

FY21 Annual Report: WWF Adria

1. CONSERVATION IMPACT

The eight countries of the Western Balkans are a treasure trove of biological diversity and immense natural values; charismatic wildlife, breath-taking forest landscapes and seascapes, yet-unexplored karst underground, free flowing rivers and wetlands weave a mosaic of important ecosystems that also serve the health and well-being of people.

Socio-economically, the region is in a state of development. Acceptance of rights and responsibilities associated with a democracy has yet to fully permeate our societies; duty bearers need to improve transparency and inclusiveness of their decision making models, and rights holders, especially local communities, must rise to the challenge of proactive participation in those processes. Sustainable development principles need to be fully internalized in the approaches to natural resources management and economic and infrastructure development, so as to ensure that impacts on the environment and nature are avoided or minimized to acceptable levels.

In order to tackle those challenges, and successfully deliver on the global mission of WWF to build healthy and resilient ecosystems while also improving the quality of life, WWF Adria's work is arranged around four pillars designed to i) protect and restore biodiversity, ii) create equitable and transparent natural resources governance models, iii) facilitate transformation of businesses towards sustainability, and iv) grow and empower conservation constituency. We do this by implementing active conservation measures, co-developing solutions with all relevant stakeholders, undertaking advocacy and awareness raising campaigns.

Through the passionate and ambitious work of our entire team, in this year WWF Adria successfully continued towards achieving our mission in relation to conservation of seas, fresh water, protected areas and wildlife, as well as addressing climate change and unsustainable consumption.

Goal 1: Key species, habitats and ecosystems are protected and recovering

WWF Adria's work on conserving species saw significant steps forwards through both implementation of specific conservation measures, as well as developing much need knowledge.

We continued our efforts on improving coexistence of people and large carnivores on several levels, from direct stakeholder engagement and promotion of damage prevention measures to actively following the development of strategic documents and ensuing that public funding for damage prevention measures will be available and more easily accessible in the period that follows. By closely monitoring the public calls for damage prevention measures we noticed that one important group of stakeholders wasn't eligible for electric fences subsidies – the beekeepers. We managed to convince the Croatian Ministry of Agriculture to amend the documentation and

thus enable the beekeepers to apply for EU funded subsidies and better protect their hives from bears. With a view to contribute to protection wolf, lynx and bear, WWF Adria participated in developing and implementing practical measures for relevant species and their habitat conservation, including: i) one farm demonstrating good practice for coexistence with large carnivores, ii) putting up electric fences for beehives and around farms, iii) acquiring shepherd dogs for protection from large carnivores, iv) installing active signaling on roads, v) developing visitor management guidelines in Natura 2000 sites with measures to tourism/anthropogenic pressure, and vi) building and putting into operation a sanctuary/rescue center for lynx orphans cubs.

In Croatia and Slovenia, WWF Adria continued efforts on developing species management plans, including preparation of transboundary Protocol for harmonization of wolf and lynx population management and monitoring, inclusion of recommendations into national wolf and lynx management plans, and preparation of long-term goals and further transboundary cooperation on large carnivore management. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, we started a new initiative (Dinalpconnect) to prevent further habitat fragmentation in the Adriatic-Ionian area, as well as to improve ecological connectivity between Natura 2000 sites and protected areas of transnational importance. Combining analytical results with expert knowledge exchange, the Dinalpconnect will deliver a Strategy for ecological connectivity throughout Dinaric Mountains connecting them with the Alps. Joint action plans for each Pilot region will be based on guidelines for agricultural and forestry practices protecting biodiversity. Action plan for Croatia-Bosnia and Herzegovina Pilot region will be focused on two species: Brown bear (*Ursus arctos*) and meadow viper (*Vipera ursinii*). Experts will define measures for the ecological connectivity for brown bear and meadow viper.

