

**Statement from  
Protected Areas Forum 2023  
Tirana, January 26, 2023**

We, 49 Civil Society Organizations, national and international, operating in the field of nature protection and academic-research institutions of natural sciences, gathered on January 26, 2023, in Tirana at the "Forum for Protected Areas 2023" and discussed challenges and opportunities for nature conservation in Albania. The forum brought before the participants and analyzed the causes raised for protecting nature, the steps taken, and the tireless work of organizations in protecting wetland Protected Areas, known as the richest hotspots for biodiversity in Albania, Europe, and the world.

The Protected Areas as a whole, mainly the wetlands, stand out for their exceptional natural values and represent the most crucial opportunity for the country's development based on a sustainable economic model. However, these ecosystems are increasingly threatened today by unsustainable developments and plans that irreversibly damage their ecological integrity. These developments have been supported recently with policies and actions that reduce the area of Protected Wetland Areas and non-compliance with environmental standards in various economic activities, leading to the loss and degradation of natural habitats. All these unsustainable activities will have an irreversible negative impact on the ecological integrity of the Protected Wetland Areas and the country's biodiversity in general and constitute a significant concern for us, the nature protection community, and donors involved in the field of protection of nature. On the other hand, violating Protected Areas of national and international importance clearly hinders Albania's integration into the European Union.

In particular, We emphasize the following concerns:

1. ***Natural and modified habitats in Protected Areas are threatened by policies and unsustainable economic activities***, such as residential and mass tourism urbanization, planned/developed resorts in the Butrint National Park, residential, and hotel construction in the Kune-Vain-Tale-Patok-Fushë-Kuqe-Ishëm Managed Nature Reserve, the construction of the Vlora international airport in the Vjosë-Nartë Protected Landscape Area, strategic investments in the form of intensive agriculture in Divjakë-Karavasta, hydropower plants in Zall -Gjocaj, Valbone, Cem, etc.
2. ***Reduction of Protected Wetland Areas through Decisions of the Council of Ministers No. 59/2022, No. 60/2022, and No. 694/2022, as well as others in the process, are highly negative for national biodiversity***. These decisions undermine the ecological integrity of almost every coastal wetland PA with national and international protection, fragment PAs and their habitats, lead to the loss of habitats and species, and create a dangerous precedent that whenever there are private interests and unstable economic conditions, PAs will shrink to accommodate these interests;
3. ***Negative impacts are allowed by the incomplete legal and institutional framework, its superficial implementation, and the lack of institutional coordination***. This leads to decision-making against the protection of nature, non-respect of the country's environmental standards, increased environmental crime, lack of transparency in decision-making, and mismanagement of natural resources in the country.

In conclusion, We, 49 Civil Society Organizations, national and international, operating in the field of nature protection, academic-research institutions of natural sciences, request from the policy-making/decision-making and law-enforcing institutions of the country, from the Council of Ministers, the National Council of the Territory, the Committee of Strategic Investments, the Ministry of Tourism and the Environment, the National Agency of Protected Areas, the National Agency of the Environment, the Ministry of the Interior, the National Inspectorate of the Protection of the Territory so that the issue of nature conservation becomes a priority , (i) stop wrong decision-making in critical areas of biodiversity, (ii) fight environmental crime by institutions, (iii) increase transparency and sustainability in decision-making; (iv) to increase the professional capacities in terms of monitoring, study and protection of nature in line institutions; (v) work towards monitoring and assessing the status of habitats and species of national/international importance, as well as (vi) to further strengthen cooperation with Civil Society for a more sustainable decision-making.

CSOs and academic institutions are ready to become part of constructive debates to design policies to protect nature so that policies and programs are sustainable, comprehensive, and representative of all interest groups.

*Participants in the Forum on Protected Areas 2023.*

***Tirana, January 26, 2023.***

#DeklaratëForumZM2023 #StatementPAForum2023

### **Representatives of academic-research institutions**

- 1) *Prof. Dr. Ferdinand Bego - Department of Biology - Faculty of Natural Sciences;*
- 2) *Dr. Ina Vejsiu - Deputy. Dean for Public Relations and Institutional Cooperation - Faculty of Forestry Sciences;*
- 3) *Dr. Gentjan Hykaj - Head of the Environment Department - Polis University*

### **Civil society organizations and academic-research institutions**

- 1) *AOS – Albanian Ornithological Society;*
- 2) *Eco Albania – Center for the Protection of Natural Ecosystems in Albania;*
- 3) *Res Publica;*
- 4) *Co-PLAN – Institute for Habitat Development;*
- 5) *VIS Albania - Volontariato Internazionale per lo Sviluppo;*
- 6) *COSV Albania - Cooperation for Development;*
- 7) *CISP-Sviluppo dei Popoli VIS Albania;*
- 8) *GO2 Albania;*
- 9) *Polis University – Department of Planning and Environment;*
- 10) *FSHN – Faculty of Natural Sciences, University of Tirana;*
- 11) *EDEN - Environmental Center for Development, Education, and Networking;*

- 12) *PPNEA - Center for the Preservation and Protection of the Natural Environment in Albania;*
- 13) *CELIM Albania;*
- 14) *Milieukontakt Albania;*
- 15) *REC Albania – Environmental Resource Center;*
- 16) *WWF Adria;*
- 17) *ACEG – Albanian Center for Environmental Governance;*
- 18) *BOA - Birds of Albania;*
- 19) *CLE - Centre for Legal Empowerment*
- 20) *North Green Association;*
- 21) *WellPoint – Care for everyone;*
- 22) *All Green Centre;*
- 23) *Agri-En - United Agro-Environmental Association;*
- 24) *ETMI - Institute for Environmental and Territory Management;*
- 25) *INLSH - Institute for Change and Leadership in Albania;*
- 26) *Agro Puka;*
- 27) *Alpine Association;*
- 28) *Albanian Forum Lake of Shkodra;*
- 29) *New Bridges;*
- 30) *Free Thought Forum;*
- 31) *H2H Foundation;*
- 32) *SDI - Social Development Investment;*
- 33) *MKEZH - Association "Multifunctional for Culture, Education and Development";*
- 34) *Green Vision Center;*
- 35) *SEEP - Social Education for Environmental Protection;*
- 36) *QSNN - Social Center for Helping People in Need;*
- 37) *Association of Ecologists for the Region;*
- 38) *Flower Initiative;*
- 39) *Environment and Community;*
- 40) *RurAL;*
- 41) *Youth Movement for Democracy;*
- 42) *Organization Menv Group;*
- 43) *Women's Counseling Center and Social Services;*
- 44) *CERCI - Community Education for Rights, Culture, Integration;*
- 45) *Federation of Forest and Pasture Users, Kukës District;*
- 46) *Ulez Friendship;*
- 47) *Eco Partners for Sustainable Development;*
- 48) *New Impact;*
- 49) *MMZHT – Environmental Protection and Tourism Development.*

