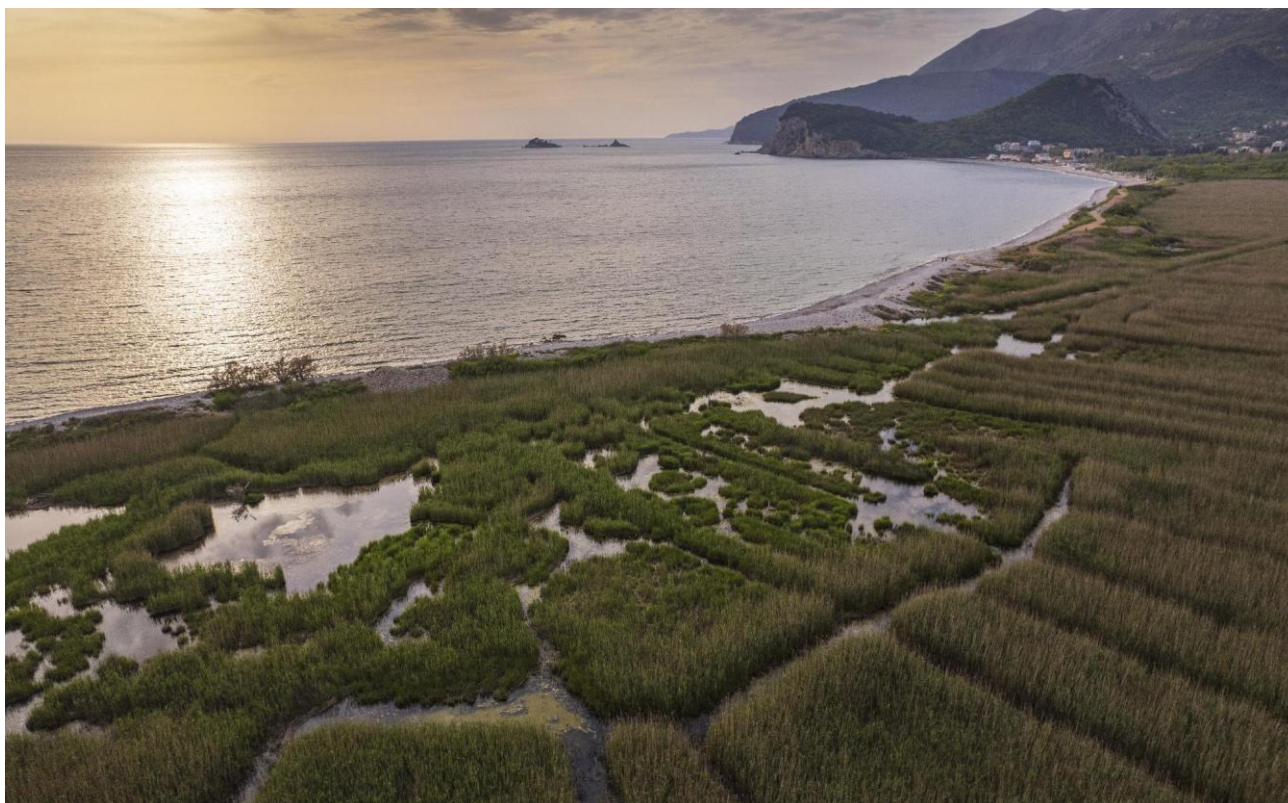


Ecological networks in Montenegro

Strategic Roadmap to achieve the targets of the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Bern Convention and the EU Biodiversity Strategy

