



PRESPA'S  
Green & Blue Lifelines

#01

The Great Prespa  
Lakeside Forest

**In the 'Prespa's Green and Blue Lifelines' project the SPP aims to strengthen the collection of scientific data and promote recognition of the importance of riparian zones.**



# Contents

## THE LAKESIDE FOREST

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- 04 TAKING SHAPE OVER TIME
- 07 INTERCONNECTED LIVES
- 10 HABITAT TYPES
- 12 FOREST RESIDENTS
- 15 WHAT PEOPLE THINK ABOUT THE FOREST
- 16 WHY WE SHOULD PROTECT THE FOREST
- 18 FACING THREATS
- 20 PROPOSALS FOR THE FUTURE
- 22 BIBLIOGRAPHY



# Taking shape over time

Thousands of years ago sediment transported by the Agios Germanos (Geropotamos) River, and the action of the waves in the hitherto undivided lake, created an isthmus of stable ground. In 1936, the Agios Germanos River, which until then had also fed Lesser Prespa Lake for several months of the year, was diverted towards Great Prespa and the wide delta dried up, giving space for the development of agricultural fields.



Lakeside forest (predominantly silver birch)

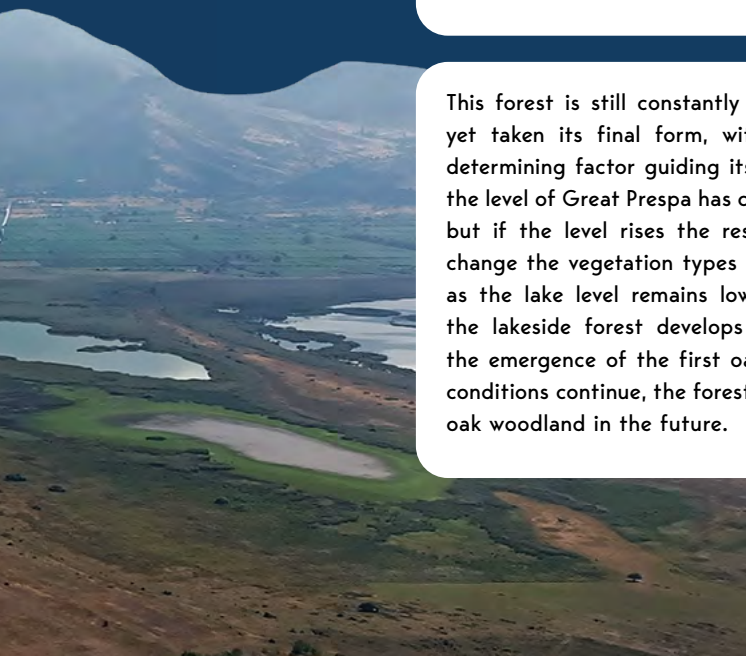
Lakeside forest (mainly willow and poplar)

Brambles and low shrubs

Mouth of the Agios Germanos River

Meadows

Visible fall in lake level



In this narrow strip of land between Koula in the west and the border with North Macedonia in the east, the constant alluvial deposits created fertile ground for woody vegetation to develop. Since the mid-1990s, as the water of Great Prespa Lake has gradually receded, a rich, dense riparian forest began to form.

Despite the fact that this area was underwater only forty years ago, reeds sprang up in the sandy ground, while bramble (*Rubus sanctus*) and other low shrubs spread in the more stable soils. On patches of solid ground, a small wetland forest of willow, silver birch and poplar emerged.

This forest is still constantly evolving and hasn't yet taken its final form, with water being the determining factor guiding its growth. The fall in the level of Great Prespa has created new habitats, but if the level rises the resulting flooding will change the vegetation types in the area. As long as the lake level remains low, the vegetation in the lakeside forest develops more quickly, with the emergence of the first oak saplings. If these conditions continue, the forest will turn into mixed oak woodland in the future.

