



**Vjosa Wild River National Park  
Stakeholder Consultation**

**Final Report**

**April 2024**

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## 1. Introduction

The stakeholder consultation was designed to gain understanding of local communities' and key stakeholders' perceptions about the Vjosa Wild River National Park (VWRNP), and to ensure their interests are realistically taken into account within the forthcoming Integrated Management Plan (IMP).

Stakeholder consultation processes are inherently two-way; and while we were listening we were also sharing. Our intention was to go beyond 'receiving information' but also to motivate stakeholders to take a more active role in the long term management of the park. In this respect, the stakeholder consultation process took on a dimension of communication on behalf of the park. The insights that emerged from that dual function are also outlined throughout the report.

To both gather and disseminate information at the same time, the stakeholder consultation was divided into three sequential stages each with its own format of consultation, with a) Leaflet campaign combined with open-ended interviews with stakeholders to establish themes that would help shape the b) structured stakeholder workshops; all of which would then feed into the c) questions of the final survey which was carried out online.

### a) Leaflet Campaign



### b) Stakeholder Workshops



### c) Survey

These three formats produced useful insights into the perceptions and positions of stakeholders divided into 24 sectors that can be disaggregated by age, gender, and sector. The results and conclusions are below.

## 2. Field Excursion and Leaflet Campaign

The first stage of stakeholder consultation was designed as a field excursion throughout the valley to establish rapport with as many communities and individuals as possible, to inform them of the latest developments in the park planning process—including inviting them to attend the first round of consultation meetings—and to listen to their perceptions on the establishment of the park.

A shortage of information, and decades of mistrust of government puts the onus on expert working groups to find new ways to connect with people and build trust in the process of the formation of the park.

Two field excursions to the Vjosa region were carried out in August 2023 to over 80 villages and towns in order to reach the broadest possible representation of stakeholders.

### 3. Stakeholder Consultation Workshops

Four workshops were held in Përmet, Gjirokastër, Tepelenë, and Vlorë on consecutive days. The workshops were attended by approximately 135 stakeholders in total.<sup>1</sup> All eight primary stakeholder sectors were represented at the workshops as identified by the stakeholder consultation team: Institutional Stakeholders Local and Central, Local Communities, Activists, Industry, Education and Research; History and Culture; Media, and International Organizations.

#### Objectives of Stakeholder Consultation Workshops

Stakeholder Engagement activities were designed to:

- Communicate the objectives of this phase of work in setting up the park—where we have been and where we’re going—highlighting the concept of “a park in the making”
- Establish rapport and gather contacts to have an open line of communication with stakeholders from all sectors.
- Emphasize listening – experts need to hear from stakeholders, not vice-versa.
- Capture local specificities and problems and identify the bottlenecks between conservation and development objectives.
- Focus on giving IMP experts a clear picture of where conflicts might arise during tourism implementation within the national park.
- Assess and analyze stakeholder positions and prepare recommendations for the IMP.

#### Main takeaways from Stakeholder Consultation workshops that affect the management plan

<b>Tourism Pressure and Environmental Impact:</b>	<b>Positive Attitude towards Protection:</b>	<b>Infrastructure and Development:</b>
<p>-Increasing tourism is leading to stress on resources and increased waste, especially in Gjirokastër.</p> <p>-Limited role of the river in the identity of Gjirokastër.</p> <p>-Concerns about flooded areas and the complexity of monitoring by RAPA.</p>	<p>-Generally positive attitude towards protection and limitations on activities.</p> <p>-Touristic commitment and interest in interpretation plans and the location of visitor centers.</p>	<p>-Acute needs for irrigation and water supply, especially in Tepelenë.</p> <p>-Persistent Issues with private irrigation pumps and municipal/public infrastructure.</p> <p>-Ongoing intensive development projects in Vlorë, including the airport, city, and coast.</p>

<sup>1</sup> The list is incomplete for Vlora where more than 40 people were present but the participants' list was signed by only 28 people.