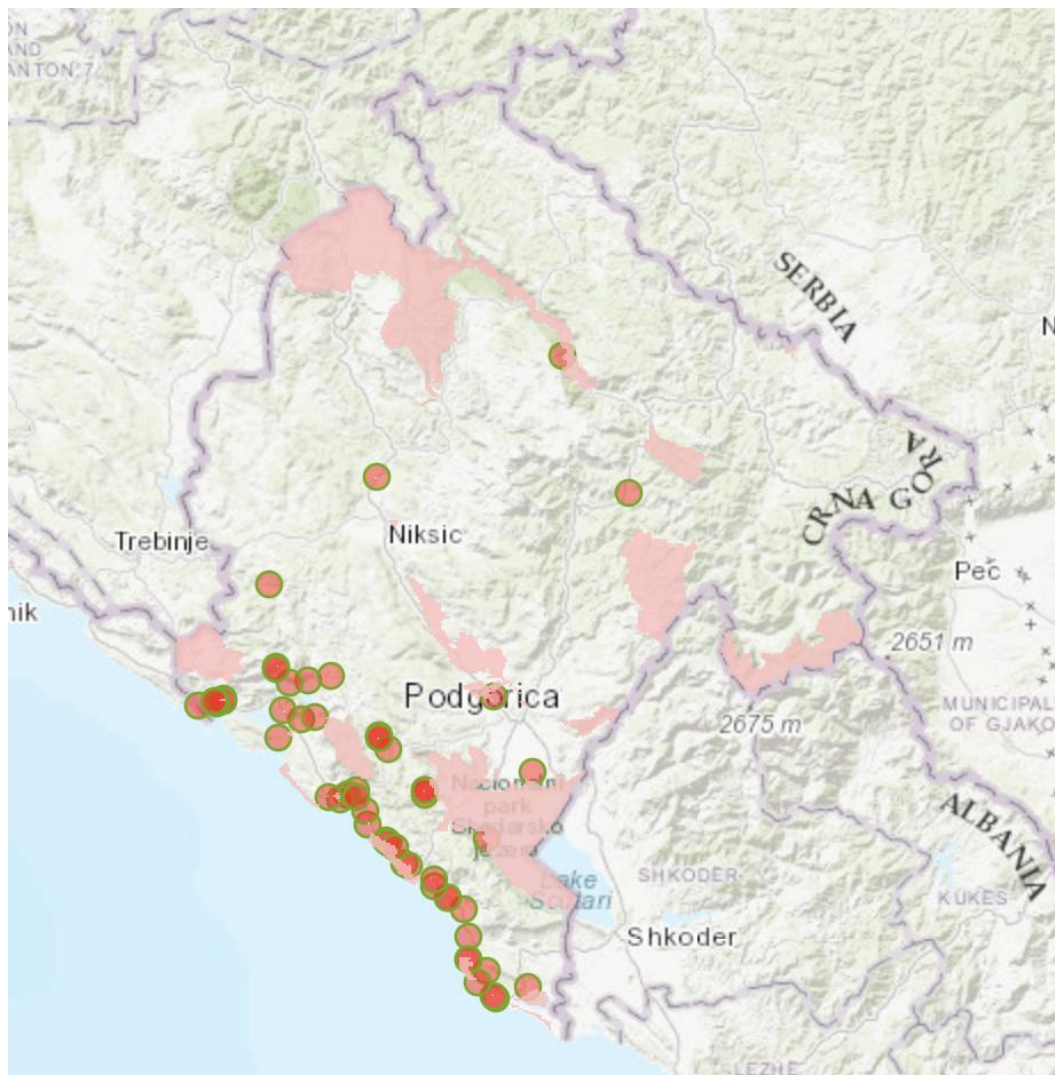


Wetland ecosystem in the hinterland of Buljarica - an Emerald candidate and proposed Natura 2000 site, threatened by massive tourism development and urbanisation (photo: Bruno D'Amicis).

Montenegro has made substantial progress toward achieving the global 30x30 target under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) by proposing a comprehensive Natura 2000 network covering **44.15% of its total terrestrial and marine territory** (7,219.83 km²). It has also strengthened its institutional capacities and strategic framework, most notably through the adoption of the new National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP).

Montenegro currently protects approximately **13% of its territory on a national level**, while active designation processes are underway for several new areas, for example the Mrtvica River Canyon and its surroundings. However, a significant institutional challenge remains - a large proportion of the protected areas lack effective management structures or operate entirely without a designated manager, undermining the practical implementation of the conservation goals.

Map 1. Current nationally protected areas in Montenegro: polygons indicate large protected areas; circles represent individual natural features and small-scale monuments of nature



1. Emerald Network: ineffective conservation since 2011

The Emerald Network was launched by the Bern Convention, the sister convention of CBD in Europe, with the aim to conserve wild flora and fauna and their natural habitats. Montenegro has **32 candidate Emerald sites**, proposed back in 2011.

After the 2011 proposal, Montenegro never updated its Emerald database, despite intensive data collection driven by EU-funded projects, and the collaborative work of biologists, scientific institutions, and NGOs.

As the Emerald Network was never effectively established, the protection of specific areas was severely hindered. For numerous plans and projects likely to have significant effects on Emerald sites, **appropriate assessments (AAs)** were never legally required, meaning that all decisions relied solely on national environmental impact assessments (**EIAs**).

Reference Map: Official map of Emerald sites can be accessed via the [Emerald Network Viewer](#).

2. Natura 2000: A decade of capacity building and major milestone

In preparation for joining the European Union (EU), Montenegro significantly strengthened its capacities to develop the Natura 2000 Network, an EU-wide network of protected areas established under the Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC) and the Birds Directive (2009/147/EC). Fieldwork and data collection spanned approximately 10 years, during which a large pool of experts was trained in field mapping of birds, other species and habitats, as well as in GIS data analysis.

In June 2026, the Government officially submitted the list, map, and database of proposed Natura 2000 sites to the European Commission, consisting of:

- **32 Special Protection Areas for birds (SPA):** Covering 5,104.45km² or **36.96%** of Montenegro's land territory.
- **58 Sites of Community Importance (pSCI):** Covering 5,220.30km² or **37.8%** of Montenegro's land territory.
- **7 marine Sites of Community Importance (marine pSCI):** Covering 179.37km², accounting for approximately **7.06%**.

