



Photo: Nick Sr. Oegger



”At midnight, I could still see headlamps all over the river“

Scientists study the tributaries of the Vjosa

At first sight, it all looked rather bizarre; for seven days at the beginning of June, people wearing waders and carrying odd-looking equipment could be seen trudging about in Albania's Bënça and Shushica rivers. They stood midstream, abseiled down into gorges, disappeared into caves or pounded away wildly on the riverbank. But their mission was a serious one. The beetle researchers, reptile specialists, hydromorphologists, fish experts and many other scientists were all out and about in the Vjosa's catchment, gathering data to demonstrate the diversity and uniqueness of this pristine river landscape. "Once again, we offer the newly elected government of Albania our support in protecting the unique Vjosa river network and establishing Europe's first wild river national park," declared Professor Aleko Miho, a river expert from the University of Tirana.

The aim is for the Shushica, the Bënça and all the other free-flowing tributaries to become part of the Vjosa National Park. To achieve this vision, we are working together with our Albanian partners as part of the „Save the Blue Heart of Europe“ campaign. "If just one single dam is built, the river concerned will no longer be able to be incorporated into the national park. That would also rob local communities of the economic opportunities that ecotourism brings," said Tara Sukič, project manager at EuroNatur. The researchers spared no effort to participate in Science Week (see inset), and to contribute to the protection of the Vjosa's outstanding ecosystem.

It's quite possibly every scientist's dream to be out and about doing pioneering work in a huge open air laboratory like the Vjosa Valley. Pictured here during Science Week on the Shushica, a tributary of the Vjosa, is Professor Gabriel Singer of the University of Innsbruck. The data gathered will be used to argue that the entire catchment should become a national park.



The Vjosa and its tributaries have an addictive quality – everyone who has ever experienced this Albanian natural treasure close up agrees. And, whether they're river conservationists, scientists, photographers or local residents, all are united in saying: "It's high time we had a Vjosa National Park!". Tara Sukič, Marta Crivellaro, Nick St. Oegger und Dritan Rrokaj were all on site during Science Week.



The seven days were exhausting but also incredibly fulfilling. Besides doing campaign work, I was also able to peer over the shoulders of some of the river researchers as they worked – the hydrobiologists, the botanists and the beetle specialists. It provided me with a rare opportunity to participate 'live' in the multidisciplinary exploration of a river system which, to this day, remains full of secrets. In my opinion, scientists are also, basically, conservationists. By using data and facts, they are able to demonstrate just how important and worthy of protection the tributaries of the Vjosa are too – and that they absolutely must be included in any future Vjosa National Park.

The fieldwork was also immensely important for building team spirit, and I finally had the opportunity to meet our Albanian and Austrian campaign partners in person. No online meeting in the world could replace those long days and evenings spent on the banks of the rivers. Just as important was the fact that I was able to develop a personal relationship with the Vjosa. One morning, I drifted whilst bathing in one of the branches of the Vjosa. In particular, the river had this one, very special hue that touched me deeply. I've never experienced such clear, blue-green water anywhere else. The scientists, and we river conservationists, were accompanied by Albanian and international media teams. Together we are telling a story; it is a story about Albania's incredible natural treasure, about the threats facing the Vjosa and its tributaries, but also about the hope which rests on the designation of this unique river system as a National Park. It was a week full of wonderful moments and I can't wait to see the Vjosa, the Shushicë and the Bënça again.

Tara Sukič is project manager for the "Save the Blue Heart of Europe" campaign at EuroNatur. Standing on the banks of the Vjosa, she had to pinch herself because the view seemed almost too beautiful to be true. Due to coronavirus restrictions, the trip to Science Week was the first time Tara had ever visited Albania.

