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## PREAMBLE

**Respecting the principles of sustainable development** that have arisen from the 1992 Rio de Janeiro Conference, the principles of the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Aichi biodiversity targets;

**Considering** that the **Aarhus Convention gives us legal grounds for exercising** our democratic rights and that these rights have been further endorsed by national laws in the field of the environment and water management in all Western Balkan countries;

**Aware** that the **effects of climate change** are evident in the Western Balkans, and that **water and water dependent ecosystems** are among the most important, but also the most sensitive **natural resources**;

**Noting** that the **plans** for the use of water resources of the Western Balkans for the purpose of electricity generation have been adopted, **and concessions granted**, as well as other water acts and environmental permits, **without adequate public participation** in such decisions;

**Noting** that the majority of studies on environmental impact assessment have been conducted very unsatisfactorily out of negligence or intentionally on the interests of private investors;

**Noting** that the legislation and its application in the field of environmentally acceptable flow are incomplete or not adequately implemented in accordance with the principles of the EU Water Framework Directive, causing major negative consequences for water bodies, the surrounding biodiversity and local communities;

**Agreeing** on the fact that **rivers** and their **valleys and canyons** represent a significant **natural resource and potential** for the sustainable and responsible development;

**Considering** that today's generations have an obligation, when making decisions regarding the future, to assume and respect the interests and needs of future generations;

The Conference participants and civil society representatives, aware of our own responsibility, are ready and willing to put our capacity into dialogue with relevant public bodies to audit and improve strategies/plans/programmes/laws that have, or may have, an environmental impact, including the processes of creating and monitoring the implementation of new public environmental policies.

We, participants at the Conference and environmental organizations, gathered around the idea of river protection and responsible water resource management, agreed upon the following:





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## **DECLARATION ON THE PROTECTION OF THE WESTERN BALKANS RIVERS**

Hydropower is presented as clean energy, but the construction and use of hydropower causes permanent damage to the environment and the destruction of river-dependent ecosystems. The environmental damage caused by small hydropower plants is paid by electricity consumers through a fee for renewable energy sources in their electricity bills, and only the reduction of transmission losses between producers and consumers eliminates the need for additional exploitation of natural resources.

The conference participants and civil society organizations support the initiative to contact the relevant public authorities for environmental protection, water management and energy with a request to conduct a revision of all the strategies/plans/programmes/laws that have been adopted and other policy documents that directly and indirectly affect the sustainable management of our rivers.

In the repeated proceedings, a good quality strategic environmental assessment must be organised in accordance with the national regulations and SEA Directive.

### **We demand from Western Balkan countries governments to:**

Impose a **moratorium** on the construction of hydropower plants and suspend all further work/projects on our rivers until a complete revision of the procedures for adopting strategies/plans/programmes and other policy documents at all decision-making levels has been completed;

**Stop immediately any public subsidies** (feed-in tariffs) to energy production from small hydropower plants and that Western Balkan countries, with the support of the European Union, redirect investments in genuinely renewable energy sources and planning to meet energy needs, based on a broad and extensive public debate with binding conclusions;

**Improve enforcement of the law** including fines for legal violations;

Start and/or accelerate the process of the **implementation and use of EU standards** as set in the Habitats Directive, the Birds Directive, Water Framework Directive, Environmental Liability and the EIA and SEA Directives; improving capacity of judges related to EU Environmental Acquis.

**Widen the space for public participation in decision-making** related to rivers and water at the early stages of planning, and take public opinion into account with due diligence;

**Expand the existing, and establish new protected areas** including areas of water bodies intended to protect natural species and sensitive habitats, expanding the effective





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network of protected areas with ecological corridors to bring the Western Balkans countries closer to the European NATURA 2000 and Emerald network;

Adopt and implement regulations on **environmentally acceptable flow**, with a methodology for determining this flow based on a scientific basis, to establish a system of automatic monitoring of watercourses status and to ensure that monitoring data are available in real time as a prerequisite for more adequate inspection and civil control.

Support sport, traditional use of the rivers and tourism to support sustainable development of local communities, aiming to create more jobs and generate more revenue.

Nurture public appreciation for our rivers and surrounding ecosystems through improved education for children and general public.

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“The Declaration on the Protection of Western Balkan Rivers” has been made on 28<sup>th</sup> November 2019, by participants in the International River Conference on “Legal and practical tools for protecting the rivers of the Western Balkans and their people” today. The Conference was organised by Arnika (Czech Republic), the Center for Environment (Bosnia and Herzegovina), and WWF Adria thanks to financial support from the European Union, the Transition Promotion Programme of the Czech Republic, the Global Greengrants Fund and the Heinrich-Böll Stiftung. The participants of the Conference are representatives of international organizations, civil society organizations, local communities, public administration bodies and institutions from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Czech Republic, Croatia, Moldova, Northern Macedonia and Serbia.