The proposed network encompasses **99% of current candidate Emerald sites, as well as many other important areas.**

Map 2. Proposed Special Protection Areas (SPAs)



Map 3. Proposed Sites of Community Importance (pSCIs)



Map 4. Proposed marine Natura 2000 sites



3. Current vulnerabilities and legislative gaps

Under the new Law on Nature, adopted in June 2026, ecological network areas are scheduled for designation only by the date of Montenegro's accession to the European Union (Article 130). Currently, **there is no legal protection for proposed Natura 2000** sites prior to accession, and Emerald sites are entirely omitted from the Law on Nature.

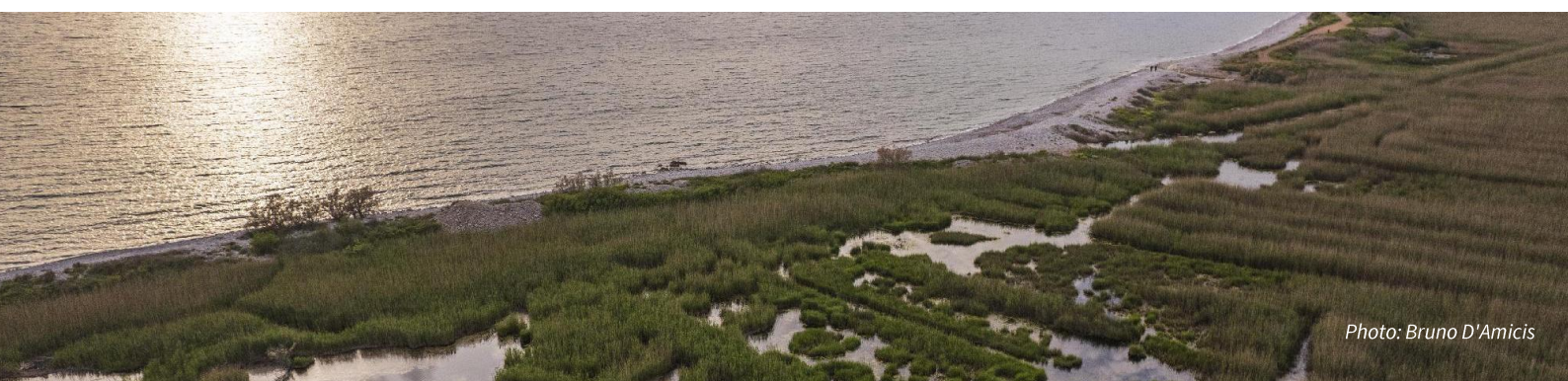
Sites like Buljarica Cove, Velika plaža, Komarnica River, Mount Komovi, Brdo Spas, and the Zeta and Morača rivers, face severe threats, such as urban and tourism development, energy and transport projects, and unsustainable management of natural resources. Many proposed Natura 2000 and candidate Emerald sites are already experiencing a deterioration in the favorable conservation status of their species and habitats.

Moreover, water and nature protection are inextricably linked, and effective site protection requires robust water governance alignment. The Water Law also needs amendments to ensure full and accurate transposition of Article 4(7), (8) and (9) of the Water Framework Directive (WFD), including strict requirement to demonstrate overriding public interest; rigorous assessment of better environmental alternatives; obligation to implement all practical mitigation measures; justification of derogations within River Basin Management Plans (RBMPs); ensuring full consistency with nature protection, drinking water directives, and broader environmental legislation.

4. Emerald and Natura 2000 should be developed jointly

According to the Bern Convention and the European Commission, Montenegro should develop first the Emerald Network and then the Natura 2000 Network:

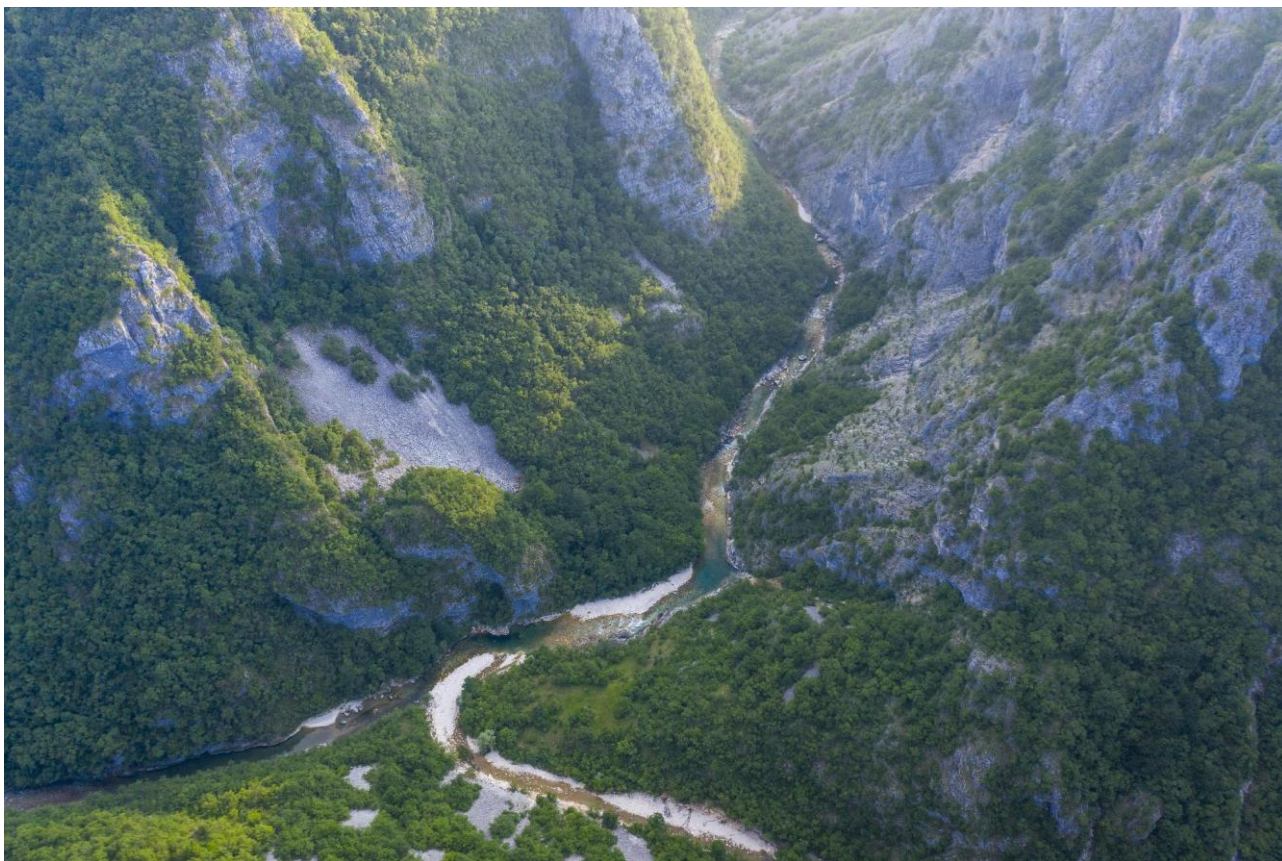
- Both frameworks aim at maintaining and restoring species and habitats of European conservation importance.
- Both are rooted in the Bern Convention and rely on shared scientific criteria, defined species/habitat types, and coherent multi-country network concepts.
- Developing its Emerald Network well before EU accession enables Montenegro to develop to build the scientific evidence base, spatial datasets, institutional capacity and network of conservation sites required for Natura 2000, reducing duplication and facilitating a smoother transition to the EU nature acquis.
- Conservation of Emerald sites can help prevent the deterioration of habitats and species in future Natura 2000 sites before Montenegro joins the EU.



5. Strategic Roadmap to achieve the targets of the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Bern Convention and the EU Biodiversity Strategy

With its Natura 2000 proposal, Montenegro has taken a **major step towards achieving Target 3 of the CBD**, which aims to ensure that at least 30% of terrestrial and inland water areas, as well as marine and coastal areas, are protected by 2030. But proposing the sites is just the beginning, Target 3 and the respective Bern Convention and EU targets, require effective conservation and management of these areas. To prevent irreversible degradation, Montenegro must take the following steps:

1. Coordinate with the European Commission and the Bern Convention Secretariat the formal designation of all proposed Natura 2000 sites as Emerald sites.
2. Host/participate in the official Biogeographical Seminar assessing the sufficiency of the Natura 2000 proposal.
3. Adopt the Emerald sites prior to EU accession.
4. Adopt amendments to the Law on Nature to ensure protection of all Natura 2000/Emerald sites.
5. Approve specific by-laws addressing Natura 2000, Emerald sites, appropriate assessment (AA), and water management.



Komarnica River Canyon - an Emerald candidate, Nature Park and proposed Natura 2000 site, threatened by planned hydropower development (photo: Bruno D'Amicis).

6. Strengthen national capacity for protected area management, inspections, monitoring; develop site-specific conservation objectives; and establish dedicated AA government divisions.
7. Mandate the integration of Natura 2000 and Emerald networks into spatial plans and sectoral developments (e.g., the Coastal Area Spatial Plan).
8. Legally request AA procedures for all activities affecting Natura 2000/Emerald sites.
9. Strengthen legislative alignment with the Water Framework Directive (WFD)

Check online this briefing and other materials



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