

# Wild Rivers – Ethics Module



## 1. Aim of this module

Inspire ethical reflection about wild rivers, and our relation to them: Why are wild rivers important to you? What are important arguments for wild river protection? Which arguments do you agree with, which arguments do you object to?

## 2. Module instruction

Start with an introductory round: what do your group members associate with “wild” and a “wild nature”? Then distribute the text “It is a wild, wild river” (next page). It is a short text. Reading requires about 15-20 minutes. Once everyone has read the text, ask your group members to take notes on the four questions below. In a final step, share responses and ideas in the group.

- I. What are the directly human-related reasons for wild river protection? These are called anthropocentric, because they put humans (Greek: anthropos) into the centre of ethics.
- II. What are further reasons for river protection, and how do they differ from the anthropocentric arguments? They are called physio-centric, because here nature (Greek: physis) is in the centre; animals, plants and rivers are considered for their own sake, and not just for us.
- III. What are your reasons for protecting wild rivers (or for objecting to such protection)?
- IV. Let’s focus on wild rivers and their inhabitants for their own sake. Does this mean that using river for hydropower, and hence building dams, is morally forbidden?

This module can be done in 1-2 hours.

## 3. Communication

If you feel that your response to the last two questions should be shared, do not hesitate to send it to us ([info@bigjumpchallenge.net](mailto:info@bigjumpchallenge.net) or post it on the big jump challenge facebook).

## 4. Further resources

- More about the definition of “wild rivers” in the module “What is a wild river” in the river action toolbox <http://www.bigjumpchallenge.net/toolbox.html>.
- The arguments in the text are discussed in depth in a sub-discipline of philosophy called environmental ethics. For some introductory articles, have a look here <https://enviroethics.org/introductory-articles/>; and specifically on the topic of wilderness here: <https://enviroethics.org/texts-subtopics/#wild>.
- No wild river at the doorstep? Watch this documentary made by young filmmakers about the Vjosa: “One for the river – the Vjosa story” (free download on [vimeo](https://vimeo.com/113111111)) or get inspired by the choice of films here <https://www.wildandscenicfilmfestival.org/>.

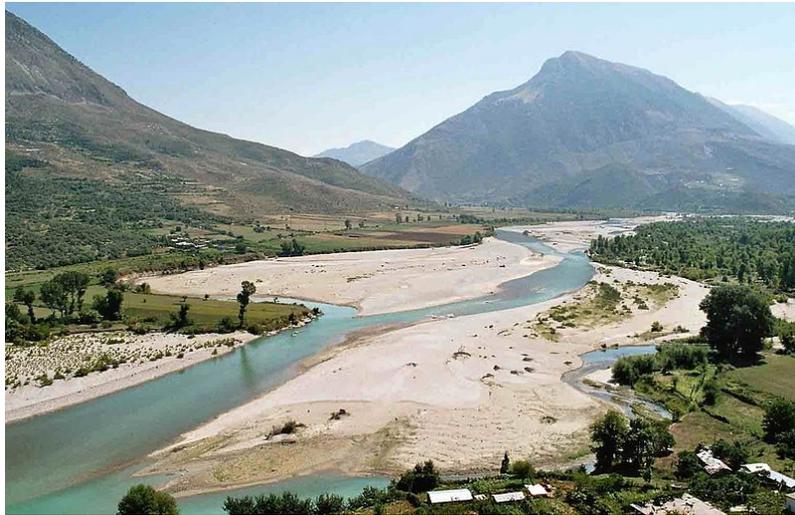
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## **It is a wild, wild river – so why should we protect it?**

If you step out of the house, the chance is very low that you will see a wild river. They are the rare type among European rivers (and not just in Europe).

They are rare because they are free flowing. There are no dams or large modifications of the river bed, of its embankment, and of the surrounding meadows and floodplains for at least a significant amount of its course. The water quality is good. The biodiversity is highly adapted to this free fellow. However, cities are usually founded at the river, and much of the trade and economic development of industrialization until recently relied on rivers for transport and energy. In the densely populated and industrialized Europe, wild rivers are therefore under enormous pressure. Some say the only remaining big, free flowing river of Europe is the Vjosa (Greece/Albania). However, due to the recent boom in hydropower, the Vjosa along with other remaining wild rivers might no longer flow freely soon.



