



Land of Eagles and Castles

*"Integrated Participatory Management for
Albanian Coastal Biodiversity"*

3rd issue

Project Newsletter

THIRD ISSUE PROJECT NEWSLETTER

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PICTURES INSTEAD OF STUFFED ANIMALS



Our team is implementing an awareness-raising campaign “Pictures instead of stuffed animals”, aiming to replace stuffed animals with photos of symbolic species found in Albania. Over the last years, the practice to stuff animals has been reduced progressively, nevertheless one could still witness it in remote areas as a distant memory of a destructive period for the environment and biodiversity.

Following the double transformation from a communist country with a controlled economy to a democratic one adhering to capitalism, Albania has experienced a long turmoil that paved the way towards criminal practices on nature and biodiversity. One of these practices was also the stuffing of animals, used as decoration in bars, restaurants, houses, etc.

Our team, in the framework of the “Land of Eagles and Castles” project, started this campaign initially in Vjose - Narte Protected Landscape, an important area for migratory birds along the Adriatic Flyway, replacing a large number of stuffed animals with stamped photos of species found in this region. Since this campaign has been gladly accepted by most of the local stakeholders, we expanded the efforts to other areas, such as Orikum and, nowadays, at Drino Valley, the home of the Egyptian vulture!

In a village inside Drino Valley, which is also an Egyptian vulture territory, we signaled the presence of a stuffed Eurasian eagle-owl (*Bubo bubo*), Grey heron (*Ardea cinerea*), and European pine marten (*Martes foina*), exposed in the premises of the only bar found there.

PICTURES INSTEAD OF STUFFED ANIMALS



Left at a corner, these objects represented the terrible years of the Albanian transition, a time when there was no respect for the environment. No one looked anymore with curiosity at these stuffed species, nevertheless, they were left there, for a long time now.

The owners accepted our offer for replacing them with stamped photos of magnificent species, such as the Egyptian vulture. In addition, they expressed their will to join the 'Savers of Egyptian Vulture Network' and help us in our raising awareness efforts.

Additionally, we identified two other restaurants in the region that expose inside their premises stuffed animals. Just as in the previous case, the owners were excited to replace them. Our team is certain that this is fundamentally a matter of awareness.

Our alternative will offer a continuous source of joy to locals, who will see the lively silhouettes of these magnificent species hanged in their walls, unlike the other option of hunting down and trying to preserve their wonderful image undamaged, which never happens.

Furthermore, having these photographs will increase the love of locals towards such symbol species of their regions, being a source of pride instead of hunting subjects targeted for killings.

Our organization hopes that this campaign will erase the stuffing of animals phenomenon and, furthermore, will contribute to building strong ties among the local communities and symbol species found around them, helping the cause of nature conservation in Albania.

KEEPING ALIVE THE RECYCLING TRADITION



The lovely students and dedicated teachers of the 9 Tetori School in Saranda continue the plastic waste recycling initiative. Such an activity was firstly encouraged by our team in the framework of the project "Land of Eagles and Castles". That's why we are happy to see it becoming a major education achievement, serving as a model worth following by other educational institutions in Albania.

It is crucial for the new generations to be aware of plastic pollution. For this reason, the implementation of such initiatives, besides informing, helps also in increasing children's enthusiasm towards the environment.

The children worked hard to prepare for the exhibition. They spent hours to collect plastic waste around the beautiful city of Saranda and changed them into creative objects serving different purposes.

We are proud that, in a way or another, we have managed to boost the implementation of an activity loved by the children, which also has a crucial social and education function, that of raising awareness towards the environment.

The recycling initiative has filled us with joy, because we feel stronger than ever for working with children and stimulating them to do great things. Of course, a part of the merit goes to the dedicated teachers who work alongside us and try to implement every educational framework we constantly provide to them.

Our team wants to thank all the children and teachers who are keeping alive this wonderful tradition. We can't wait to see their next exhibition.

BREEDING BIRDS IN VJOSA RIVERINE HABITATS



Charadrius dubius
© M. Topi

Vjosa, the last wild river of Europe, represents one of the greatest river landscapes in Albania, with a rich biodiversity and other natural values. For this reason, in 2016, thanks to a process coordinated by PPNEA in a national level, this area was internationally recognized as a Key Biodiversity Area (KBA).

Nevertheless, Vjosa same as other KBAs in Albania, up to a few weeks ago, was constantly threatened by the construction of dams, which, if implemented, would have destroyed all the biodiversity values of the area. Hopefully, the Albanian government took a step back from these plans, which is a victory for nature conservationists in Albania.

In order to give our scientific contribution for proving the importance of Vjosa riverine habitats to a large number of bird species, we conducted a breeding birds study in the area, the results of which were made public by PPNEA.

