

Albania's 'wild river' granted national park status

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The Vjosa and its tributaries will now enjoy the highest level of protection.

Environmental campaigners scored a rare victory in Albania on Wednesday after authorities announced the creation of a national park to protect the Vjosa River, one of Europe's largest undammed waterways.

For years, [activists](#) lobbied to save what they call Europe's last major "wild river"—one whose course is unaltered by industry or dams—recruiting A-listers like Leonardo DiCaprio to their cause.

Spanning more than 400 kilometres (248 miles), the Vjosa and its tributaries will now enjoy the highest level of protection.

Albania's Prime Minister Edi Rama praised the project.

"It is a transformational moment for the whole area and also for the future of communities around it, for the whole country," Rama told AFP.

Activists agreed, saying the national park breaks new ground in the world of conservation.

"It establishes, for the first time, a conservation concept where an entire river system is protected and not just individual sections of a river," said Ulrich Eichelmann, head of the Austria-based advocacy organisation RiverWatch.

On Wednesday, Rama and Tourism and Environment Minister Mirela Kumbaro oversaw a ceremony inaugurating the opening of the project in Tepelena, a southern town on the river's banks.

Milestone

Local and international NGOs have been battling for years to raise awareness of the need to protect one of the last undammed rivers on the continent.

In Albania, the river was threatened by a string of hydroelectric power projects, which have now been banned by authorities.

Activists and residents living near the Vjosa's banks have been warning for years that the dams would cause floods and grave damage to the river's ecosystem.

Around 1,200 animal and plant species have been recorded along the Vjosa, including around 40 that are listed internationally as threatened.

Before the ceremony Kumbaro told AFP that proclaiming the 12,727-hectare (31,449-acre) [national park](#) was a major milestone for Albania, which relies on hydroelectric energy to power its economy.

"But, we consider the huge responsibility we have towards our children and the Albania we are going to leave them as more important," she said.

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