



Terms of Reference

Mitigation Hierarchy Assessment - Vjosa Wild River National Park
Hydromorphology and Freshwater biodiversity conservation

May 2024

1 BACKGROUND

In March 2023, the Vjosa Wild River National Park (VWRNP) in Albania was formally established, protecting a network of 400km of natural free-flowing rivers. The VWRNP covers the entire length of the Vjosa River in Albania, from the Greek border to its mouth in the Adriatic Sea, as well as three main tributaries: Drinos, including Kardhiq, Bënçë and Shushica.

The “Rural Water Supply IV” (RWS IV) project on the Shushica tributary was approved in 2019, and about 75% of the construction work is already complete. RWS IV project consists of a water pipeline to transmit water from the mountains for tourism development in the coastal areas. The project will extract water from a point located adjacent to the National Park boundaries, and therefore directly draw from water flows to the Vjosa system and the National Park.

Recently, concerns have been raised by national and international NGOs, academia and local voices regarding the potential significant impact of the project on the aquatic and riparian biodiversity, integrity of VWRNP and impacts on the water supply for local stakeholders, as well as the extent of public consultation and the quality of the ESIA. The National Park and its core values of uninterrupted freshwater flow, aquatic ecological processes, and equitable provision of water-related ecosystem services are therefore likely to be impacted.

RWS IV is financed in part through a German Development Bank KfW loan and EU Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF), executed by the Albanian Development Fund (ADF). Following the raised concerns, there has been an agreement by the partners to halt the project for 10-12 weeks to allow for additional impact assessments as the project is now likely to impact the newly established VWRNP.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) is a global organization dedicated to conserving nature and promoting sustainable development. In addition to a previously completed EIA undertaken as part of the Albanian regulatory framework, IUCN has been requested by the Albanian Ministry of Tourism and Environment to undertake a separate assessment of the extent of potential impacts of the water extraction project on the natural values and ecosystem services of the VWRNP and provide associated recommendations as a basis for further decisions by the Albanian Government. The assessment will be implemented through applying the IUCN Mitigation Hierarchy framework and IUCN Protected Areas Standards and Guidance.

Two international experts in hydromorphology and freshwater biodiversity conservation will contribute equally to the assessment and provide recommendations within their respective fields of expertise in a joint report, supported by an Albanian national expert on freshwater ecology.

2 OBJECTIVES

1. Review, verify and examine existing data, reports, assessments and information from various project partners and stakeholders.
2. Apply the IUCN Mitigation Hierarchy framework and IUCN Protected Areas Standards and Guidance to assess and mitigate the potential impacts of the Lepusha River (Shushica tributary) water abstraction and diversion project (“Rural Water Supply IV”) on the natural values, fluvial processes and ecosystem services of the VWRNP.
3. Provide recommendations on alternatives/avoidance, best-fit mitigation, offsets and other long-term solutions to the Albanian Government as a basis for decisions on measures to be taken to prevent and/or address impacts of the RWS IV on Vjosa WRNP.

A mitigation hierarchy approach involves the following principles:

Mitigation Principle

1. *Be applied as early as possible in the project life cycle, to inform potential development decisions*
2. *Explicitly consider the project within a broader landscape or seascape context*
3. *Identify and respect nationally and internationally recognized 'no-go' areas*
4. *Thoroughly examine lower impact alternatives in the project design, including not proceeding with the project at all, recognising that not all impacts can be offset to achieve No Net Loss*
5. *Give priority to avoiding any damage to biodiversity*
6. *Take full account of direct, indirect and cumulative impacts, geographically and over time*
7. *Clearly distinguish impact avoidance, minimisation and on-site restoration measures from offsets*
8. *Design offsets to achieve at least No Net Loss and preferably a Net Gain of biodiversity.*
9. *Ensure any biodiversity offsets used as part of the mitigation hierarchy secure additional conservation outcomes that would not have happened otherwise*
10. *Approaches that are science-based, transparent, participatory, and address the effects of the project and mitigation actions on livelihoods*
11. *Follow a Rights-based Approach, as defined by IUCN resolutions, including WCC-2012-Res-099*
12. *Identify and put in place the legal, institutional and financial measures needed to ensure long-term governance of all mitigation actions (including any biodiversity offsets).*
13. *Apply a rigorous monitoring, evaluation and enforcement system that includes independent verification of all mitigation actions.*
14. *Apply the Precautionary principle throughout all stages of the mitigation hierarchy.*
15. *Apply the Ecosystem approach in all stages of the mitigation hierarchy. See 2004 publication: [The ecosystem approach : five steps to implementation | IUCN Library System](#)*

IUCN will also provide some examples of applying the Mitigation Hierarchy framework.

3 SPECIFIC TASKS

IUCN will provide the experts with directions and contacts from where to independently secure and gather existing data for in-depth review, verification and qualitative assessment, including, but not limited to:

- Feasibility study from developers/ designers
- Existing EIA of the project
- Proposed abstraction rates/ volume from the project
- Alternative water resources (to abstract water from)
- Flow data (estimations for Shushica, Vjosa system)
- Spatial/ map data
- Species/ habitat data
- Other areas important for the integrity of the VWRNP, currently not protected (tributaries, springs, floodplain, delta etc.)
- Other infrastructure, water abstraction, activities or processes that might cause cumulative impacts

Collection of additional data, including from interviews, during the field visit.