<b>Conflicts and Unclear Paths to Solutions:</b>	<b>Recreation Value and Safety Concerns:</b>	<b>Environmental Concerns and Projects:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Conflict over water extraction in Shushica Valley and the construction of a water extraction project near the Kalivaç HPP site;</li> <li>-Conflict over the airport project in Narta lagoon, a protected area;</li> <li>-Uncertainty about solving existing contracts in sustainable use zones, such as the Mallakastër case;</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Universally acknowledged high recreational value of the river, including activities like swimming, wild camping, and rafting.</li> <li>-Need for dedicated swimming spots for safety reasons.</li> <li>-Unclear building buffer distance from the riverbed leading to different interpretations by municipalities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Concerns about fish farming and its negative impact on the river ecosystem.</li> <li>-Need for planning to address inputs and rainbow trout management.</li> <li>General sewage system problems in Tepelenë.</li> <li>Various ongoing projects in parallel, including Vita Vjosa, trail rehabilitation, and cleaning.</li> </ul>

#### 4. Stakeholder Consultation Dialogue

##### a) Open-ended Interviews

35 people interviewed throughout June, August, and September 2023. Interviews were conducted face-to-face with diverse stakeholder sectors, from community leaders (“kryeplak”), to residents and business operators, with the objective to collect qualitative sentiment about the VWRNP that would inform Stakeholder Workshops and later feed into the development of the online survey.

Conversations were informal, varied in length, and friendly, in an attempt to establish camaraderie and minimize distortion of the sentiment of interviewees. The interviewees were introduced to the scope of the stakeholder engagement process, why it was important, and role of the research team. They were asked to discuss their relationship to the river, what opportunities they may or may not see in the establishment of the park, and what implications they may foresee in their daily lives due to the transition of the river to a protected status of the river.

##### i. Results

After completing the interviews, the consultants established five categories of sentiment.

**Active Ally 31%** - Actively involved with the river cause; daily interaction and representation on behalf of the river in interactions peers/colleagues/institutions; able to overlook personal benefit for the greater cause of protection and conservation of the river.

**Institutional Supporter 34%** - Involved with the river cause due to their institutional role; supports the cause emotionally at the personal level but whose perspective is affected by being an employee; tends to see the VWRNP as inevitable and in positive light.

**Positive 21%** - Not directly involved with the river cause; supports the conservation and protection cause as part of improving tourism which is their industry, possibly superficial because of lack of information, and tends to be an attitude of “wait and see.”

**Ambivalent 11%** - Uninvolved and distant to the cause usually stemming from lack of trust in institutions. As a result sees the VWRNP as a project prone to failure; does not want to be involved formally in the cause but would support eventually if the project turned successful.

**Against 3%** - Actively against the establishment of the park; sees it as limiting to economic activities, income and stifling of livelihoods in their or others’ communities.

### Summary of Findings from Interviews

The open-ended interviews reveal insights into stakeholders’ perspectives regarding the establishment and management of the Vjosa National Park. While there is considerable support for park establishment at 86%, stakeholders highlight a range of challenges and considerations that need to be addressed.

- **Communications:** 74% of people interviewed mention the lack of information being communicated—and by extension a lack of transparency—as a problem. This cuts across both local authorities and community members regardless of livelihood. Local government representatives feel out of the loop. Local business owners and community members lack information with which to make economic decisions for themselves regarding upcoming limitations, and environmentalists are skeptical about the future governance of the park.
- **Environmental Concerns:** 54% of people interviewed highlight environmental challenges such as pollution, habitat degradation, and biodiversity loss as significant issues to be addressed through park establishment and management. 31% also raise agricultural, irrigation and land management issues which then develop into livelihood problems for the whole Shushica branch (institutional representatives and local leaders). This also encompasses concerns about flooding and water management issues and the potential impact of the park on household farming practices; such as the need for updated irrigation schemes and awareness-raising on soil preservation and fertilizer usage. This also comes up in dialogue with local authorities and environmentalists concerned with the non-compatibility of tourism objectives with conservation.
- **Economic Challenges:** 34% of respondents have concerns about potential economic impacts, including changes to traditional livelihoods, access to resources, and tourism-related development when limitations are in place.
- **Fear of Displacement:** 34% of respondents, which were all from Shushica Valley, raise existential concerns around displacement or the disappearance of communities arising from conflicts over resource management.

## **b) Online Survey**

The online stakeholder survey garnered responses from 382 individuals from 11 regions, providing a diverse representation across age, gender, and sectors with participation ranging from under 17 to 65 and above. A notable majority of age of respondents (49%) fell within the 31-49 age range.