The lakeside, or riparian, forest is defined by its location along the shore of Great Prespa Lake in the north of the Prespa National Park and differs from other forests, as it is an ecosystem transitioning between terrestrial and aquatic systems. The vegetation mosaic that has been created has different life forms and ecological processes in comparison to neighbouring ecosystems, and it also varies in physiognomy, structure and composition, following local shifts in the natural hydrological conditions.

The forest vegetation shows different resilience to flooded and anaerobic stress conditions in comparison with the more mountainous neighbouring areas. Looking at the wider ranges to which the species belong reveals the more Central European and less Mediterranean character of the vegetation, where the European species seem to prevail (45%) and the Mediterranean to follow (25%). The proportion of dominant European vegetation is considered to be amongst the highest in Greece.

# Water level of Great Prespa (1951-2023)





# Interconnected lives

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In total, there are twelve types of habitat on the isthmus, of which five are noted in the EU Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC, with two of these being priority habitats (626O and 91EO). Two of those not mentioned in the directive are considered to be of national significance (72AO and 72BO), which is very important as at national level they are only found in Prespa. In this area the habitat types don't have strict boundaries but blend into each other creating an ever-changing complex of forms. The largest number of habitats is found around the Agios Germanos rivermouth and just to the north of there.

288 species and subspecies of plants have been recorded in these habitat types, with sandy areas having the greatest plant diversity (141 species), followed by the mixed forest of willow, silver birch and poplar (71 species) and the alder forest habitat type (56 species).

The existence of the unusual forest form of mixed stands of willow and silver birch is particularly important. These stands are found on the north-eastern part of the lakeshore in Greece, as well as in the northern and eastern parts of the lake in North Macedonia. This mix of trees is especially rare in the Balkans and has an important role in keeping the area's hydrological cycle stable.

Amongst these plants are 21 Balkan endemic species that require protection (7% of the total). Similarly, 23 further plants are nationally characterised as "Other Important Species", while 4 species nationally protected by Presidential Decree (P.D. 67/81), *Centaurea cuneifolia*, *Onosma heterophylla*, *Papaver rhoeas* and *Rubus sanctus*, as well as the species *Verbascum eriophorum*, have a limited distribution range. Looking the wider distribution area to which these plants belong, it's clear that the European species prevail in the mixed forest of willow, silver birch and poplar (49%), followed by the temperate species (17%), while alder forests have slightly more temperate species (21%), with the European plants occupying 50%. In both types of forests only 13% of the plant species are Mediterranean.

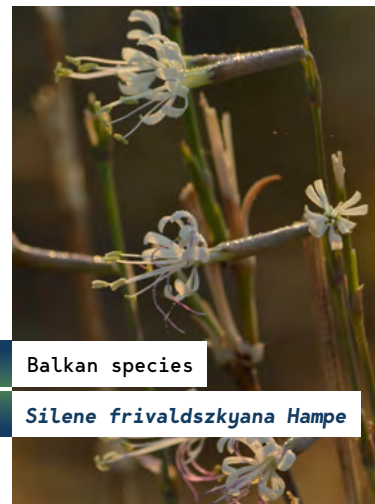
The main habitat type in the lakeside forest is 91AO 'Salix alba and Populus alba galleries', which is described in the Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC and includes riparian forest galleries in which willow and poplar species predominate. The dominant species here are white willow (*Salix alba*), silver or white poplar (*Populus alba*), silver birch (*Betula pendula*) and goat or pussy willow (*Salix caprea*), often mixed together, or sometimes forming associations or thickets.

Silver birch ranges mostly north and east of the Agios Germanos River; as a cold-loving species, it seems to be limited to the foothills of Mt Varnous, where the mountain peaks generate cold downward winds.

White poplar appears to be spreading south and east of the river, while white willow is rapidly spreading towards the shoreline north of the rivermouth. In 2023, the forest occupied 95.78 ha, a relative increase in area compared to habitat mapping in 2009, although the forest seems slightly more fragmented nowadays. Sampling also shows the gradual but strong encroachment of oak species, mainly downy oak (*Quercus pubescens*) and Hungarian oak (*Quercus frainetto*).

