

Antonio Lauria, Francesco Alberti,
Pietro Matracchi, Gabriele Paolinelli

Enhancing cultural and natural heritage as a lever for the regeneration of rural areas

The village of Bënjë, Southern Albania, as a case study

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- Antonio Lauria (AL) PI of the research project “Develop Community Resources through the Valorization of the Natural and Cultural Heritage”. Supervisor of the book. Author and editor (with FA, GP and PM) of the book. Author of the Executive Summary, Chapter 2, Sections 3.1 and 4.1. Author (with PAM) of Chapter 6. Author (with MR) of the alternative text descriptions of the images for visually impaired people. Author of photographs included in the book.
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Ardian Ndreca	Author of the book’s preface.
Stefania Vizzaccaro	Author of the book’s foreword.
Rebecca Milner	Translator of the manuscript into English.

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*Antonio Lauria, Francesco Alberti,
Pietro Matracchi and Gabriele Paolinelli,
Firenze, September 2024.*

1.2 A river and its landscapes

Gabriele Paolinelli

1.2.1 Naturalness

From Slovenia to northern Greece, the Balkans is the inhabited European region where rivers are more natural than in the rest of Europe³³ and have mostly excellent hydromorphological conditions (Schiemer *et al.*, 2020).

This is also the case with the Vjosa, which originated with the name Aaos in the Pindus Mountain Range in northwestern Greece and flows through southwestern Albania, [Figs. 1.51-1.55] and its right-hand tributary Lëngarica, which flows into the Vjosa at Petran in the municipality of Përmet. [Fig. 1.56] The former, 272 km long, has a maximum elevation difference of 2,664 m a.s.l. and is fed by a catchment area extending for 7,240 km². The latter, 36.8 km long, has a sub-basin of 374 square kilometres, with an elevation difference between 232 and 2,045 m a.s.l. (Apostolakis & Simixhiu, 2008).

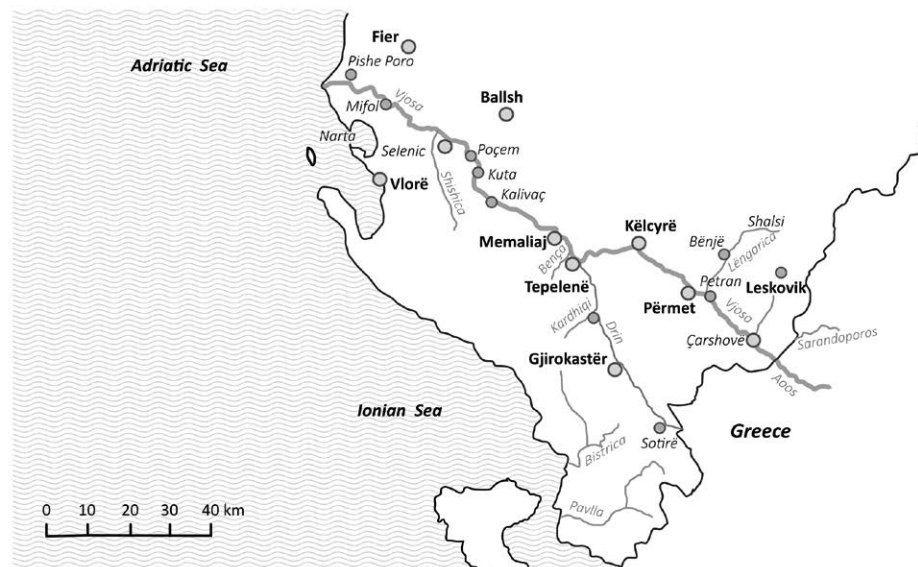


Figure 1.51 – The course of the Vjosa River from source to mouth.

The study area lies within the Bredhi i Hotovës - Dangëlli National Park and, more specifically, in the lower valley of the Lëngarica and that of the Bënjë Stream, its right tributary. The landscape has local environmental, social and economic features that depend on the Vjosa River macrosystem and are a significant sample of the richness of the catchment area (see Chapter 2 and § 3.2). For this reason, it is significant to contextualise the project research described in the second part of this volume with respect to the river and its landscapes. This is the case even though it deals specifically with a place in a small village and a minute prefiguration of interventions on a ‘minor’ resource, a path (see § 3.1).

