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# Flamingo Revolution in Albania: Environmental Governance, Protected Areas and Sustainable Development

Published On: 02-07-2026

## Recent Developments:

- **People across Albania have launched the "Flamingo Revolution"** against a proposed **US\$1.6 billion luxury tourism project** involving **Sazan Island** and the **Vjosa–Narta Protected Landscape**, a globally significant coastal wetland. The movement has evolved from an environmental campaign into a broader anti-corruption protest demanding greater transparency and accountability.
- **The protests intensified after Albania amended its Protected Areas Law in 2024**, permitting strategic developments inside certain protected areas, raising concerns over biodiversity conservation and compliance with European environmental standards.
- **The European Parliament has urged Albania to suspend construction in protected areas** until environmental safeguards and legal commitments are fully respected, especially as Albania continues negotiations for European Union membership.

## Flamingo Revolution:

### *Background:*

- **The Flamingo Revolution** is a public protest movement opposing the construction of a luxury tourism project in environmentally sensitive coastal ecosystems.
- **The proposed project includes development on Sazan Island and the Vjosa–Narta wetland**, an important habitat for flamingos, Mediterranean monk seals and nesting sea turtles.
- **Protesters allege that the project was approved without meaningful public consultation**, environmental transparency or adequate ecological assessment.
- **The movement has expanded beyond environmental concerns**, demanding stronger democratic accountability, anti-corruption measures and the resignation of **Prime Minister Edi Rama**.

## Why the Project is Controversial:

### *Threat to Protected Ecosystems:*

- **The Vjosa–Narta Protected Landscape** forms one of the Mediterranean's most ecologically valuable coastal wetland systems.
- **The area supports rich biodiversity**, including migratory birds, coastal lagoons, dunes, salt marshes and endangered marine species.
- **Construction activities may fragment habitats, disturb breeding grounds and reduce ecological connectivity**, threatening long-term ecosystem health.
- **Wetlands also provide essential ecosystem services**, including flood regulation, carbon sequestration, groundwater recharge and fisheries support.

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### *Concerns over Environmental Governance:*

- **Albania amended its Protected Areas Law in 2024**, allowing strategic investment projects within previously protected areas.
- **Environmental groups argue that the amendments weaken legal protection** for ecologically sensitive landscapes.
- **The project has generated debate regarding balancing economic development with biodiversity conservation.**
- **The controversy also raises questions regarding transparency, environmental impact assessment and public participation in decision-making.**

### Natura 2000 Network:

#### *About Natura 2000:*

- **Natura 2000 is the European Union's largest coordinated network of protected areas**, established to conserve biodiversity while permitting sustainable human activities.
- **The network is based on the Birds Directive (1979) and the Habitats Directive (1992).**
- **Its objective is to protect threatened habitats and species of European importance while maintaining ecological connectivity.**
- **Candidate countries seeking European Union membership are expected to progressively align their environmental laws with Natura 2000 standards.**

### About Albania:

#### *Geographical Features:*

- **Albania is located in Southern Europe on the Balkan Peninsula.**
- **It lies along the Strait of Otranto**, connecting the Adriatic Sea with the Ionian Sea.
- **The capital city is Tirana.**
- **Albania shares land boundaries with Montenegro, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Greece.**
- **The country is predominantly mountainous**, with mountains covering about **28%** of its area, hills **47%** and plains about **25%**.
- **Its coastline supports numerous lagoons, wetlands and coastal ecosystems of international ecological importance.**

#### *Political and International Profile:*

- **Albania is a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).**
- **It is an official candidate for membership of the European Union** and continues negotiations to harmonise domestic laws with European standards.
- **Compliance with environmental legislation forms an important component of the European Union accession process.**

### Flamingos:

#### *Classification and Distribution:*

- **Flamingos belong to the family Phoenicopteridae.**
- **They are recognised by their pink plumage, long legs, elongated neck and downward-curved filter-feeding beak.**
- **Six living flamingo species occur across Africa, Europe, Asia and the Americas.**
- **India supports two flamingo species**, namely the **Greater Flamingo (Phoenicopterus roseus)** and the **Lesser Flamingo (Phoeniconaias minor).**