Limited range

*Verbascum eriophorum*



Balkan species

*Silene frivaldszkyana* Hampe

European - SW Asian

*Lythrum salicaria* L.





In lower places and along the length of the Agios Germanos River, we see the habitat type 91E0 'Alluvial forests with *Alnus glutinosa* and *Fraxinus excelsior* (*Alno-Padion*, *Alnion incanae*, *Salicion albae*)', which is also a priority under the Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC. This type includes alder forests that usually grow on heavy and periodically flooded soils, such as riverbanks and lakeshores. Its range of 15.94 ha seems to be stable compared to 2009, and it forms pure, unmixed forests along the length of the Agios Germanos River.

In terms of its structure, the lakeside forest has pure stands of alders along the bed of the Agios Germanos River, while the willows, poplars and silver birches form thickets or mixed associations, though more rarely we sometimes find a mix of individual trees. The densest places are those where alder (*Alnus glutinosa*) appears, gradually becoming less dense in forests where white willow (*Salix alba*) predominates. The lakeside forest has rather even-aged stands throughout its area, which are approaching 30 years old, as the trees emerged at almost the same time. Trees in places with *Salix alba*, *Betula pendula* and *Populus alba* are moderately high, while in shallow gradients they are mainly of low and medium height, with the average tree height in the forest rarely exceeding 15 m.

White poplar (*Populus alba*)



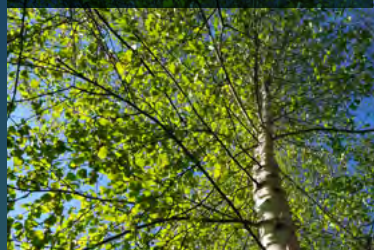
Max. Height: 30m Average Height: 16.67m

Forest type: 92A0

Assessment of conservation degree:

Very good, due to the increase in its area, however it is at risk from succession to oak forest. In these forests there is a large mix of species.

Silver birch (*Betula pendula*)



Max. Height: 22m Average Height: 13.60m

Forest type: 92A0

Assessment of conservation degree:

Very good, due to the increase in its area, however it is at risk from succession to oak forest.

White willow (*Salix alba*)



Max. Height: 30m Average Height: 16m

Forest type: 92A0

Assessment of conservation degree:

Very good, with rapid expansion towards the shoreline north of the rivermouth. Increased forest area compared to 2009, but slightly more fragmented.

Alder (*Alnus glutinosa*)



Max. Height: 30m Average Height: 14.83m

Forest type: 91E0

Assessment of conservation degree:

Very good, mainly due to maintaining its area and generally remaining undisturbed, however a lack of regeneration is observed.

