

# Airport threatens Albania's fragile wild paradise

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Flamingos on Albania's Narta lagoon near Vlorë.

Flamingos and Dalmatian pelicans laze in the azure waters of a shallow lagoon near Albania's Adriatic coast.

But this avian paradise's days may be numbered, ecologists warn, with a new airport being built close by to cash in on the Balkan nation's tourism boom.

Its construction near Vlora has triggered protests from environmentalists, who say it is being built inside a protected area and poses a serious risk to a variety of birds.

"This project goes against the laws of nature," said Zydjon Vorspi of the Protection and Preservation of Natural Environment in Albania group.

"Building such vast infrastructure in an area known worldwide for its exceptional biodiversity means blocking the birds' paths and creating major problems for local, as well as international, populations."

The lagoon is fed by the Vjosa, billed as Europe's last major "wild river", which was given national park status with much fanfare by the Albanian government in March after a campaign supported by Hollywood star Leonardo DiCaprio.

Millions of birds pass through the Narta lagoon and the nearby Karavasta estuary to the north every year, providing critical grounds for [migratory species](#) travelling between northern Europe and the African continent.



Albania's spectacular Vjosa, one of Europe's last wild rivers.

The airport will likely have a direct impact on the habitat, ecologists say, with jets disrupting migratory flyways and nesting areas that could irreparably damage the fragile ecosystem.

"We can already see that some species are worried," Niko Dumani, a biodiversity specialist, told AFP.

But the Albanian government denies the airport is infringing on protected areas and said the project will be a much-needed boost to tourism.



"The airport will be built anyway," declared Prime Minister Edi Rama. "It will be an added value and in no way a threat to the ecosystem".

## 'A better life'

A two-and-a-half-hour drive south of Tirana, the Narta lagoon and its marshy surroundings are home to more than 200 bird species, including 33 on Albania's red list of endangered flora and fauna.

It is the final destination of the Vjosa—one of Europe's last undammed rivers—before it empties into the Adriatic through a labyrinth of waterways and marshes that are ideal for birds.



Vlora's new airport, which environmentalists say threatens wildlife.

But just five kilometres north as the crow flies, construction teams are laying the groundwork for the 104 million euro (\$112 million) airport that aims to handle two million passengers a year by 2025.

Locals are largely supportive of the airport, which they hope will bring jobs and development to an impoverished region.

"I think it's a good investment for the future of our children, for a better life here," Tokli Hysa, 70, told AFP.

His village has been emptied by waves of migration, with only a single shop left that sells everything from sugar to bags of cement.

Authorities say the airport will encourage tourism and create 1,500 jobs directly in a country where one in five under 30 are out of work and the average monthly wage is 560 euros.

## **Disfigured coast**

But environmentalists fear mass tourism will set off a tidal wave of construction.



'Goes against nature': environmentalist Zydjon Vorpsi observes birds at the Narta lagoon in southern Albania.





Running for cover: a stone curlew darts across the mudflats of Albania's Narta lagoon.



The new airport abuts Albania's Narta lagoon, which is hugely important for migrating birds.

Activists point to the disfigured swaths of coastline in Vlora and Durrës that have been overrun with resorts and apartment blocks with little oversight.

The rapid urbanisation in the area—along with overfishing and [climate change](#)—has already played a part in the dramatic decline in migratory bird populations.

Last year researchers reported that the number of waterbirds in Albania's Divjaka-Karavasta wetlands were down by a quarter.



For Ornod Bazaj, the owner of an agency focused on eco-tourism, the [airport](#) could undermine the tracts of pristine coastline that are attracting tourists to the area in the first place.

"In the short term, it will have beneficial effects," Bazaj said. "But in the long term, it will destroy the environment and in turn tourism."

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