Photos: Nico St. Oegger

Science Week

From 29 May to 6 June 2021, a delegation of 30 scientists from Austria, Albania, Italy and Germany headed out into the field to gather multidisciplinary data on the two main tributaries of the Vjosa – the Shushica and the Bënça. This research week was the continuation of a similar venture that had taken place on the Vjosa in 2017. Then, participants helped to prove the ecological value of the Vjosa and, as a result, to ward off hydropower projects. Science Week 2021 had a corresponding objective and was once again organised by Professor Fritz Schiemer (University of Vienna) and Professor Aleko Miho (University of Tirana). Whilst the threat of the Vjosa being dammed has been averted for now, its tributaries are still at risk. Five hydropower plants are planned on the Shushica and eight on the Bënça!

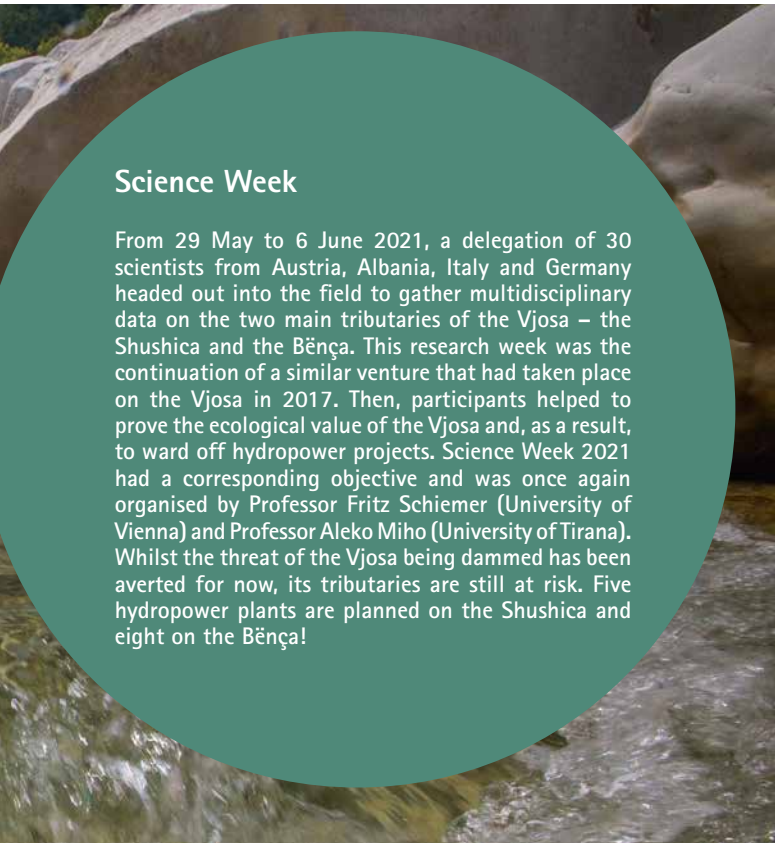
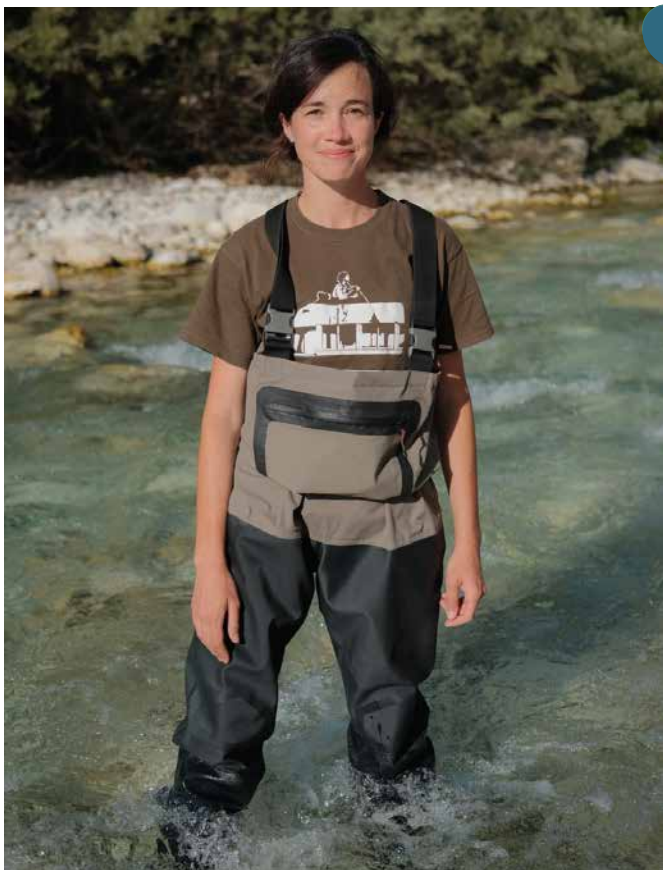


