

Joint Statement

On the Expansion of the Emerald Network in Countries of the Western Balkans

by scientists and representatives of NGOs

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The Western Balkans is a global biodiversity hotspot, especially in terms of freshwater biodiversity. The region's extensive mountains, river and lake systems, and coastline are home to numerous endangered species and important habitats with a high degree of endemism. A high percentage of the region's rivers are in good or pristine condition, which is significantly above the European average.

We, the signatories of this joint statement, believe that the proper designation of the Emerald Network sites in the Western Balkans and subsequently developed and effectively implemented management plans for Emerald sites and other sites of conservation importance can offer protection and recovery for fish and other important species and habitats, preserving the unique biodiversity value of the region's rivers.

Protected and restored rivers in the Western Balkans provide a great opportunity for the sustainable development of communities living alongside their banks. They provide drinking water, food, water for irrigation, flood protection, climate regulation, opportunities to develop fishing, water sports, ecotourism and opportunities to strengthen ties and cooperation between countries, scientists, institutions, businesses and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

In early December 2022, **39 scientists and representatives of NGOs from Albania, Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Greece, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Switzerland** joined the Emerald Green online webinar. We prepared [a shadow list](#) and a [map of 88 potential Emerald sites](#) that need to be added to the Emerald Network by the signatory countries of the Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (Bern Convention) in the Western Balkans. The results were based on the latest available data and our knowledge of the distribution and conservation of more than 50 fish species of European importance.

Through the **Emerald Green shadow list and map**, we want to encourage and support the region's governments in completing the Emerald Network. We see the practical application of the Emerald Network and recognise this process as an important step towards EU accession, when the Emerald sites will be candidate Natura 2000 sites.

As members of the Council of Europe and signatories of the Bern Convention, five Western Balkan countries must establish areas of special conservation interest as part of the Emerald Network. Launched by the Council of Europe as part of its work under the Bern Convention, the implementation of the Emerald Network at the national level is considered

one of the main tools to allow the contracting parties (signatory countries) to comply with their obligations under the convention.

As contracting parties to the Bern Convention, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia finished the first phase of implementing the Emerald Network in 2011 by proposing a small number of sites. Since then, none of the countries have expanded their original list of sites, meaning that most rivers and fish populations remain unprotected. Moreover, most sites lack management plans, monitoring, consistent data collection and resources.

Ensuring river conservation and the proper functioning of the Emerald Network in the region is a long-term task that requires cooperation between governments, scientists, NGOs and especially local communities living within or near existing and potential Emerald sites. Apart from contributing to obligations under the Bern Convention, this will help countries to meet the goals for protecting biodiversity and ecosystems set in the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans and the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework adopted at the 15th Conference of Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity held in Montreal in December 2022.

The Emerald Green shadow list and map is part of our contribution to this process, supporting governments in identifying the most important sites for the protection of freshwater species and habitats under resolution 4 (1996) and resolution 6 (1998) of the Bern Convention. We are ready to provide and further discuss detailed maps of areas to be added to the Emerald Network, lists of species and habitats and the standard data forms of the sites. Where knowledge gaps are identified, we would be happy to support with additional fieldwork.

Finally, we, the signatories of this joint statement, would like to support governments in ensuring that an expanded Emerald Network results in more benefits for local communities and the long-term protection of Europe's most important river habitats.

On behalf of:

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