WWF Adria's work on protecting endemic fish species of the Adriatic karst focused on 7 endemic and steno endemic fish species in the area from Livanjsko polje to Popovo polje in Bosnia and Herzegovina. These endemic species are specific for karstic conditions where in the wintertime temporary lakes are formed and, in the summertime, they dry out. In the dry summers, these well-adjusted fishes migrate to the underground or hibernate. The species are all critically endangered and under severe pressures of big hydropower plants, some of which were built in the 1970s, some in the 2000s and some are currently under construction. Big hydropower plants do not take these species into consideration in the maintenance of accumulations, canals for hydropower systems or providing ecologically accepted water flows. Predatory species are introduced in accumulations and the endemic species are also being poached out since they are considered as traditional food (nowadays as slow food) and their price skyrocket once the hydropower plants decrease their populations by diminishing their habitats. The behavior of these endemic fish species is not well known so WWF Adria is examining the behavior, migration, population sizes, mapping their current locations and proposing measures to revitalize and conserve these very important species that are also the national heritage of locals in the area.

The analysis of new and existing Local Ecological Knowledge (LEK) on Angel Sharks (*Squatina squatina*) in the Adriatic Sea conducted in 2020, allowed fishers and divers along the Croatian coast to record their interactions with angel sharks. Georeferenced occurrence data collected through the study revealed a previously unknown *S. squatina* hotspot in the Molat Island

archipelago. Both adult and juvenile *S. squatina* records were identified, suggesting that the area may be used as a nursery ground. This remarkable discovery suggested that this might be the last remaining population of these top marine predators in the Adriatic and one of the few remaining in the world. Our efforts are now directed to provide recommendations for spatial use of the area and bycatch risk assessments in dependence of different fishing gears. The first field work activities in the area were organized in June 2021 to detect in situ presence of Angel Shark and conduct bottom habitat mapping with the aim to prepare the scientific and technical baseline for the establishment of the fishery restricted area (FRA) or no take zone (NTZ). Although no Angel Shark were detected by visual census, the presence of other Elasmobranch species was high, especially juveniles indicating the high value of the area as a breeding ground for sharks and rays. Following activities in the area will consist of strengthening citizen science data collection with fishers, divers and coastal communities, conducting systematic environmental DNA (eDNA) sampling to confirm hotspots and continuation of the visual underwater surveys via scuba diving and/or snorkeling.

The Covid-19 pandemic revealed a vulnerability of protected areas (PAs) that rely primarily on tourism for their income – lockdowns and travel restrictions significantly reduced their budgets, putting into questions their operations. This was additionally aggravated when the governments, in response to the pandemic, redirected funding to the public health sector. Protected areas which already operate with insufficient budgets, were put in an even more difficult position. Thus, at the end of December 2020, WWF Adria and the Parks Dinarides Association organized one of the first online webinars on the topic of Covid-19 effects on protected areas, with participants from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Slovenia. Based on the inputs gathered on this event, the report [“Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on protected areas in the Dinarides region”](#) was published, outlining many indicators of the direct impact of the pandemic on PAs. The report calls for systematic investments by the governments of the Western Balkans countries to support the functioning of protected areas as key tool for protecting biodiversity and conserving ecosystems. Findings from this report were used in further advocacy work and for defining communication messages.

[New Protected Area in North Macedonia - Shar Mountains](#)

For the first time in history, a protected area was placed under temporary protection before the official proclamation process was completed so that natural heritage is protected from destruction. In July, Shar Mountain was proclaimed a national park Category II. WWF Adria supported the process last year, signing a MoU with the Ministry of environment protection to raise awareness about the benefits of the proclamation), and working with experts on the zoning and allowed activities in the park. We also sent a letter to the Prime Minister asking for immediate proclamation of Shar Mountain and stopping of small hydro projects there.

Goal 2: Good governance systems are in place that enable sustainable management and use of natural resources

At the beginning of the pandemic [WWF Adria issued a statement](#) directed to the governments of the Western Balkan countries, urging them to postpone any decision making, unless related to health and safety of the citizens, if meaningful transparency and participation could not be secured. The statement was in response to the trend that started emerging of adopting laws through 'urgent procedure', even when it wasn't necessary, and without any public discussions, that had been canceled under explanation that they were not in compliance with Covid-19 safety measures. Unfortunately, such practice continued throughout the pandemic in all countries, with laws about nature protection also being targeted, thus warranting WWF Adria's engagement.