A disbalance in gender representation is also notable, with a majority of female respondents (63%) and (36%) male. We believe this is due to the fact that one of the biggest groups of respondents were from public education institutions such as Universities of Vlorë and Gjirokastër; as well as high school educators and students (contacted via parents) were predominantly female.

The diversity of institutional representation also suggests a shared responsibility for the conservation and sustainable management of the Vjosa River basin, with various stakeholders recognizing the need for coordinated efforts and collaboration to address environmental challenges effectively.

The highest sectoral participation rates were among visitor or interested groups (29%), community members (23%), and institutions (15%). These groups demonstrated a strong commitment to shaping the project's direction and ensuring its alignment with local needs and interests. Academia and research entities (12.7%) contributed valuable expertise, while industries (12.2%) offered insights into economic implications and expectations. Environmental activists or civil society representatives (3.7%) advocate strongly for ecological preservation.

Below we discuss key themes that emerged from responses.

### **i. Results**

#### **Awareness of Vjosa Wild River National Park**

96% of people surveyed are aware of the establishment of the VWRNP. This demonstrates the success of communication campaigns around the establishment of the park. Social media was the most prominent channel (79%), followed closely by television (69%). It should be noted that social media, television and other media that might have been government-led efforts were not distinguishable in this survey. Only 14% of people stated that government communication was their primary source of information.

Overall it is a positive finding but reveals that though the government has chosen channels like social media and television to communicate information about the park, stakeholders aren't aware of the intent, and this may be a missed opportunity.

#### **Perceived Level of Information and Acceptance of the Park**

While a majority of respondents expressed feeling adequately informed about the goals and future plans for the National Park (58%), almost half still felt inadequately informed. Those feeling adequately informed predictably come from institutional respondents. Business operators in all industries, environmental activists and community members report feeling informed or uninformed in equal numbers.

There was virtually no negative sentiment expressed in this question. Respondents are in support of the establishment of the park but 42% report the need to have more information about the park. This matches the findings in open-ended stakeholder interviews.

One outlier respondent expressed being adamantly against the establishment of the park because of an expectation that it would hamper tourism. This view is likely representative of a more widely held sentiment due to a lack of information, but not recorded by the survey.

A major challenge of the survey is that people who are apathetic or against the park are much less likely to spend time filling out the survey. The same issue arose during interviews where the research team may not have been seen as reliable enough to deliver negative information to the government, making engagement seem like a waste of time. To combat this bias, we directly approached certain industry representatives, known from previous research to be “against” to ask their views. Two deliberately targeted respondents from the Mining industry were in full support of the establishment of the park, with one reporting having been approached by the government with information on limitations.

People answering this survey generally have very high expectations of economic and touristic development in the valley as a direct result of the establishment of the park. But at the same time they have insufficient knowledge of what limitations on activities may be on the way. This situation can be understood as a kind of “wait and see” position: agreement with the basic premise of a protected river, but with limited grasp of future personal impact.

### **Stakeholder Perspectives on Economic and Environmental benefits**

Industry representatives are the group that reports highest expectations of benefit from the National Park among 73% of all respondents. All three groups see tourism as the main driver of future economic benefits to the valley.

26% of respondents reflect skepticism about implementation of conservation measures that will increase the value of the park which they see as vital to the economic benefit to come.

Most people surveyed mention that the future economic value in the valley is co-dependent on protection and conservation, not seeing the latter as excluding tourism development. This reflects a major opportunity for the management plan to advance.

81% of all respondents believe that the park will improve the natural environment of the valley. That sentiment is shared among industry, institutions, and sectors. Virtually all respondents (99%) expect that the change in status of the park will affect its protection, and as a result the natural environment of the park will be improved.



Similarly, virtually all respondents expect the VWRNP to positively impact the country as a whole.

93% of institutional representatives expect the park to be positive for Albania as a whole, clearly reflecting the government's vision and institutional commitment towards the establishment of the park.

One person surveyed saw the benefit of creating a lighthouse model for the country "Vjosa will set an example for other rivers."

Skepticism of government's ability or willingness to protect the river was present in the survey results with one respondent commenting: "If implemented as actually intended (and not just a fake propaganda show) it will help nature protection/conservation due to rules and regulations but even "valorization" of nature. Same time the establishment of a natural park will make it more attractive to tourism so more visitors which again will increase (potential) pressure on nature. So it's a mixed picture."