³³ According to Ecomasterplan Balkan (2018), in the Balkan region a quarter of rivers have hydromorphological conditions classified as “near-natural.” In comparison with the rest of Europe, for example, only one tenth of Germany’s rivers can boast the same qualities (see Schiemer *et al.*, 2020).



Figure 1.52



Figure 1.53



Figure 1.54



Figure 1.55



Figure 1.56

Figure 1.52 – The Vjosa River in the Përmet area, with the Nemërçka Mountain Range and the rural villages along the piedmont line between the forests on the steeper slopes and the cultivated fields on the conoids and terraces of the valley floor.

Figure 1.53 – The Vjosa River near Petran, in a section of the riverbed carved into the rock formations of the valley floor.

Figure 1.54 – The landscape of the Vjosa Valley between Petran and Përmet.

Figure 1.55 – The Vjosa River in Përmet.

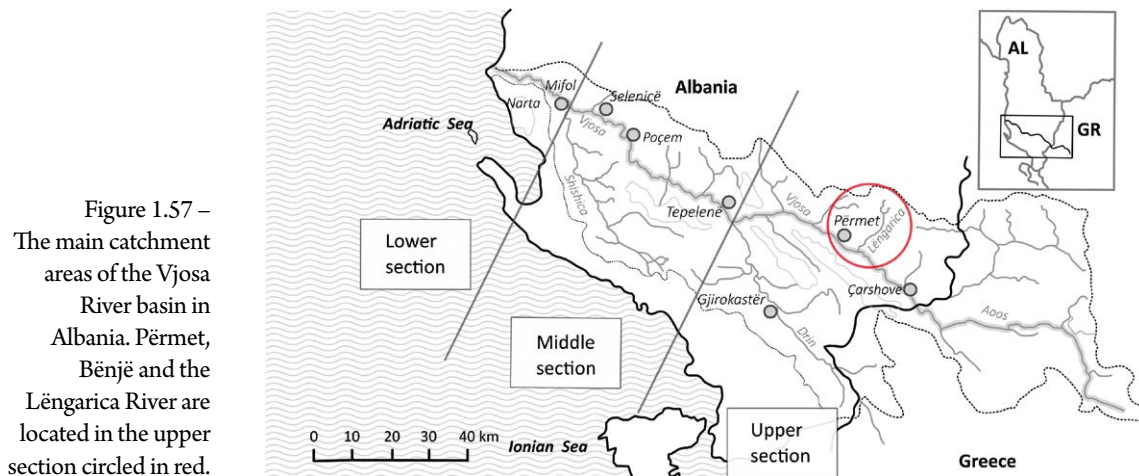
Figure 1.56 – The Lëngarica Valley in the area of Bënjë.

«The Vjosa River and its tributaries can be classified as a gravel-dominated, laterally active, anabranch rivers with high sediment yields, where the bedload supply is higher than the actual transport capacity of the channel. This is reflected, particularly in the middle section of the river in extensive gravel plains up to 2,000 m wide, crossed by several lateral and parallel rivers, oxbows and side channels. Another criterion of laterally active, anabranch gravel bars are specific forms of break-off at high flow velocities, which is reflected in the rapid abandonment of the main river channel during extreme flood events, and the formation of a new, parallel river channels in former floodplains.» (Sovinc, 2021: 3).

Following the course of the main valley, the entire catchment area can be divided into three sectors: high, medium and low. [Fig. 1.57] With respect to this geographical division, the study area is located in the upper part of the catchment area, including the southern territories of Albania.

«The upper section [...] is characterised by a steeper slope of the watershed and a succession of steep gorges between the settlements Përmet, Këlcyra, and Dragot, interspersed with areas of large alluvial fans and islands. Downstream of the Dragot town area, the river valley widens, with the exception of two gorges in the river course: Kalivaci and Pocemi. The middle section of the river, between the towns Selenice and Tepelena, is a typical river floodplain. The middle section is known for the large gravel and sand banks formed by the branching river. The valley is wide, and the floodplains of Vjosa River are recognised as one of the most magnificent riparian ecosystems of the Balkan Peninsula, characterised by their natural, dynamic hydromorphological processes.