In North Macedonia, [Eko-svest and WWF Adria](#), supported by 20+ organizations, sent a letter to the President of North Macedonia asking not to sign the controversial law for legalization of illegal buildings, which the Parliament passed without public consultation or debate. The law, if approved, would have created significant problems for the protected areas where illegal buildings and objects are threatening the wildlife and habitats. As a result of this public pressure, the President refused to sign the law and returned it to the Parliament, after which a wide public debate was organized.

In Kosovo, the Municipality of Prishtina was planning to develop an Adventure Park within Germia Protected Landscape. WWF Adria worked with local organizations from Pristina and submitted concerns about the location of the project, the process of planning and transparency, public hearing, and compliance with relevant legislation to the court. The court suspended the planned illegal construction of Adventure Park in the first zone of protection in Germia.

In Serbia, [National park Đerdap](#) was also under threat because of the intentions of Majdanpek Municipality to adopt a new Detailed Urban Development Plan (DUP) for "Archaeological site – Lepenski vir", situated in the Đerdap National Park along the Danube's Iron Gate. The plan was to build a new docking station on the river, with accompanying tourist objects. Development of such a project would directly impact the Danube River and its shore, as well as adjacent habitats which are under 1st and 2nd zone of protection within the National Park. Coalition 27, RERI and WWF Adria sent comments on the Detailed Regulation Plan to the Municipality of Majdanpek, emphasizing that the document ignored the nature protection legislation, demanding suspension of the procedure due to the procedural violation. We requested that a new procedure be initiated in accordance with the legal regulations of the Republic of Serbia. The plan has been changed due to our reaction, with some problematic elements being removed (e.g. pool, apartments...); however, the port, as the biggest threat, for which the funds have been already allocated in the state budget, despite no permits or adequate zoning documentation, has remained in the plan.

In Montenegro, the established cooperation of the WWF with the Montenegrin authorities has resulted in the formation of a working group (WG) for the revision of concession agreements for small hydropower plants (sHPPs) in January 2021. WWF provided a legal expert to support the work of WG hence having a direct impact on decision making. As a result of WG work, in April 2021, the Government of Montenegro cancelled the construction of sHPPs on three rivers in the north part of Montenegro – Vranještica, Murinska and Komarača rivers. The WG is still active, and the termination of other concession agreements are expected. Also, the Government made

the decision to permanently stop issuing new concessions for sHPPs on Montenegrin Rivers which means that no new incentives will be awarded to investors. On the initiative of WWF Adria and several local organizations, the new Rule Book on environmentally acceptable flow (e-flow) was adopted by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management of Montenegro. In accordance with the new Rulebook, water users will have the obligation to conduct continuous monitoring of e-flow, and the obligation to submit monthly monitoring data to the competent authorities thus significantly helping sustainable river management in Montenegro. We increased our engagement in setting up durable river protection mechanisms (DRPM), which we had started in the previous year. So, in Montenegro, the Municipality of Pljevlja has started the legal procedure for the protection of the upper part of river Čehotina on the initiative of WWF Adria and local environmental organizations from Montenegro and with the support of The Nature Conservancy. In Bosnia and Herzegovina the main action of WWF Adria has been the direct involvement of in drafting secondary legislation to the recently adopted Law on Environmental Protection. At the request of the Federal Ministry for Environmental Protection, WWF engaged a legal expert, who prepared draft bylaws in close collaboration with WWF Adria staff. The Federal Government adopted two bylaws prepared under this activity. Additionally, WWF strongly advocated for changes of two laws regulating the “energy sector”, but relevant for reducing the negative environmental impact of sHPPs. The main goal of this work is to stop further issuing of energy permits, consequently, stopping further construction of sHPPs. Finally, WWF Adria has been actively engaged in the process of the Environmental Strategy development through participating in the 3 working groups (nature protection, environmental management, and management of water resources). Finalization of this process is expected in the first half of 2022.