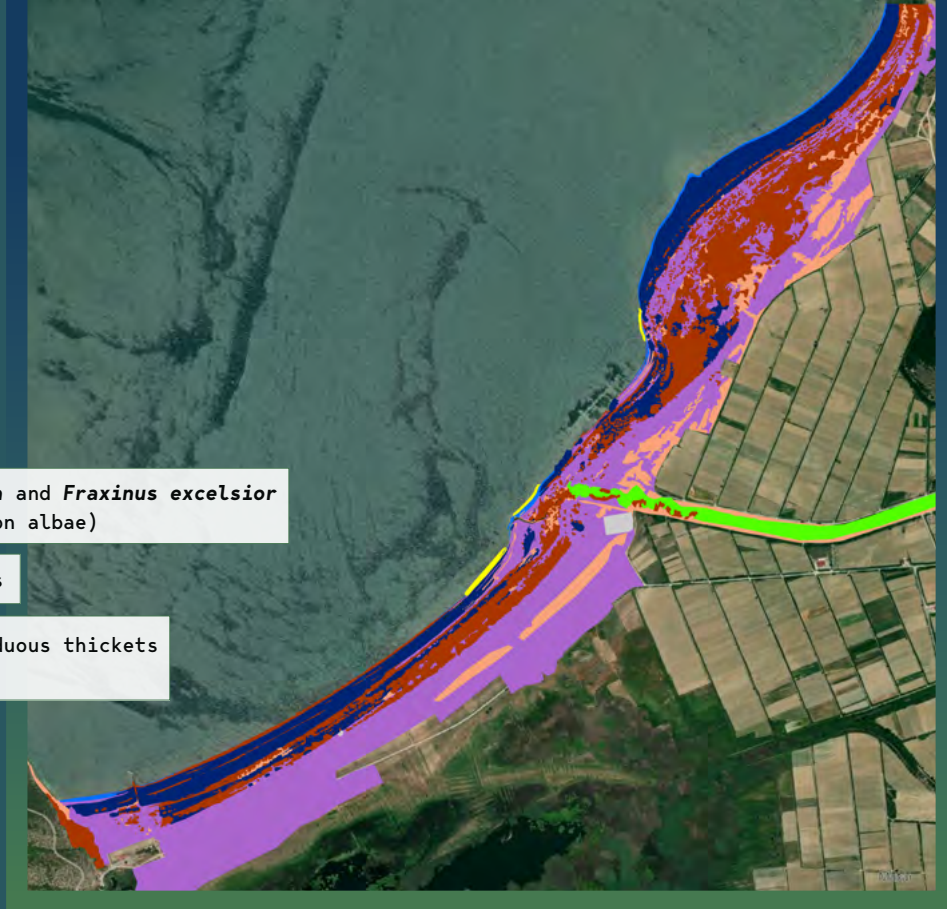
# Habitat types

## Forest habitat types

- 91E0 Alluvial forests with *Alnus glutinosa* and *Fraxinus excelsior* (Alno-Padion, Alnion incanae, Salicion albae)
- 92A0 *Salix alba* and *Populus alba* galleries
- 5160 South-eastern sub-Mediterranean deciduous thickets (*Prunion fruticosae*)

## Other habitat types

- 1012 Service areas
- 21B0 Unvegetated sandy beaches
- 3270 Rivers with muddy banks with *Chenopodium rubri p.p.* and *Bidention p.p.* vegetation
- 6260 Pannonic sand steppes
- 72A0 Reedbeds



2009

2023

## 2009-2023

### Changes in the distribution of willow-poplar-silver birch

Habitat type 92A0



## Species distribution



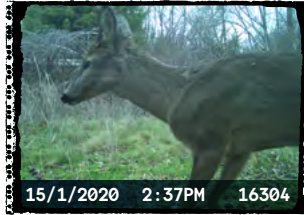
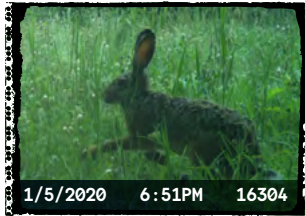
Silver birch (*Betula pendula*)

White willow (*Salix alba*)

Silver or white poplar (*Populus alba*)

Young *Salix alba* forests

# Forest residents



Prespa's lakeside forest is not just special for its rich vegetation structure, but also because it makes a 'green bridge' between the eastern and western parts of the Prespa National Park on the one hand, and between Greece and North Macedonia on the other. Many animals use the isthmus as a movement corridor every day, and the rich composition of the forest makes it an ideal place for many mammals and birds to breed.

At least 14 species of mammals are found in the forest, the most common of which are wild boar (*Sus scrofa*), roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus*), European badger (*Meles meles*), wildcat (*Felix sylvestris*) and European hare (*Lepus europaeus*). Less frequently recorded mammals include brown bear (*Ursus arctos*), wolf (*Canis lupus*), golden jackal (*Canis aureus*), martens (*Mustela sp.*) and the red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*). A recent record of European polecat (*Mustela putorius*) is extremely unusual, as it is the first concrete evidence that this species is present in Prespa.

Most mammals usually limit their movements during daylight hours to avoid encountering people, but as there isn't any intense human activity in the lakeside forest, animals are also active there during the day, mostly smaller mammals.