Vjosa at Tepelena. Photo credit: Wiki\_Media

Still, others things are also rare. For example, emerald-coloured rivers, a colour attributed to the Soča flowing through Slovenia and Italy. 450 km long canals are also rare; there is only one in Europe, the Grand Union Canal in England, which is 461 km long. So, if rarity is not the reason, why *should* we protect the wild rivers? This is a question about what it is right and what it is good to do. It is a question of ethics. So, what ethical responses can be given to this question? Here are some of the basic considerations:

***Justice and the future:*** We only borrow water from future generations, is an important slogan of the youth network for river action. Yet, what do we know about future generations? What will they like, what will they dislike? Will they like wilderness, or will they want to live in cities and cyberspace only? It is impossible to predict their choices. For this reason, current generations should preserve the options of future generations. They should have at least the real opportunity to have (some) wild rivers around (even if we do not know, if, why and how they will enjoy them).

***The intrinsic value of rivers:*** We can speak of constrained, modified, unfree rivers. We can “think like a river”, see *it’s* good. But morality requires to treat others as ends, and not just as a means for us. On this view, we should respect the river as an entity with intrinsic value, and not just as something valuable for us. In short: let them flow, let them rustle, let them sparkle.

This point is even stronger once we note that while we can appreciate the idea of free flowing river, no one has ever been able to create or plan one. Science is still struggling to understand the complex interactions of such river systems. To be sure, there can be legitimate reasons for river modification – such as meeting needs of drinking water and food. But even if we cannot respect all rivers as free-flowing, as a legitimate second-best we should at least respect those few rivers that still run freely.

***The value of all life & biodiversity:*** Perhaps, you are sceptical about our capacity of “thinking like a river”. But surely, rivers are important for living beings, for plants, and fish that have over a long period of time adapted to these ecosystems, and are hence unlikely to survive anywhere else – perhaps only in the gravel of a meandering riverbed. In short, this argument says: if you don’t do it for the river, then do it for the fish! There is also an instrumental argument here: if you value biodiversity, and its many real and potential benefits for humans, then protecting the frequently unique life of rivers is also important. For example, the critically endangered European Eel almost only occurs in the Vjosa.

***Wild rivers and different lifestyles:*** “Wild rivers” sounds a bit like “wild west”. And as in Western films, it turns out that there are already people living there, in the “wild”. Are these people also “wild”? Surely not in the sense of “primitive”! Rather, they show that there are other lifestyles possible in this world: without much industrialization, without or with very little agriculture. A commitment to happiness and everyone’s freedom are widely shared in our societies. If we protect wild rivers, we recognize other ways of living and being happy. It is about freedom.

***Beauty and recreation:*** The appeal of the “wild” is also an attraction of beauty. A free-flowing river sounds different than a canal, its flows and its embankment have evolved in a unique way. The river has literally created its bed, and is not put into a bed made for the river. This creative force attracts our sense of beauty (even if only transported via pictures, documentaries and travel reports). For many, this sensory experience is also recreational. Leading a good life is a fundamental value, and if the experience of beauty in nature and the recreational value of such nature, contributes to the good life of many, then there is a strong case to protect wild rivers.

***International justice and Europe:*** Above we noted that there are not many wild rivers left – especially not in industrialized and densely populated Europe. This creates pressure on a country like Albania to protect the Vjosa – perhaps the last, big wild flowing river in Europe. Not doing something does have opportunity costs for Albania – while others enjoy industry, and also want to have the wild rivers elsewhere, Albanians cannot use the energy of the river for its industry. Rather, it protects other valuable ecosystem services: recreation, beauty, freshwater, fishing and biodiversity. It is only fair therefore to support such a country in its effort not to industrialize the river. The industrialized countries have a responsibility to support those countries and regions with the remaining wild rivers in recognition of a joint heritage, and of the many values and options thereby preserved.

## **Acknowledgments**

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