Results confirmed as nesting species:

- The Stone Curlew (*Burhinus michahellis*)
- The Little Ringed Plover (*Charadrius dubius*)
- (Yellow-legged Gull (*Larus michaellis*))
- Black-winged Stilt (*Himantopus himantopus*) was recorded as possible breeder.

Vjosa represents a unique habitat found in Albania, that is why we need to protect it from every unsustainable plan near its territory.

The local community strongly opposed the construction of dams, which resulted in the cancellation of these plans by the Albanian authorities.

Now, our countless and beautiful bird species can live undisturbed in their wild home.

BREEDING OF PIED AVOCET IN VJOSE - NARTE



© Z. Vorpsi / PPNEA

As part of the breeding birds inventory work in Vjose - Narte Protected Landscape, PPNEA has carried out an exhaustive monitoring in some of the habitats and for some of the species within this area.

One of the habitats in which this methodological approach was conducted is the saline area, where all the waterbird species were monitored. If you are interested to read about the Pied avocet (*Recurvirostra avosetta*) population in Vjose - Narte, read the results below.

Around 495 - 525 nesting pairs were counted in the saline area. During this breeding season, the first eggs were laid at the end of April, while the first birds hatched around the 28th of May. However, in a significant number of nests, the incubation lasted until close to the 3rd week of June, while in a few nests it lasted even longer.

Vjose - Narte Protected Landscape is the only place in Albania where Pied avocet nests in a relatively high number, which constitutes approximately 1% of the European population of this species.

Furthermore, the Pied avocet has been reported as breeding, or potentially breeding in Divjakë-Karavasta National Park, where it is present with a low number of pairs.

These data show once again the importance of Vjose - Narte Protected Landscape as a key area for biodiversity, not only in Albania but worldwide.

This monitoring work was made possible thanks to the support of the "Land of Eagles and Castles" project, funded by Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund.

LITTLE TERN POPULATION IN VJOSE-NARTE



The amazing Vjose - Narte is important to a large number of bird species, whether migratory across the Adriatic flyway or breeding ones. These bird species find in Vjose - Narte a perfect habitat to shelter, rest and reproduce.

Our team has conducted a strict scientific research regarding the fluctuations of bird populations on this unique habitat, which represents one of the most Important Bird Area (IBA) in Albania.

In Vjose - Narte we inventoried the population of little tern (*Sternula albifrons*), the results of which surprised us.

According to the data generated from the monitoring work carried on along this breeding season, the population of little tern was 230 - 280 breeding pairs, or around 1% of the European population of this species.

From our previous data, in 2015 the population of this species into Vjose - Narte Protected Landscape was 377 - 400 breeding pairs.

While we are analyzing the causes of this change, we can certainly say that maximal efforts are needed for the preservation of this area, in order for it to continue being a home to a considerable number of bird species.

THE MEDITERRANEAN MONK SEAL



The Mediterranean monk seal (*Monachus monachus*) is one of the rare species in the world. This wonderful creature represents, probably, the most endangered marine mammal on the entire planet.

We are glad that such a wonderful species is also present in Albania. Our team, since 2018, is working intensively to protect its population and ensure the right conditions for it to shelter and reproduce in the marine caves along the Albanian coastline.

We have also created a local network of informers, who immediately inform us whenever they see an individual of this species in the open waters of Albania. This group is crucial for raising awareness in the local level and helping us implementing several educational and communications campaigns.

From the beginning of July, up until the last days of December, we have been informed about three sights of the monk seal, two of which were recorded by locals through their mobile phones.

Our team is constantly working to identify the potential habitats in the Albanian coast used by this species for shelter and reproducing.

The presence of the monk seal in our coastline makes us proud and, furthermore, motivates us to do our best for protecting the marine ecosystems, which represent a natural treasure for Albania.

We want to thank all our supporters, who care about the Mediterranean monk seal, giving all of us a wonderful example to follow.

NATURA 2000 SITES IN VJOSE

- NARTE - PISHE - PORO



Vjose - Narte is a rare and important ecosystem not only to birds, but even to small and medium size mammals, such as the Eurasian otter and the golden jackal.

This rare wonder of nature is a perfect place for these species to shelter, find food, or even reproduce.

In the framework of identifying potential Natura 2000 sites within Vjosë-Nartë-Pishë Poro ecosystem, PPNEA and RAPA Vlorë organized an expedition in order to gather data regarding the presence of Eurasian otter (*Lutra lutra*) and golden jackal (*Canis aureus*), which are both part of the European Directive of Habitats.

We focused our monitoring work to the south side of the protected area, including the Narta lagoon and the village of Akërne.

Through this expedition our research group managed to gather secondary data about the presence of Eurasian otter in the area, like scats, tracks and remained food. Furthermore we encountered even the tracks of a golden jackal.

Locals provided us important information regarding the presence of wolves into the area, a fact that was proved latter by our team when we found a road killed individual.