[...]. The lower section is characterised by the widening of the Vjosa River and the formation of wide meanders. Between the towns of Fieri and Vlora, the Vjosa River crosses the Myzeqe lowlands and flows towards the Adriatic Sea. The river delta is located north of the Narta Lagoon, where the river reaches the sea.» (Sovinc, 2021: 4).



The physiographic, hydrogeological and hydrological characteristics of the basin are primary factors in the landscape ecologies of the river and its tributaries. Deep aquifers support the ecological flow of the river even during drought periods. The widespread high nature values found in the catchment ecosystems (Wickel & Galaitsi, 2017) also connote the landscapes aesthetically, giving them significant socioeconomic recreational and tourism potential.

In the Vjosa Basin, more than 15 habitat types of priority conservation interest according to the EU Habitats Directive have been identified. In general, different habitat types make river ecosystems important for the conservation of biodiversity. The most significant and represented situations include: calcareous rocky slopes with chasmo-phytic vegetation, *Platanus orientalis* and *Liquidambar orientalis* woods, alluvial forests with *Alnus glutinosa* and *Fraxinus excelsior* and southern riparian galleries and thickets (*Nerio-Tamaricetea* and *Securinegion tinctoriae*)³⁴ (Shumka *et al.*, 2018).

1.2.2 Critical issues

A number of studies that have examined the Vjosa River basin have found various critical issues, despite the fact that it is one of the most interesting areas in Europe due to the high degrees of naturalness of its ecosystems.

According to Shumka *et al.* (2018), the main threats to the native riparian vegetation are deforestation, fires, uncontrolled grazing and subsequent erosion. A systematic analysis of the typology of critical issues was conducted in a recent study prior to the formulation of the proposed establishment of the national park in accordance with IUCN categories (Sovinc, 2021). The broadest range of threats is found in the middle and lower basin, which is to be expected. But the study highlights a complexity of factors, [Tab. 1.2] which also present systemic interactions. Among others, there is one aspect of particular biological relevance for the conservation of river ecosystems and therefore of the naturalistic and ecological interest of the landscapes they belong to. Biological and ecological risks due to invasive alien species are insignificant in the upper and middle basin and unknown in the lower basin. This situation of good biological integrity is attributable to the widespread high degree of naturalness of the ecosystems. However, this strength is threatened by human action. To safeguard the naturalness of the river ecosystems, the spread of plantations of alien plant species from commercial nursery production, which has been found in the middle and lower basin, is inappropriate.

Table 1.2 – The main threats facing river ecosystems in the Vjosa basin landscapes (taken and adapted from Sovinc, 2021:15). LEGEND: ++ very high threat; + high threat; 0 no threat; ? unknown.

THREATS	UPPER SECTION	MIDDLE SECTION	LOWER SECTION	TOTAL
Pollution				++
Solid waste/waste management	++	+	++	
Groundwater pollution	+	++	+	
Water pollution	0	++	++	
Land degradation				++
Industrialisation	0	++	++	
Urbanisation	0	+	++	
Hydromorphological change				+
Small hydropower plants	++	+	++	

³⁴ «Tamarisk, oleander, chaste tree galleries and thickets and similar low ligneous formations of permanent or temporary streams and wetlands of the thermo-Mediterranean zone [...]» (Doug, 2013: 132).

THREATS	UPPER SECTION	MIDDLE SECTION	LOWER SECTION	TOTAL
Land use				+ / ++
Oil dwelling + bitumen excavation and deposits	0	++	0	
Gravel extraction (industrial)	+	++	+	
Stone mining (industrial)	+	0	0	
Water extraction (bottling/industrial)	0	++	++	
Water extraction / irrigation	0	+	++	
Firewood collection	0	0	0	
Poaching	+	+	++	
Plantations of alien commercial species	0	+	+	
Intensification of agriculture (pastures, regular burning), use of chemicals	0	+	++	
Transformation of former forested areas into croplands and pastures	0	++	++	
Tourism development	0	0	++	
Natural factors				+
Riverbank/coastal erosion	0	+	++	
Floods	0	0	+	
Invasive alien species	0	0	?	
Diseases	+	+	0	

The study area of this research is also affected by more environmental critical issues than those identified in Table 1.2.