Assessment of impacts on hydromorphology and freshwater biodiversity conservation following the Mitigation Hierarchy methodology focussing on:

- Processes (ecosystem, fluvial, morphological) and ecosystem services
- Freshwater ecology (including endemic and threatened species) and habitats
- Area/ distance of impact

Assess cumulative impacts from other infrastructure, activities and processes e.g.:

- Water abstraction levels (irrigation, water bottling industry, other industry)
- Erosion due to deforestation, grazing, impact from fire, infrastructure
- Altered and irregular water flows (in consultation with the scientific community)
- Climate irregularities, flow and rainfall, water temperature (in consultation with the scientific community)
- Longer-term impacts on species behaviour and life cycles (in consultation with the scientific community)

Recommendations – based on expert judgement and qualitative assessment best available secondary data and information – to be provided on:

- Alternatives/avoidance
- Best-fit mitigation,
- Offsets (no net loss)
- Other long-term solutions

The tasks of the international experts in hydromorphology and freshwater biodiversity conservation will be carried out in close collaboration with IUCN – including the Regional Director, the Heads of the Protected and Conserved Areas Team and the Water and Wetland Team, and the Vjosa WRNP project manager – as well as an Albanian counterpart (national expert in freshwater ecology).

The work will require a field trip to Albania expected to be undertaken at the beginning of June 2024 together with the Albanian national expert. The fieldwork is estimated to take 5-6 days including meetings with relevant stakeholders in Tirana (scientists, authorities, NGOs and other stakeholders, but the expert is not expected to lead any community engagement or public consultation processes), a visit to the construction site on the Lepusha-Shushica tributary and potentially visits to the tourism development sites on the coast as relevant. Primary field data collection and modelling is not expected.

DELIVERABLES AND TIME FRAME

Deliverables:

- Inception report including all resources and data collected, as well as a detailed outline of the assessment process to be delivered two weeks after signing of the contract.
- Draft of the final report including preliminary recommendations to be submitted after seven weeks of signing the contract.
- Final Impact assessment report applying the IUCN Mitigation Hierarchy framework and IUCN Protected Areas Standards and Guidance, including associated recommendations for the developers and the Albanian Government on alternatives/avoidance, best-fit mitigation, offsets and other long-term solutions. The report should be submitted at the end of the contracting period in a high standard of English, estimated up to about 15-20 pages.

Specific chapters of the report include:

- A review of technical documents and other collated data, including information from field visits and other sources as appropriate;
- The methodology used to verify the accuracy and reliability of the collected data and discussion of any quality assurance measures implemented to ensure data validity;
- Qualitative assessment of potential impacts of the RWS IV project on hydromorphological processes and ecosystem services, as well as the biodiversity and other natural values of the VWRNP based on existing data and expert knowledge and judgement;
- Recommendations on alternatives/avoidance, best-fit mitigation, offsets and other long-term solutions based on qualitative assessments, expert judgement and application of the Mitigation Hierarchy framework.

The anticipated start date of the work is 27 May, 2024. Anticipated duration of the contract: 10 weeks.

Action / Week	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Data collation										
Field visits										
Inception report										
1. Hydromorphology impact assessment										
2. Biodiversity conservation impact assessment										
Developing recommendations of avoidance/ alternative solutions										
Develop best-fit mitigation recommendations										
Develop proposals of offsets to achieve No Net Loss										
Develop proposals of other long-term solutions										
Draft report										
Final report delivery										

4 QUALIFICATIONS AND EXPERTISE OF THE CONSULTANT

IUCN seeks two international experts in the fields of hydromorphology and freshwater biodiversity conservation to undertake the assessment and provide recommendations within their respective fields of expertise.

Expert in hydromorphology – required qualifications

- PhD or at least an MSc in hydromorphology or a similar field with demonstrated experience in analyzing fluvial processes and aquatic ecosystem services.
- Internationally recognized experience in environmental impact assessments (at least 10 years).
- Recognized experience with global protected area standards and advisory services.
- Demonstrated experience in producing reports and recommendations on alternatives, mitigation measures, offsets linked to river-related construction projects.
- English language proficiency.
- Experience in implementing the IUCN Mitigation Hierarchy is an advantage.
- Experience working in Southeast European countries is an advantage.

Expert in freshwater biodiversity conservation – required qualifications

- PhD or at least an MSc in freshwater biology conservation, freshwater protected area management or similar fields with demonstrated experience in analyzing impacts on freshwater ecosystems.
- Internationally recognized experience in environmental impact assessments and freshwater biodiversity conservation (at least 10 years).
- Recognized experience with global protected area standards and advisory services.
- Demonstrated experience in producing reports and recommendations on alternatives, mitigation measures, offsets linked to river-related construction projects.
- English language proficiency.
- Experience in implementing the IUCN Mitigation Hierarchy is an advantage.
- Experience working in Southeast European countries is an advantage.