

Beat: News

The Impact of the Vlora Airport on Albania's Protected Narta Lagoon

Narta Lagoon in Albania are now at risk

chicago, 22.03.2021, 00:56 Time

USPA NEWS - The habitat and very existence of migratory birds in the Narta Lagoon in Albania are now at risk due to plans to build the Vlora International airport.

In February, dozens of local and international environmental organizations wrote an open letter to Prime Minister Edi Rama to highlight their concerns over the project. They said it would cause "irreversible damage to the ecosystem of the Vjosa-Narte Protected Landscape."^[?]

They added that such an investment would bring uncontrolled and unsustainable development models that risk irreversibly damaging the natural value and resources of the area.

The International Union of Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has listed the region as a Category V protected landscape. This means it has a distinct and valuable character in terms of its ecological, biological, cultural, aesthetic, and other features. It is also in the Albanian Protected Area Network, is an Important Bird Area, and a Key Biodiversity Area. It almost meets the criteria to be classified as a Wetland of International Importance. It has even been nominated by the government as a candidate site for the Emerald Network under the Bern Convention.

Albania is a signatory of the Agreement on the conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds (AEWA) which relates to 92 species found at Narta. More than 200 other species are monitored in the area, two-thirds of which are protected under international conventions, and tens of which are endangered.

But this hasn't stopped plans for the airport. In the letter sent by 36 organizations, it's also noted that the government's decision potentially violates a number of national laws, international laws, and EU Directives on wildlife conservation.

Furthermore, the area is an important section of the Adriatic Flyway, in which hundreds of thousands of birds forage and take shelter during the migrations season. Birds like pelicans, herons, gulls, and flamingos are big enough to put the safety of planes and people at serious risk in case of collisions.

Minister of Tourism, Blendi Klosi told Euronews " We need to be clear that it's an existing one and its just an idea to build a new one. It's important to develop tourism. We are 100% sure the new airport will be in full compliance with all rules of the protected areas."^[?]

The government's position is that because it was once a military airport, changing it to an international airport will make no difference. He added that the airport is not being built in a protected area, but did not address the issue of it being directly in the flyway.

When pressed on the environmental impact and the international outcry, Klosi said that "of course we will talk with the experts. We are waiting for the environmental study on which way to best build the airport."^[?]

But wildlife experts say this isn't good enough.

The PPNEA said that the airport conflicts with local law, in particular, law no. 81/2017 "For the Protected Areas"^[?].

The organization added that the government is playing with the lack of jobs and poverty amongst locals to garner support for the project. This is despite the fact that these are "two problems never addressed by this government or previous ones."^[?]

"Furthermore, the airport is not going to help on this stance, the local population will continue to be poor, while others will profit at their expense. You can witness this while visiting the village of Rinas. The local community continues to be poor, despite the proximity with

the airport and, furthermore, they suffer the vast environmental pollution around their homes,"^[7] they added.

They are adamant the project must not go ahead as it will set a worrying precedent for other protected areas of the country.

Local mayor Dritan Leli is also towing the government argued that it used to be an airport. This is despite the fact it stopped being one in the 90s and was not receiving international flights from huge passenger liners multiple times a day. He said he wants it to be built as quickly as possible.

The airport will be built by Mabetext Group, owned by businessman Bexhet Pacolli, YDA Group, and 2A group with an investment of EUR 103.9 million.

Should the airport fail or not meet expectations, Albanian taxpayers will pay EUR 138 million from their pockets.

The contract states that the project carries high risks because it's an airport that is being built from scratch in a green area and it's impossible to predict traffic. It also states that a consultant contracted by the Contracting Authority forecasted a low rate of return of just 9.23%.

Due to this, the Albanian government will assume a "revenue guarantee"^[7] which means they will pay the winning consortium if the airport fails. The schedule states that the consortium will receive EUR 9.6 million in the fourth year of the contract (the first year of operation), increasing to 18.6 million in the 13th year.

Article online:

<https://www.uspa24.com/bericht-18416/the-impact-of-the-vlora-airport-on-albanias-protected-narta-lagoon.html>

Editorial office and responsibility:

V.i.S.d.P. & Sect. 6 MDStV (German Interstate Media Services Agreement): Alice Taylor

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