### **Perception of challenges and risks**

66% of people surveyed do not feel the park poses a threat or challenge to their work, livelihoods or daily life. That also reflects their expectations that the park overall is a positive development for the country. Interestingly it appears that high level leadership positions are those that most anticipate risks and challenges with the establishment of the National Park, versus non-professionals and the business sectors largely not perceiving the park to pose risks.

Industry representatives are torn between benefits stemming from tourism development and the challenges brought by the necessity of increased protection measures to accommodate that same tourism development.

In the sectoral group, challenges and risks are foreseen by experts and professionals who are closer to the national park cause and have more in-depth insights on the implications, problems and real challenges faced throughout the valley. Students, youth and locals that attach their livelihoods to tourism or economic development have the perspective of beneficial developments that the park will bring.

### **Communications**

The survey findings reflect a significant level of awareness and interest in the establishment of the Vjosa Wild River National Park. While efforts have been made to inform the public, there remains a need for continuous engagement and communication to ensure inclusivity and transparency.

93% of people surveyed report not being approached by any authority to discuss limitations of activities inside the park. (a large number of respondents have skipped this question or reported N/A in the target group of industrial and sectoral representatives).

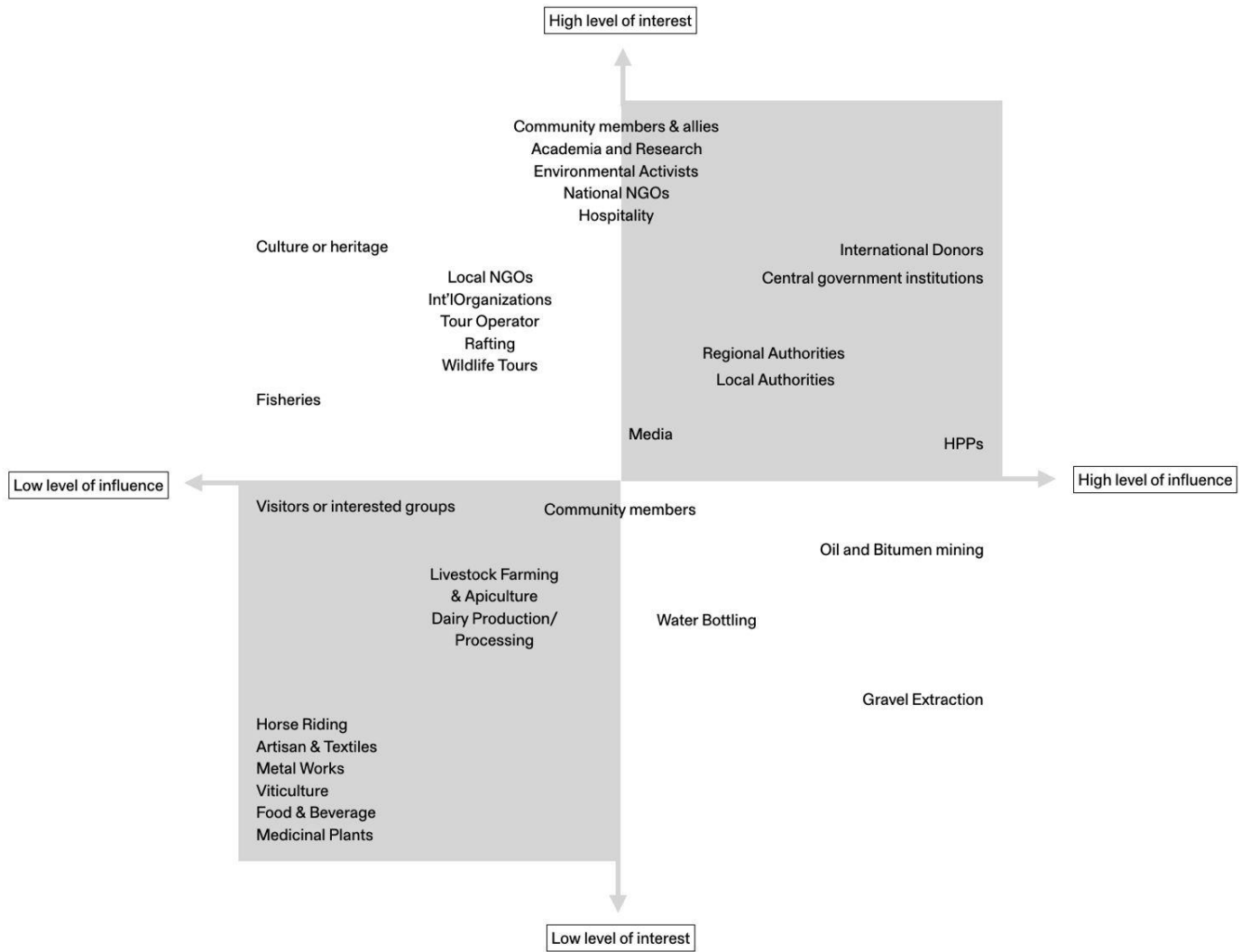
Though hundreds of individuals were contacted as part of this project, with a handful of meetings being held with community members prior to the survey, the level of contact does not come close to what stakeholders expect almost one year into the establishment of the park.