In Croatia, new fishery management plans were enacted in Telascica and Lastovo Islands nature parks through the work of co-management committees established by WWF Adria in the framework of the small-scale fisheries project. This saw coming into effect of the first fishing no take zones ever in Croatia to be agreed with fishers, together with a number of additional measures that reduce the fishing effort (beach seines and all active gear removed, gears reduced in length and numbers). It is a small but vital step toward small scale fishing sustainability in Croatia. Furthermore, through genetic research conducted on Norwegian lobsters (*Nephrops norvegicus*) we have proven that in the Adriatic there is more than one separate population of this species which has a crucial consequence for the governance of the fisheries. So far it was believed that all members of the specie belonged to the single Adriatic population and therefore the management measures were approached in the same fashion. Now we have the baseline to change this approach and to promote Norwegian lobster fisheries that are keeping the populations within the sustainable yield such as those that use traps which are non-invasive tools as opposed to bottom trawling.

Collaboration with investigative journalists was an important part of our advocacy work, especially during pandemic when access to the information was additionally narrowed. Their stories were published in Serbia, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia, with the intent to draw more attention of the public and the decision makers to the challenges linked to natural resource management.

In Serbia, Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) published the first story about National Park Đerdap. In addition to highlighting the non-transparent procedures, the story showed how our pressure through comments on Detailed Urban Development Plan and journalist's investigation made a pressure for the plan to be changed and less infrastructure is now planned for construction.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Center for Investigative journalism (CIN) published two stories:

- [Authorities Gloss Over Legality of Viewpoint Restaurant](#) is the story about illegal construction of the commercial catering establishment "Vidikovac" on Mount Trebević, a protected area in Sarajevo Canton. The case is currently under investigation by the Cantonal Prosecutor's Office in Sarajevo.
- [Protected Areas Without Protection](#) analyses the overall management of protected areas in Bosnia and Herzegovina, showing how uncontrolled commercial exploitation, private interests and the lack of the Government preservation efforts have endangered natural heritage sites in the country. This story received an award from the Association "Center for Media Development and Analysis", for the best journalistic research on corruption in 2020/2021.

WWF Adria has continued collaborating with and supporting the work of 'Coalitions 27', informal networks of civil society organizations that monitoring the progress of countries' EU approximation processes as it relates to Environment and Climate change chapter. In September 2020, the first Shadow Report in Bosnia and Herzegovina was published. This Report has been prepared by the „Partnership 27" and it shows the actual state of environmental laws in Bosnia and Herzegovina, regarding regulations within the framework of European integration, with a focus on Chapter 27 – Environment and Climate change. It covers: Horizontal issues, Water sector, Air quality and Climate changes, Industrial pollution and Nature protection. The report and Partnership 27 is based on the experience of Coalition 27 in Serbia, which was established in 2014 and WWF is its member from the start. Coalition 27 also exists in Montenegro. Similar Coalitions are also developing in Kosovo and North Macedonia, with aim to have regional cooperation between them, since the countries share a similar framework and challenges in nature conservation and orientation towards the European Union.

Goal 3: Business practices are transformed towards sustainability and corporate and social responsibility

In the frame of the Small Scale Fisheries project in Croatia, WWF Adria started the process of establishment of 2 small scale fishers cooperatives, in Lastovo island and Velebit channel. The aim of this initiative is to support development of sustainable small scale fisheries that benefit from the market while reducing fishing effort and transforming the fisheries towards sustainability. This is the outcome of 3 year engagement and trust building with fishers in these areas. Final goal is to have well organized cooperatives that take sustainable catches to the premium market that recognizes and supports such organizations.