The lower course of the valley of the Lëngarica River has two stretches with a clear geomorphological distinction. The valley narrows into a canyon of great ecological and scenic interest upstream of the Kadiu Bridge and the thermal springs in its vicinity. [Figs. 1.58 and 1.59] Whereas, the section widens considerably between the bridge and the confluence with the Vjosa at Petran, with gentle slopes on the hydrographic right and slightly steeper ones on the left.

The river ecosystems of these valley segments are impacted by hydraulic transformations for hydroelectric power production. Recent damming and catchment works have been carried out just upstream of the canyon. [Fig. 1.60] The critical impacts of the reservoirs are generally related to the alteration of the natural hydrology of watercourses. Management protocols need to ensure ecological runoff and a time-based distributed release of overflow or maintenance volumes in order not to generate ecosystem shocks. The Albanian company Lëngarica & Energy sh.p.k, a member of the Austrian group *Enso Hydro*, recently monitored the ecological flow from 1.1.2022 to 1.8.2023.³⁵ This essential variable of the landscape's environmental qualities has therefore been formally taken on. However, the observations conducted³⁶ in June 2021 and February 2022 in the lower valley, from the end segment of the canyon, just upstream of the thermal springs, to the confluence with the Vjosa at Petran, suggest that the ecological consequences of changes

³⁵ See < www.enso.at > (2024-01-31).

³⁶ Campaign for the observation of the landscape of the main valley bottom carried out by the author. The aim of this activity is to support the hypothesis of river greenways in the Vjosa basin as a policy of landscape conservation and enhancement, complementary to that of protected areas (see Chapter 4).

in the river's water regime should also be examined by ecological experts. Indeed, it is not sufficient only to conduct water volume measurement campaigns to understand, prevent or manage ecosystem impacts on watercourses and their consequences in terms of the loss of biological diversity and often scenic expressiveness. The plausible critical relevance of climatic factors on a global or at least geographical scale must also be taken into account. In the case of the Mediterranean region, global warming is occurring at speeds and intensities above global averages, which have led climatologists to identify it as a hot-spot to be specifically considered for adaptation needs (IPCC, 2022). As already noted, it is common for intense winter droughts to be added to summer droughts, with serious repercussions on the vegetative recovery of plants. In such a context, the clear trend dynamics make the ecological management of hydropower production even more necessary.



Figure 1.58 –
View of the
Lëngarica Canyon
on the upstream
side.



Figure 1.59 –
Rocky outcrops in
the lower reaches of
the Lëngarica River
upstream of the
Kadiu Bridge.

Figure 1.60 – The middle valley of the Lëngarica River, upstream of the canyon, with the hydraulic works of damming and catchment for power generation.



In the valley of the Bënjë Stream, the most evident and widespread critical issues are related to soil erosion. In unstable rocky debris outcrops, which are also found on slopes with marked gradients, the predominant absence of soil prevents the formation of vegetation cover. This also contributes to making these parts of the slope more vulnerable to the hydrogeological instability.

1.2.3 Opportunities

The multitude of values of the watercourses in the Vjosa River basin has also been formally recognised at political-institutional level with the attribution of the “national park” category, according to the classification of the International Union for Nature Conservation (IUCN). This result was recently achieved due to various scientific evidences (Wickel & Galaitsi, 2017; Shumka *et al.*, 2018; Fontes *et al.*, 2019; Schiemer *et al.* 2020; Sovinc, 2021) and as a result of pressure exerted by international public opinion through multiple cultural initiatives.³⁷ After a preliminary political phase (2021), in the summer of 2022 a memorandum of understanding³⁸ was signed and at the end of that year the *Vjosa Wild River National Park. Vision, Road Map and Feasibility Study* report was published (Greca *et al.*, 2022). In March 2023 the national park was formally established and its operations are therefore now in the start-up phase.

The park’s perimeter strictly refers to the river ecosystems of the Vjosa River course and those of its tributaries (Greca *et al.*, 2022). Although this is formally correct for the type of protected area, it may nevertheless be an overall weakness in the protection and enhancement policies that the park promotes. In fact, other areas of land that have systemic relationships with the Vjosa River and its major tributaries but that are not part of the park or other protected areas may have features of significant natural

³⁷ See footnote 31.