This activity was financed by the European Union and EuroNatur Foundation.

SAFE FOOD FOR THE EGYPTIAN VULTURE



Close collaboration with RAPA Gjirokaster is crucial for the implementation of the Egyptian Vulture New LIFE Project, especially in activities such as the maintenance of supplementary feeding stations and tackling of poisoning cases.

For this reason, PPNEA donated two freezers to the Regional Administration of Protected Areas Gjirokaster, which will help the conservation of safe food for both supplementary feeding stations situated in southern Albania.

Since the poisoning cases are a threat on the entire Balkan Peninsula, in order to mitigate this phenomenon, the so-called “vulture-restaurants” built by PPNEA in the southern part of Albania are furnished regularly with safe food by the Savers of Egyptian Vulture Network.

Besides freezers, PPNEA in collaboration with the Veterinary Service has prepared and distributed several anti-poison kits to shepherds close to the Egyptian Vulture territories.

Our second supplementary feeding station was financed by the "Land of Eagles and Castles" project, giving us the opportunity to prevent the poison cases in Kurvelesh region.

Our two supplementary feeding stations have been regularly visited by the Egyptian Vulture, making us happy and optimistic for the future of this magnificent species.

RED-FOOTED FALCON ROOSTING SITE DISCOVERED IN ALBANIA



There are no boring days for nature conservationist. When it comes to monitor different bird species, a lot of surprises come on a daily basis.

One of this cases was the discovery of the first roosting site of the red-footed Falcon (*Falco vespertinus*) in Albania. We came across this discovery on a monitoring initiative focused on different birds of prey found in our country.

The red-footed falcon is an Afrotropic and Palearctic bird. It winters in the southern part of the African continent and nests in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. In our country it is transient and to our knowledge has not yet been reported as breeding, although it has been reported in our neighboring country, Montenegro.

This species carries the status of "Near Threatened" (NT) globally, because its global population, and especially the European one, has suffered a significant decline since 1970. The main threats that have caused this situation are the changes in habitat and loss of the nesting sites.

The roost of the red-footed falcon was located in the Lushnja area and was monitored for 2 consecutive days by our working group. A number of 15-17 individuals of this species were encountered regularly in this roost.

We are happy for this discovery, which will enhance the monitoring efforts for finding other similar roosts across Albania.

AGAINST THE AIRPORT IN VJOSE - NARTE



Vjose - Narte Protected Landscape is a heaven for migratory birds across the Adriatic flyway. Although in Albania one can find a large number of wetlands which serve as home and resting sites for different bird species, they cannot be compared to this particular habitat.

In order to preserve the natural values of Vjose - Narte, this area, in 2004, has been included in the list of protected areas of Albania. But, despite of its protected status, the Albanian government since 2018 is planning to build an airport within its territory.

Faced with such unsustainable plans, PPNEA is leading the way of opposition against the construction of the airport within the protected area. We have undertaken several concrete actions and tried to raise awareness regarding the destructive impact such an infrastructure would cause to the biodiversity values of Vjose - Narte.

In the timeframe of this newsletter we have carried on the following actions:

- Expedition with media representatives in the exact territory chosen for building the airport.
- Created an advocacy strategy for protecting the area.
- Caught the EU Commission attention regarding this case.
- Started the work for creating an awareness raising video about the importance of the area.
- Drafted an open letter with partner organizations for opposing the construction of the airport.

We know that it will not be easy an easy fight, but our team is prepared to protect this unique area for the generations to come and for the hundreds of migratory birds which depend on this ecosystem.

AGAINST THE AIRPORT IN VJOSE - NARTE



When we organized the expedition with media representatives in Vjose - Narte, we were shocked to see that even the journalists were disinformed regarding the actual site chosen for the construction of the airport. That is why we are struggling to spread the actual facts of this plan, until it is not too late.

One fundamental aspect of this fight is constituted on a discursive level. The airport is being framed as development, while we all know that such developmental plans cannot be implemented inside the protected areas. We need to show the local community that this is not the right kind of development they need. Vjose - Narte is a perfect location for eco and agro tourism and we have funded there an entrepreneurial model for the locals to follow.

Even the EU Commission report for Albania, published on the 6th of October 2020, highlighted that:

"The legislation on strategic investment raises concerns for the protection of biodiversity, as it may allow large tourism and industrial investments in protected areas, e.g. the proposed airport in the Vjosa-Narta area. This conflicts with other national laws and with international biodiversity protection conventions that Albania has ratified".

PPNEA, together with partner organizations, is finishing an open letter directed to the Prime Minister of Albania, Mr. Edi Rama. We aim to boost the post as much as possible in order for anyone to get informed regarding these destructing plans for Vjose - Narte Protected Landscape.

If you want to join our cause, contact us at contact@ppnea.org and give your contribution for conserving a unique habitat in Albania.

Thank you!



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