Moving forward, outreach to all stakeholder sectors should be made strategically, leveraging multiple communication channels. This will foster greater understanding and support for the conservation and sustainable management of the Vjosa River ecosystem.

Stakeholder comments coincide with findings from field excursions and face to face interviews. The nature of concerns expressed are: Transparency and involvement of all stakeholders in communications and the process; environmental concerns including regeneration efforts and simultaneously de-pollution and management of waste and harming behaviors; concerns over rule of law and effectiveness of operations and governance of the park; awareness raising efforts including education of stakeholders and younger generations.

### **Stakeholder matrix**

Mapping stakeholders addressed in this study according to level of influence and level of interest.



## 5. General Takeaways on Sentiment of the VWRNP

**The status of National Park is broadly supported as an idea, while its reality remains relatively unknown.**

The park was created in an unprecedented rush to halt dam construction. About half (56%) of people surveyed *strongly support* the protection of the area as a park, while 42% support, but need to know more. It's likely that most supporters of the park today are in fact simply supporters of the halting of the dams. And though it will still take many years for the park to be legible as a different kind of territory than what it used to be, a clear and compelling vision for what the government *intends* for it to be would go a long way in rallying support.

**Risk of the unknown**

The new park and what it represents is welcome, but even though support is widespread, for many sectors that may just be because people don't know what it really means for them. One Industry representative from a water bottling company responded without any negativity and said simply that "we are interested in learning more." The risk here for the management plan is that there are numerous sectors that have not yet been threatened but when they are, may quickly turn to an "against" position and become obstacles to protection.

**Despite the lack of information, most people are optimistic about what the park *could* be**

Though 40% of people don't feel adequately informed, 73% believe the park will be an economic benefit to them or the area, and 99% of respondents think the establishment of the park will help improve the environment. That optimism extends to youth too, with 84% predicting that the protection of the park will bring economic benefits to the area.

**There is widespread appetite for individual action**

Bledar Mullara owns a restaurant between Tepelena and Kelcyre. He was interviewed in August and explained his personal efforts of afforestation in riverbanks near his restaurant. RAPA representatives know better than anyone that the enforcement of laws inside the park by officials alone will be impossible. Everyone bears some degree of duty to the protection of ecosystems whether its reporting violators, forming a volunteer group to pick up trash, or raising awareness among your friends and family. Thorough, regular, and up-to-date Government information about what isn't allowed and what is, where, and how much empowers people to help in the protection effort.

**Children and youth have an important role to play**

Young people's perceptions largely resemble those of adults. Similar in economic optimism and their support for the park, in interviews, youth have a contagious passion and energy to make change. In many cases throughout the survey they also demonstrated a genuine belief in institutions that makes them a valuable asset for the future of the park. When asked "Why do you feel the environment will improve?" one person under age 17 commented "Being a National Park, it can't be polluted anymore and will become a more sustainable location."

**"Wait and See" attitude has its benefits**

96% of people surveyed are aware the park exists, while 40% feel inadequately informed of its goals. The information vacuum leaves property and business owners especially without the tools they need to act prudently, creating a freeze. In interviews stakeholders repeat that it's not really even about being "for" or "against" the park, they just want to know how to proceed with their assets.

This pause before the IMP and its enforcement mechanisms are in place is a good thing for the health of the river ecosystem, despite not being a cause of frustration for stakeholders.