Photo: Gernot Kunz



The tributaries of the Vjosa are also teeming with life. Late into the night, scientists netted and identified the tiniest creatures – some of them species that exist nowhere else in the world.



When my supervisor asked me if I wanted to be a part of Science Week, I was completely blown away and immediately said 'yes'. It provided me with a golden opportunity to work with scientists from different disciplines on the ground. This exchange is valuable and is often lacking at universities. During the research week, we were out in the field together, discussing different perspectives and quizzing each other about our work – a wonderful chance to widen our own horizons.

One of the best experiences was the creative atmosphere that prevailed during this week. We only had a few days and were out in the field like crazy collecting as much data as possible. It was great to see how we all did our best. You could literally see people's brains smoking. This experience motivates me immensely, especially because I can see the direct impact of my work. Slowly but surely, there is a realisation in the scientific community that we can and should contribute to a sustainable way of living instead of just doing research for the sake of science. That motivates me. In the Vjosa Valley, people still live in harmony with the river, a connection that has been lost in most parts of Europe. I hope that the people in the Vjosa Valley will be able to stay in their homeland and keep their very special relationship with the Vjosa. I would like to contribute to this with my work.

Marta Crivellaro is a PhD student at the University of Trento and is working on the hydromorphodynamics of near-natural rivers. The geographical focus of her PhD is the Vjosa River and its catchment. During Science Week, she collected data necessary to simulate the impact of the planned hydropower plants on the Shushica and the Bënça.

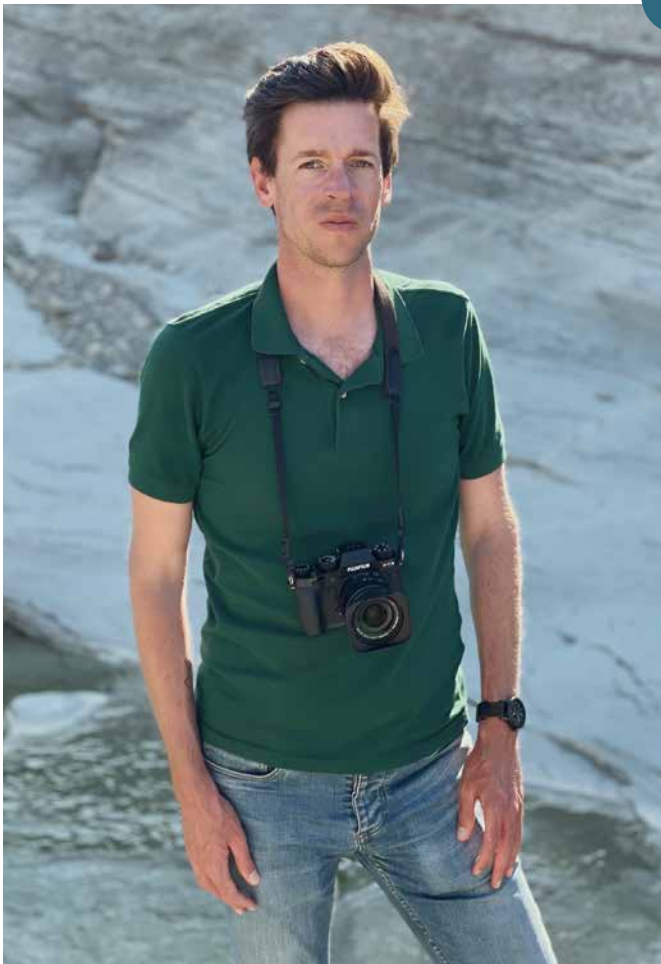


Photo: Gerrit Kunz - Gold-eyed spider (Phidippus schroyersi)



Photo: Nick St. Oegger

After months of travel restrictions and pandemic-related lockdowns, Science Week participants doubly appreciated the opportunity to interact and exchange ideas with like-minded people. Pictured right: the biodiversity of the Vjosa catchment is extraordinary, and that includes the range of spider and snake species found there.