Wildcat



Penduline tit

Even though it's relatively much less abundant than the other mammals, the golden jackal seems to have established a population in the Greek part of the Prespa basin. They mainly move along the Great Prespa shore up to the mouth of the Koula channel, from where they can access the western part of the Prespa National Park, as roe deer also do.

The lakeside forest is a critical habitat for roe deer, which can find important food sources there, such as the leaves of willow, poplar, silver birch and other broad-leaved species. Young roe deer find refuge in the dense thickets of vegetation, which keeps them hidden until their mother returns to nurse them. Meanwhile, the stray dogs in the area have a negative impact on young or small mammals, such as badgers, which often suffer from their attacks.

The forest is an important breeding ground for birds in the Prespa National Park, with at least 29 bird species found there. The most numerous species recorded as nesting are the common starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*), common nightingale (*Luscinia megarhynchos*) and the Eurasian blackcap (*Sylvia atricapilla*). The European turtle dove (*Streptopelia turtur*), which is also seen in high numbers, is a vulnerable species (VU) on the IUCN Red List with an ever-declining population.



Common nightingale

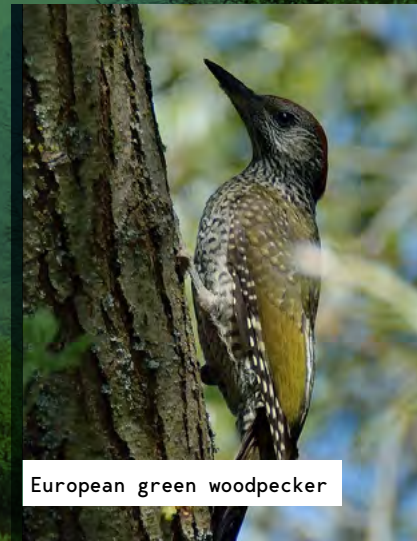
The Syrian woodpecker (*Dendrocopos syriacus*), red-backed shrike (*Lanius collurio*), woodlark (*Lullula arborea*) and the European honey buzzard (*Pernis apivorus*) are included in Annex I of the National Directive on birds, which provides for special conservation measures for their habitats. This list also includes the European nightjar (*Caprimulgus europaeus*), short-toed eagle (*Circaetus gallicus*), western marsh harrier (*Circus aeruginosus*) and collared flycatcher (*Ficedula albicollis*), which have been seen to make intensive use of the forest, often during migration, in order to meet their needs for rest and food.

Other species, such as the Eurasian nuthatch (*Sitta europaea*), visit the forest when their young begin to leave the nest and disperse. Lastly, there is also evidence that some species, such as the Eurasian sparrowhawk (*Accipiter nisus*), breed in the area but are difficult to locate, while the common swift (*Apus apus*), which is assessed as near threatened (NT) by the IUCN, uses the airspace above the forest to feed.

As the vegetation grows and the forest matures, more woodpeckers and birds of prey are choosing the lakeside forest for breeding. In spring, the lesser spotted woodpecker (*Dryobates minor*) and European green woodpecker (*Picus viridis*) can be heard moving between the silver birches looking for suitable nesting trees. The presence of a few Eurasian chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*) in the past shows that they had initially colonised the forest but later abandoned it. Likewise, the lesser grey shrike (*Lanius minor*) and cirl bunting (*Emberiza cirrus*) seem to have initially been recorded at the forest edges and then as the forest matured they gradually abandoned it.




Lesser spotted woodpecker



European green woodpecker

# What people think about the forest



The forest on the Greek side of Great Prespa Lake hasn't always been there. There used to be an open view to the lake, with the shores of the neighbouring countries and the island of Golem Grad on the horizon. From the moment that the forest began to emerge, it has been met with mixed feelings from the residents of Prespa. According to a study carried out in 2023, aiming to capture the views of the local community on the value of the river, streams and riparian zones of Prespa, the majority of residents recognise their usefulness for economic, social and recreational purposes. However, there's also a strong perception that the excessively dense vegetation, which grows uncontrollably and isn't managed, makes it difficult or even impossible for residents and visitors to access the lakeside forest and streams.