### **The concept of a symbiotic relationship between a clean river and tourism value is well understood**

Most people surveyed mention that the future economic value in the valley is co-dependent on conservation, not seeing the latter as excluding tourism development. One respondent said “Firstly it will improve the ecosystem and secondly it will bring many local and foreign visitors.” Another remarked that “as operators in the field of tourism and agritourism, we think that declaring Vjosa a national park will bring advantages in this sector, we also hope for a cleaner environment and river for visitors and guests who come for nature and water sports! As the area has priceless natural, historical-cultural, traditional-customary values, products and typical dishes, etc. which will be known even more under the status of National Park. All these can be translated into a stable economy, which has already started to give the first visible results for almost a year.” This presents a major opportunity for government to proactively develop sustainable development policy that will accelerate gentle development and eradicate mass tourism-style construction.

### **Park tied to a larger understanding of patriotism**

91% of respondents “definitely” see the establishment of the national park as a positive for Albania overall. Many people associate the park protection decision with patriotism for the natural beauty of the country, commenting that “Vjosa will set an example for other rivers.” Others go so far as to interpret it as part of the process of the establishment of the rule of law. One respondent said “it won’t serve the personal interests of a small group of people anymore.” The river protection regime is also understood as elevating the country’s development standards to be in line with those of the EU: “The declaration of a national park means more attention towards protection of the park, more promotion and more development projects according to European standards.”

### **Lack of Resources for Protection and Enforcement is felt by Local Authorities**

Representatives of local authorities reiterated the need to have updated and thorough information on the borders of the Park and areas, especially in light of visible conflict with existing contracts and land plots under private ownership.

### **Recommendations:**

- **Lean in to “A Park in the Making”**

This concept works. One risk in announcing a national park before the physical markers and protection regimes are in place is that tourists get disappointed by what they find and inflict reputational damage online. In the summer of 2023 numerous tiktok videos circulated of tourists getting lost in incomplete construction sites at the Albanian coast. In interviews, one respondent asked that government “avoid the establishment of a ‘fake park’ and with it the reputation of Albania as a ‘don't go there they built everywhere hotels resorts roads etc in nature, its destroyed’ destination. [...]” “A Park in the Making” is an elegant way to explain a very complicated situation that resonates with residents and tourists alike. Give visitors the context of the idea and make it visible in the valley. It will head off negativity and attract people into the park’s historic process.

- **Articulate a vision for the park that people can rally around**

Use the architecture competition as a foundation for communicating this vision. Much of the values of the building likely align with values of the park and will resonate with the public because they are visual and future-oriented. One of the great Albanian Renaissance writers, Naim Frashëri grew up in Vjosa and conjured patriotism through the beauty of the landscape. A blueprint for the future of Albanian rural life has been established by this park.

- **The future of the park is going to need regular people to help protect it. Start building that sense of duty now by being generous with information.**  
Information empowers citizen conservationists. Thorough, regular, and up-to-date Government information about what isn't allowed and what is, where, and how much, empowers people to help in the protection effort.
- **Keep talking, be present, be accessible**  
The government needs to foster ongoing dialogue and collaboration with stakeholders to address shared challenges and concerns in a consistent, transparent forum. This will improve institutional trust and simultaneously strengthen allyship and boost support from uninvolved actors.
- **Build the park with not for**  
No one likes having change dumped on them. Implement inclusive management approaches that involve stakeholders from all sectors, including tourism, agriculture, industry, and government, and local communities. Overall, stakeholders who have been more engaged in dialogue are at the same time more aware of what ensues with the new status of the river and also support the project beyond personal benefits.
- **Engage children and youth**  
Kids want something to do. Children's bonds with the natural world are more easily and durably formed the younger they are. But once they're formed they last a lifetime. Build school programs beginning in kindergarten to bring regional schools to the river on a regular basis. Build it into the science curriculum. And support schools to grow student associations to do awareness-raising and habitat conservation activities.
- **Keep local authorities resourced**  
Local and regional authorities need to be equipped with resources, capacities and finances to target issues that affect livelihoods of people in the VWRNP. These strategies would ensure the alignment of different governmental levels' goals with conservation and management efforts, and make a smoother transition towards total the maximum level of protection while securing local support.
- **Think Long term, act short term**  
Everyday frustrations make it easy to forget that the park ecosystem will last many centuries if well cared for. The challenges we face have to be taken incrementally with an eye on long term horizons. One government respondent, when asked if they felt that the park poses a risk or challenge to their work, responded simply yes, "but It is worth it (!)"