowned in a dam reservoir (photo by Gregor Subic).



Scientists studying a tributary of the Vjosa. The river system serves as a rare (and perhaps unique) reference point for future river restoration. Until recently, this river system had not been explored by scientists (photo by Thuile Bistarelli).



Construction of the Medna Sana hydropower plant near the source of the river Sana, Bosnia-Herzegovina. The Sana is one of six most important rivers for the huchen, a globally endangered fish species (photo by Matic Oblac).

Dam construction site at the Valbona, in northern Albania. Construction continues even though the appeal court has ordered a construction freeze (photo by Cathrine Bohne).





A protest against damming of the Vjosa on the river's banks near Qeserat, Albania (photo by Oblak Aljaz).

The 'brave women of Kruščica', Bosnia-Herzegovina, who kept a construction site occupied for a year as part of efforts to prevent the construction of a dam and save their local river (photo by Andrew Burr).