Several freshwater areas of high environmental interest critically damaged by activities of the private sector have been identified for the potential implementation of bankable water solutions. Wetlands, and more especially peatland areas, have been established as the main target due to their high environmental values and services - in terms of biodiversity and climate change mitigation and adaptation. WWF Adria, in collaboration with WWF Netherlands, identified a pilot site for the implementation of a specific and challenging bankable project: restoration of the peatlands of Hutovo Blato (1488 ha) through carbon crediting, with a potential extension of the project in the Adriatic peatlands of Bosnia and Herzegovina (app. 12,000 ha). In addition, the integration of this project for the restoration of Hutovo Blato in the MERLIN project (Horizon 2020), as one case study among 17 distributed all over Europe, is ensuring the financing of the implementation of the main restoration measures on the field (restoration of specific habitats, fish stocks and birdlife in key areas), keeping in mind that the key component to ensure successful restoration and conservation of the site will be the restoration of close-to-nature hydrological conditions, to be negotiated with the local hydropower company. The 4-year MERLIN project also encompasses an upscaling phase, which will enable the extension of restoration activities, potentially through carbon-crediting or other bankable projects, at the national and regional levels.

Goal 4: Civil society is educated and empowered to engage in environmental stewardship and decision making

WWF Adria continued strong efforts in building up the capacity of the civil society across the region through three main directions: i) providing financial support, ii) providing trainings, and iii) education.

Through the [Small Grants Program](#), we supported 10 organizations from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo and North Macedonia, to contribute to protection and conservation of PAs in our region, also by improving the monitoring of unsustainable activities in and around PAs. The interest for the support program was significant, with 58 applications being received. [Parks Dinarides Grant selected 7 projects under their Grant Program for Protected areas](#), with goal to improve relations and dialogue between the Association and their local communities and build partnerships at the local and regional level.

Capacity building of CSOs centered on protected areas and river protection. In relation to the former, WWF Adria gathered 33 organizations from 4 countries (6 Serbia, 11 BiH, 11 Kosovo, 5 North Macedonia) in a training aiming to improve participants' capacity to design programs for conservation in protected areas while using a human-rights based approach, and to improve their knowledge and understanding on PA topics and policy processes, as well as illegal and unsustainable practices in PAs. Among 33 organizations were the grantees from the Small Grants Program and additional organizations that we recognized as potential partners for future activities. This included both environmental and non-environmental organizations that have interest and potential to work on specific protected areas in their communities. In the case of river protection, WWF Adria supported local initiatives in Croatia, Montenegro, BiH, Serbia and Albania to fight against unsustainable river infrastructure and promote durable river protection, by providing legal

support, logistical support, advice, facilitating meetings with decision makers, and increasing their visibility directly and as case studies in our policy work.

WWF Adria implemented a regional social media/digital campaign #LosingRivers, with the goal of raising awareness of audiences in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia to small hydropower issues. Over three weeks in October 2020, our messages on the dangers of small hydro development appeared on more than 8 million screens, engaging almost one million people. By utilizing peoples' loss aversion, a well-known cognitive bias, we created a campaign that made people aware of what is at stake if we allow the proliferation of small hydropower plants to continue. Adding humour to the campaign increased the reception of the messages. The success of the campaign was also recognized by professionals at the IdejaX advertising festival, declaring it the Best Regional Social Action Campaign in 2020 by awarding it a silver medal.

Implementing education activities was especially challenging during the pandemic, since the educational system shifted online, leaving teachers overwhelmed with adapting the program to online lessons. Moreover, lockdowns prevented field work disrupting our concept of 'learning about nature in nature', requiring WWF Adria to adapt the Nature Academy for online setting as well. Having successfully overcome those challenges, the Nature Academy now has 10 new schools that became Ambassadors to their Protected Areas. Around 118 students actively participated in our program and around 30 teachers supported their project implementation. In order to enable sustainability of environmental education, WWF Adria organized trainings for 32 educators from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia with the aim to improve their knowledge and skills and empower them to independently implement activities in the field of environmental education, nature preservation and protection.

2. ADAPTING TO EXTERNAL CIRCUMSTANCES

Covid-19 pandemic, fortunately, did not lead to significant negative impacts to our work, as we were able to adjust implementation of our ongoing initiatives to ensure continuity, such as transferring to virtual setting or implementing actions in a different order (e.g. postponing workshops until in-person gatherings will be possible and instead focusing on desk research and analyses). However, if travel and gatherings restrictions continue in the next year, the disruption to our work – which rests on in-person engagement with local communities and stakeholders – will be more difficult to absorb.