Nick St.Oegger is a documentary photographer and journalist working throughout Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean. His work explores the relationship between people and their natural surroundings. He has spent several years following the impact of the hydropower boom in the Western Balkans. With his stunning photographs, Nick St. Oegger is also supporting the “Save the Blue Heart of Europe” campaign.



My rational mind had been telling me for a long time: ‘I want to have a bunch of exhibitions, I want to win a bunch of awards.’ I was asking myself what projects I could do to start that. With the Vjosa it’s all different: this is a place that I want to see, this is a story that I think I’m in a good position to tell. I feel this strong connection, almost a magnetic attraction to the people, to the landscape here. Unlike other projects I have done in the past, I feel calm and serene on the Vjosa. Here I have learned to trust that everything is flowing and happening, as it should. The great thing about Science Week was that it brought together so many different experts who are among the best in their fields. Being out and about with them meant important lessons for me. I have focused so much on landscapes and the wider picture in my work so far. At Science Week, I had the chance to focus on the smaller elements. I started to understand how vulnerable all of this is. It is too easy to look at the wider picture of the river. There is so much other life around the river.

It was impressive to see how the scientists spread out over the whole area and didn’t just focus on the water and the fish. They all worked extremely hard. Most people were here voluntarily and it was just for a short time. They had to get the most that they could out of this time. When I went back to my room at midnight, I could still see headlamps all over the river. The researchers were working late into the night, and some were already up again at 5 a.m. It was impressive to experience their enthusiasm and energy. Especially the macroentomologists were great. I first noticed them the night after my arrival at the beach in Vlora. They were walking in front of me and all of a sudden, they got down on all fours and were stalking some bugs that had landed there. I was very curious to know who these people were. There was one time we ran into each other at night on the river. They were looking into every crack with their headlamps and showed me amazing things which I never would have thought existed.





Photo: Gernot Kurz - historical bridge over the Shushica - a tributary of the Vjosa.

The good news Major dam project on the Vjosa thwarted

On arrival at the scientists' camp, the first thing the campaign team did was to toast a success. The evening before, our legal experts in Tirana, "Lawyers for Rivers", had scored a major triumph: Kalivaç, one of the big dam projects on the Vjosa, had been put on hold for the time being. The Turkish investor's environmental impact assessment had been rejected by the Administrative Court in Tirana, and the resulting appeal was then dismissed at the end of May. The Kalivaç dam, which for many years has hung over the Vjosa like a sword of Damocles, will, for now, not be built.



Photo: Joshua David Lim

I came back to Albania to help my father with his work. We live by the Shushica River and grow food, such as tomatoes, onions and potatoes, for our own consumption. And we produce Raki. We rely heavily on the river. It helps us to survive and we love it. I hope there will be investment in the future of the river. I imagine that nature tourists will come here to see the Shushica. That would be good for us. There are not many rivers left in the rest of Europe that are like the Shushica. I appeal to Europeans to look at our river and support its preservation. I also call on local people here to stand up for the Shushica and to stand against those who want to destroy the river. It is part of the Blue Heart of Albania and that is why I am ready to do anything to protect the Shushica.

Katharina Grund

Dritan Rrokaj comes from Albania. He returned to his homeland on the Shushica after studying abroad for several years in Scotland and Sweden. He met Cornelia Wieser from Riverwatch and documentary filmmaker Joshua David Lim during a break at Science Week and invited them back to his property for a stimulating discussion. You can watch the video interview on the "Save the Blue Heart of Europe" Facebook channel at [enatur.org/1032](https://www.enatur.org/1032)