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### *Species of Flamingos:*

- **Greater Flamingo (Phoenicopterus roseus).**
- **Lesser Flamingo (Phoeniconaias minor).**
- **American or Caribbean Flamingo (Phoenicopterus ruber).**
- **Chilean Flamingo (Phoenicopterus chilensis).**
- **Andean Flamingo (Phoenicoparrus andinus).**
- **James's or Puna Flamingo (Phoenicoparrus jamesi).**

### *Distribution in India:*

- **Greater Flamingos and Lesser Flamingos occur mainly in coastal wetlands, mudflats, estuaries, lagoons and salt pans.**
- **Important habitats include the Rann of Kutch, Gulf of Khambhat, Gulf of Kachchh, Chilika Lake, Pulicat Lake and several coastal wetlands of western India.**
- **Large seasonal congregations occur during winter migration.**

### *Major Threats:*

- **Habitat degradation, wetland reclamation, pollution and unplanned infrastructure development reduce breeding and feeding habitats.**
- **Human disturbance at nesting colonies affects breeding success.**
- **Climate change alters wetland hydrology, influencing food availability and migration patterns.**
- **Increasing coastal urbanisation and tourism pressure threaten long-term habitat stability.**

### *Conservation Status:*

- **Greater Flamingo: International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) – Least Concern.**
- **Lesser Flamingo: International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) – Near Threatened.**

### Importance of Wetlands in Biodiversity Conservation:

#### *Ecological Significance:*

- **Wetlands serve as critical habitats for migratory birds, aquatic organisms and threatened wildlife.**
- **They regulate floods, improve water quality, recharge groundwater and store significant quantities of carbon.**
- **Healthy wetlands strengthen climate resilience and support sustainable livelihoods through fisheries, tourism and agriculture.**
- **Conserving wetlands contributes directly to achieving biodiversity conservation and sustainable development goals.**

### Major Environmental Issues Highlighted by the Protest:

#### *Key Concerns:*

- **Conflict between infrastructure-led economic development and biodiversity conservation.**
- **Weakening of legal safeguards protecting ecologically sensitive areas.**
- **Limited public consultation in environmentally significant projects.**
- **Need for transparent Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) before project approval.**
- **Importance of balancing tourism development with long-term ecological sustainability.**

### Way Forward:

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### *Sustainable Development Measures:*

- **Protected areas should remain scientifically managed through ecosystem-based conservation approaches.**
- **Transparent Environmental Impact Assessments and meaningful public participation** should precede all major infrastructure projects.
- **Wetland conservation should be integrated with climate adaptation and biodiversity strategies.**
- **Development planning should follow the principles of sustainable development, precautionary approach and inter-generational equity.**
- **Strengthening environmental governance will improve biodiversity protection while supporting responsible economic growth.**

### Value Addition for UPSC:

#### *Important International Frameworks:*

- **Natura 2000:** European Union network of protected areas established under the **Birds Directive** and **Habitats Directive**.
- **Ramsar Convention (1971):** International treaty for the conservation and wise use of wetlands.
- **Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD):** Global agreement promoting biodiversity conservation, sustainable use and equitable sharing of genetic resources.
- **East Atlantic Flyway:** One of the world's major migratory bird routes used by flamingos and numerous other waterbirds.

#### *Important Terms:*

- **Protected Area:** A geographically defined area managed to conserve biodiversity and natural ecosystems.
- **Wetland:** An ecosystem where land remains permanently or seasonally saturated with water, supporting specialised flora and fauna.
- **Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA):** A systematic process for evaluating the environmental consequences of proposed development projects before approval.
- **Ecological Connectivity:** The movement of species and ecological processes across interconnected natural habitats.
- **Sustainable Tourism:** Tourism that balances economic benefits with environmental conservation and community well-being