3. TOGETHER POSSIBLE

WWF Adria is an office of the WWF Network. Our work is designed to support delivery of our Network's global goals and we are actively contributing to successful implementation of several joint initiatives:

- With WWF Austria and WWF Central and Eastern Europe, we are working to declare Mura-Drava-Danube as the first five-country UNESCO biosphere reserve, and secure sustainable management of that transboundary protected area.
- As a member of the Living European Rivers (LER) Initiative, WWF Adria is spearheading the work on minimizing and eliminating impacts of hydropower on rivers and wetlands. LER is a pan-European effort aiming to deliver measurable conservation and restoration of freshwater ecosystems and biodiversity.
- Mediterranean Marine Initiative (MMI) is a joint effort of Mediterranean offices of WWF to secure long-term conservation and recovery of this invaluable ecosystem. WWF Adria is a member benefitting from pan-Mediterranean scale of work and funding, as well as contributing conservation results and success stories from the field.

Many WWF offices have recognized us as a trusted partner, able to deliver on highly complex issues. These offices extend their support to WWF Adria as advisers, funders, project partners and capacity builders: WWF Austria (TBR MDD, fisheries); WWF Japan (fisheries), WWF Sweden (protected areas governance), WWF Netherlands (freshwater conservation and restoration), WWF Switzerland (freshwater ecosystems restoration). We are committed to maintaining and growing these partnerships, as a way to harness the power of WWF Network and bring the latest knowledge and most advanced solutions to our region.

Still, our interest first and foremost lies in anchoring WWF Adria in the Western Balkan societies as a dependable, inclusive and transparent partner. Only through collaboration with others can we ensure that our work resonates across the society and delivers meaningful solutions in the context of our region. These partnerships include an array of organizations, from grassroots civil initiatives and local NGOs across eight countries, to NGO coalitions in various countries and other international NGOs present in our region (e.g. EuroNatur, Bankwatch, The Nature Conservancy), to other institutions relevant for implementation of our conservation goals (e.g. universities and research institutions).

4. FUNDRAISING

In this year we started to implement 5 new projects with a cumulative total budget for WWF Adria of around 800.000 EUR. Some of these projects were a continuation of previous work, enabling us to build on the great progress already underway in freshwater conservation and natural resource governance. Others helped us open new topics, such as wildlife crime in Croatia, BiH and Serbia, and empowerment on climate change in Croatia and Slovenia.

During the year we were also busy with developing original project proposals, of which 4 have been approved to start implementation in the next fiscal year:

- 'MERLIN' was submitted to Horizon European Green Deal call, and is a joint effort of many partners across Europe designed around demonstration, optimization, upscaling and transformation of restoration of all types of freshwater-related ecosystems (wetlands

including peatlands, floodplains, water bodies). The project foresees 17 case studies, and one of those is in Bosnia and Herzegovina. WWF Adria's budget for this 4-year action is 800.000 EUR.

- 'Panda Labs for Climate and Energy' was submitted to EUKI as a joint partnership of 5 organizations and under leadership of WWF Bulgaria. The aim of the project is to, based on Design Thinking methodology and rapid prototype testing, create a bridge between generations and use the enthusiasm and "out of the box" thinking of young people to provide innovative and brave solutions in the framework of Just Transition. WWF Adria will be implementing this 2-year project in Serbia for the budget of 125.000 EUR.
- 'FishMPABlue2Plus' project is seeking to expand the approach to sustainably manage Small Scale Fisheries in Mediterranean MPAs (i.e. "SSF governance toolkit" and related environmental-socio-economic monitoring methodology) and increase the capacities of 10 Mediterranean MPAs in its implementation. This InterregMed funded project will last 13 months and for our work in Croatia we are counting on the budget of 70.000 EUR.
- 'Small Hydro, Big Profits: Shifting Financial Incentives to Protect Balkan Rivers from Small Hydropower' project is the continuation of our ongoing efforts to stop small hydropower development by eliminating state subsidies. Funded by WWF Netherlands within the framework of Living European Rivers, this 350.000 EUR 2-year project will be implemented jointly by WWF Adria and WWF European Policy Office.