³⁸ «The Ministry of Tourism and Environment (...) is developing a comprehensive plan to enhance the level of protection of the Vjosa River from category IV: Natural Park to the level of the IUCN Category II: National Park, by Law No. 81/2017 “On Protected Areas,” and also following the IUCN protected area standards.» (Greca *et al.*, 2022: 5). See < <https://riverwatch.eu/sites/default/files/FEASIBILITY%20STUDY%20VJOSA.pdf> > (2024-01-31).

interest and ecological, historical and archaeological, scenic and panoramic interest. In such cases, significant economic and social potential coexists with indications of landscape conservation that are in fact necessary conditions for the sustainability of development. However, the typological segmentation of activities found in the preliminary articulation of the park's recreational and tourism policies (Greca *et al.*, 2022), in the absence of a strategy to integrate them, may result in cumulative environmental loads that are unsustainable for river ecosystems, as well as being counterproductive over time for the dynamism of local socioeconomic systems.

In any case, these issues can be adequately dealt with in the planning and operational programming processes that the park managing body will have to develop in order to make protection policies effective. However, it is believed that the sustainable enhancement of the recreational and tourism potential of the landscapes could more effectively contribute to improving the economic and social conditions of the territories if the policies concerning it were not restricted to the direct spatial relevance of watercourses. From this prospective point of view, the national park plan and above all its local strategic and implementation variations could play an important role in promoting agreement among policies and actions integrated with the territories under ordinary governance and with those of existing neighbouring protected areas.

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Fig. 3.39 (*Above*) From https://it.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Golik_Bridge,_Albania_2018_01.jpg (*Bottom*) From https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ponte_di_Mes.

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Fig. 5.1 Reworked by Eni Nurihana from Flink & Searns, 1993.

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The Florence Accessibility Lab



The Florence Accessibility Lab (FAL) is an Interdepartmental Research Unit created in 2013 following more than two decades of research into environmental accessibility and social inclusion (see <https://www.dida.unifi.it/vp-136-fal.html>).

The main goals of the Florence Accessibility Lab are to define, consolidate and promote a new design culture that considers environmental accessibility a great collective resource for human autonomy and well-being in order to make local communities more dynamic, safe and cohesive, exploiting architectural and landscape heritage, as well as for the development of advanced technologies for people. In short, for “Human Development”, as intended by the *United Nation Development Programme*.

The cultural framework of the Florence Accessibility Lab is based on the central role of the human being in habitat transformation processes and on the need for those processes to be guided by in-depth knowledge of socio-economic dynamics and a caring attitude to commons.

The Research Unit takes an interdisciplinary approach to its research and works in a wide range of applied fields: cultural heritage, regeneration of less favoured areas, sustainable tourism, urban security and quality, urban mobility, street furniture, playground, housing adaptation, public buildings. The Florence Accessibility Lab also promotes and organises several kinds of advanced education projects (training and refresher courses, workshops, seminars, summer schools, Master’s courses, etc.).

Since its creation, the Florence Accessibility Lab has hosted Italian and foreign scholars, Ph.D candidates and graduate students, all sharing a research interest in accessibility and disability. At present, the Research Unit is composed of about thirty professors from the University of Florence, belonging to the departments of Architecture (DIDA), Industrial Engineering (DIEF), Economics and Management (DISEI), Political and Social Sciences (DSPS), and Education, Languages, Interculture, Literatures and Psychology (FORLILPSI), and various other research fellows, contributors and consultants from both Italy and abroad.

The Florence Accessibility Lab was the defining model for other accessibility labs created in several Italian universities.

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This book presents the results of research carried out by a work team from the Department of Architecture of the University of Florence, promoted and funded by the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation in the Western Balkans (Tiranë). It focuses on Bënjë, a rural village in the municipality of Përmet, southern Albania. Bënjë is studied and described in relation to the surrounding territory of the upper Vjosa Valley, of the highest landscape value. The research defines a strategy of small interventions aimed at enhancing, in the most respectful way, the natural, architectural and social resources of the area as a lever for a process of sustainable and socially inclusive development, proposing an approach to the revitalisation of rural areas that can be replicated in other similar contexts.

Antonio Lauria is an architect and a full professor of Technological and environmental design of architecture at the University of Florence's Architecture Department. He is the founder and scientific coordinator of *the Florence Accessibility Lab* and editor-in-chief of the *People_Places_Architecture* book series. His research interests are in the field of person-environment interaction in architecture.

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