While the majority of local people don't engage in any activity in the lakeside forest, 35% of residents surveyed said that they went to the forest for a visit or walk, or to swim at the beach near the rivermouth, and a few people mentioned collecting mushrooms or blackberries there when they are in season. Although aesthetic opinions about the value of the forest seem divided, the majority agree that the forest is important for the nature of the national park, as it provides oxygen, with a few also recognising its value for protecting soil from erosion and for biodiversity conservation.

Some respondents, on the other hand, are anxious about the forest. The dense vegetation, where brambles and trees are intertwined, making paths impassable, raises fears of increased wildfire risk. When winds bring down trees, the accumulated mass of dead branches and wood may become a source of wildfire, especially while the climatic conditions remain dry and hot. Many believe that wild boar hide in the forest, from where they can easily approach crops and destroy them. Participants in the survey also pointed out various problems that the forest itself faces, such as illegal logging, poaching and the dumping of rubbish and construction waste.

Many residents said that they would like the lakeside forest to "continue to exist", though a few stated that they wanted it to disappear. In any case, all agreed that the opinion of the residents of the area should be sought on issues related to the forest, while several pointed out that emphasis should be given to ecotourism promotion and development.



# Why we should protect the forest

The narrow strip of land on which the lakeside forest is found today is a complex and sensitive transitional area that connects the terrestrial environment with the river and the lakes. In the ground beneath this strip, the Lesser and Great Prespa lakes are connected to each other, especially as the water level has dropped and the surface flow has decreased. The Agios Germanos River is also connected to the underground aquifer, though the precise underground paths the water takes remain a mystery. The vegetation follows the waters and the riverbanks give space to the water-loving species of the riparian forest, whose pliant resistance to force protects the banks in high waters.





## Although small in surface area, the lakeside forest is hugely important for Prespa because:

- **It is a mosaic of different habitats** that meets the needs of a rich wildlife. The mix of different habitats that make up the forest is especially rich and many of them are not found anywhere else in Greece.
- **The forest's fallen trees create a refuge for animals**, offering a place to hide and nest, as well as food resources, while they are also home to rare species, insects and fungi.
- **It's a refuge for important pollinators**, as well as the predators that regulate populations of harmful rodents and insects, so that they don't affect the neighbouring crops.
- **It functions as a large natural microbiological and chemical filter**, improving the quality of water entering Great Prespa Lake. It retains the nutrients that are washed out of the agricultural fields and keeps the water clean.
- **The ample foliage of the trees creates its own microclimate**, lowering the temperature in the wider area, retaining dust and reducing the intensity of winds, particularly those from the north, which protects Prespa's valuable bean crops.
- **The extensive shallow tree roots limit erosion** of the soil by wind and rain.
- **It regulates the intensity of the light** beneath the trees, creating a special 'light climate environment', as well as limiting noise pollution.
- With careful management, **it can offer shade for livestock and recreation for residents or visitors** to Prespa, contributing to the local economy, as well as social and cultural development.

# Facing threats

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Together the Great Prespa lakeside forest and Agios Germanos rivermouth form an important ecosystem with ever-changing vegetation, which is faced with threats due to its unstable nature and from human impacts.



## The main pressures or threats are:

- **The interrelated relationship between the forest and the water level of Great Prespa:** The constant fall in the water level of the last six years has led to the spread of habitat types, such as reedbeds and rushes (72AO and 72BO) or mixed willow and poplar forests (92AO), as well as the emergence of a new habitat type for Greece, 3270 'Rivers with muddy banks with *Chenopodium rubri pp* and *Bidention pp* vegetation'. Any change in the water level will inevitably affect some of these habitat types.
- **Vegetation development/succession:** The stabilisation of soils and the fall of the groundwater level have allowed oaks to encroach upon the understory of the mixed forests of silver birch, willow and poplar, which will undoubtedly lead to a different form of forest, with the area north of the Agios Germanos River changing most quickly. On the rest of the isthmus, the gradual enrichment of sandy soils with organic matter from plants has given a foothold to pre-forest species like brambles.
- **Storms and strong winds:** The species that grow in the mixed forests of white willow, silver birch and white poplar usually have relatively shallow roots and are therefore more easily uprooted, so in the event of very strong winds there could be many fallen trees. However, since the more mature parts of the forest are quite dense, this also opens the forest up and allows it to regenerate.

