

CASE STUDY 3

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ALBANIA

Organization: National Federation of Communal Forests and Pastures of Albania (NFCFPA)
Region: Europe

The Ulza Watershed in Albania is characterized by forests dominated by oak and interspersed with black pine and acacia, alongside grazing lands, crop-lands, rivers, and the Ulza Lake. Across three villages, the territory encompasses 12 forest parcels. This landscape provides biodiversity habitat, regulates water and climate, and sustains local livelihoods through fuel-wood, timber, grazing, non-timber forest products, livestock, and small-scale cultivation. Soils in the territory are rich in organic matter while forests are important for carbon sequestration.

Historically, customary institutions shaped resource governance, establishing norms for forest and land management. During the communist period, lands were reorganized into collective farms, and post-communist reforms redistributed land without reinstating pre-communist owners, creating long-standing disputes and legal ambiguities that persist today. Decentralisation efforts by the national government have transferred approximately 60% of forest and pasture-land to municipal ownership, resources upon which nearly one million people depend. The hybrid tenure system present in the territory results in a lack of clarity over access and use rights.

The landscape faces mounting environmental pressures. Illegal logging and over-harvesting of firewood have led to deforestation, while abandoned farmland has accelerated erosion, with 30% of the soils showing a exceptional high level of soil erosion. Overgrazing, water pollution, and biodiversity decline compound these pressures, alongside increasing climate-related threats such as floods, droughts, and wildfires. Governance gaps and poor infrastructure, including the absence of adequate sewerage, water supply, and road systems, further hinder sustainable management.

Despite these challenges, communities continue to play a central role in natural resource management. Customary institutions remain influential in everyday management and conflict resolution, with villagers respecting informal boundaries that have contributed to the preservation of forest parcels. *Community-led natural resource management* (*CLNRM*) and *Sustainable Land Management* (*SLM*) practices have become key in fostering local participation and collaborative decision-making. Villagers have engaged in forest tending works, thinning of young oak stands, and afforestation with acacia and stone pine. Scientific studies and local examining confirm that selective thinning enhances long-term biomass accumulation in oak forests and carbon storage potential. These efforts are complemented by a large-scale carbon sequestration project, which restored approximately 6,000 hectares of degraded forest in 24 municipalities. Other practices include agroforestry, assisted natural regeneration, climate-smart agriculture, and sustainable grazing, with some supported through carbon credit programs. Monitoring ecosystem health is done through both scientific methods and community-based observations. Geospatial tools are employed and key indicators include forest health, soil quality, water quality, biodiversity, crop and grazing productivity, and fire/degradation risk, with community proxies such as availability of firewood, crop vigour, fish abundance, seasonal species sightings, livestock weight gain, and reports of wildfires.

The environmental outcomes of these initiatives are measurable. Between 2001 and 2024, Ulza's forests functioned as a net carbon sink of 8.77 $ktCO_2e$ per year, removing 9.21 $ktCO_2e$ annually while emitting just 434 tCO_2e.[32] The forests remain largely natural, with very little tree cover loss, though biodiversity is assessed as having moderate intactness.[33] These findings underscore both the fragility and the promise of Albania's communal forest management, where traditional governance and community-led restoration and adaptation offer a pathway to ecological sustainability and climate resilience.

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33 Hill, S.L.L., A. Arnell, C. Maney, S.H.M. Butchart, C. Hilton-Taylor, C. Ciciarelli, C. Davis, E. Dinerstein, A. Purvis, and N.D. Burgess. 2019. "Measuring Forest Biodiversity Status and Changes Globally." Frontiers in Forests and Global Change 2 (November). doi:10.3389/ffgc.2019.00070. Accessed from ***www.landmarkmap.org***.