- **Biomass accumulation and wildfire risk:** In the more mature and dense parts of the forest the understory is overgrown with various grassy or woody species, such as the common reed (*Phragmites australis*), holy bramble (*Rubus sanctus*), downy oak (*Quercus pubescens*) and common dogwood (*Cornus sanguinea*). As a result, in the event of a dry and hot summer – in combination with strong winds and fallen trees – the forest is vulnerable to wildfires. As long as the underground water level remains high, the dominant tree species retain the moisture in their trunks, reducing the danger of wildfires spreading.
- **Regeneration:** The forest needs openings and a high water level in order to regenerate. However, where openings have been created in the most mature parts of the forest they are also vulnerable to encroachment by oaks.
- **Human impacts:** These are small, but they can have a significant impact on the direction of forest development. Illegal logging and forest fragmentation, rubbish and waste dumping, road construction, uncontrolled tourism, and fires in the fields or in the drainage channels that escape towards the forest, are some of the pressures. Fragmentation of the forest can force larger mammals to seek safe passage through the fields, risking collisions with passing vehicles, while human disturbance can threaten the reproduction of sensitive species and trample rare plants.



# Proposals for the future

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The future of the lakeside forest depends on the climate and on people. By its very nature, the lakeside forest acts as an evolutionary laboratory, with water being the key factor shaping its future direction. Any measures to be taken should allow the system to adapt flexibly to the coming changes. Consequently, the first priority should be to protect this green 'lung', which provides shade and shelter to animals in the flatlands around the lakes, as well as to manage the forest so that residents and visitors can come to know it better.



# Proposals from the 'Prespa's Green and Blue Lifelines' project:

- **Inclusion in forest management plans** as a single unified forest stand from Koula to the border, with its use for wood or timber production completely ruled out. Low-impact, mild forest management could be carried out, which, amongst others, would include the removal of alien species and clearing of excess fallen branches, especially after trees have been brought down. Likewise, large lying and standing dead trees should be left, as they are valuable for forest fauna, and interventions should be planned so as not to disrupt or fragment the green movement corridor. Places with dense, undisturbed vegetation where many animals reproduce should be protected and preserved.
- **Reduce disturbance in the forest**, by reducing road construction and controlling illegal activities like sand extraction and poaching. With regard to fires, even though the nature of the forest means that significant damage is unlikely, they can nonetheless have a significant effect on wildlife, especially during the breeding period and when animals are raising young.
- **Improve footpaths**, with the protection of species and habitats as a guiding rule. Well-designed paths should enhance access to the lakeside forest for residents and visitors, while also preserving its integrity as an ecological corridor.
- **Maintain the cohesion of the vegetation**, which is considered essential for the forest, whose role as a green ecological corridor is crucial. Any intervention should be planned in such a way as not to impede the free movement of wildlife.
- **Firebreaks** should be established to protect the forest where needed, maintaining clear spaces where the forest comes into contact with reedbeds. Dry reeds often spread fires to adjacent lakeside or riparian forest vegetation, destroying the sensitive young trees. In particularly dry and hot years these wildfires can easily get out of control and spread into the wider agricultural and forest ecosystems.
- **Non-intensive grazing** with goats and sheep, to maintain low vegetation, control the spread of oak and help protect the forest from fire. To be successful the measure should ensure that herds have access to water throughout the length of the forest. The existing water trough could be reinstated and a rainwater storage tank built.
- **Monitoring of species and habitats**, which can act as both an indicator of forest development and a measure of its importance. The ongoing evolution of the forest creates challenges for various species that live in it, but also opportunities for new species to colonise the area.

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What treasures lie in the riparian forest?

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SOCIETY FOR  
THE PROTECTION  
OF PRESPA

