

Wildfires in Albania

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Introduction

Albania, despite its very small territory, is one of the European countries with a rich vegetation which originated during the Tertiary era. Today's vegetation of Albania is composed of endemic relic vegetation and of species that have invaded from neighbouring regions through migration, having phylogenetic similarities with floristic elements of neighbouring countries.

Albania is a mountainous country with high topographic and climatic variety: 52% of its surface is on elevations between 600 and 700 m above sea level with prevailing steep slopes (ca. 30%). Thus, ca. 90% of its surface is subject to severe erosion.

About 65% of Albania's population is living in rural areas, and mainly depend on extensive agricultural and stock-breeding activities. The Northern, north-eastern, southeastern and central areas are characterized by hilly-mountainous terrain, whereas the north-southern/coastal area along the Adriatic and Ionian coast is a lowland. Climate extremes range from extreme cold winters in the northern, north-eastern and south-eastern areas to very hot and dry summers along the coast. Rainfall regimes vary from North to South and from Coast to Inland. There are fewer rainy days in the South than in the North, but months without rainfall can occur at any time of the year, as it is typical for the Mediterranean climate. Local precipitation differences lead to diverse vegetation patterns.

The forests

Forests occupy 1.045 million ha with a standing volume of about 82

million m³ and an average annual growth of 1.4 m³ per ha. This is very low compared with many countries of Central Europe. Most of the forested land (77%) consists of degraded forests with low productivity, e.g. oak forests (31.8%) and shrubland (25.6%).

The forest area is divided in two basic categories according to function: production forests (ca. 900,000 ha = ca. 86% of the area) and protection and recreation forests (ca. 140,000 ha = ca. 14%). The highland ecosystems are characterized by laurel, chestnut and alpine pastoral belts at various altitudes. In the South and near the Mediterranean coast, these belts grow at a higher altitude than in the northern inland areas. The major forest tree species are:

Beech (<i>Fagus silvatica</i>)	on 160 000 ha	(= 17%)
Pine (<i>Pinus</i> spp.)	on 142 000 ha	(= 15%)
Fir (<i>Abies</i> spp.)	on 13 000 ha	(= 2%)
Oak (<i>Quercus</i> spp.)	on 300 000 ha	(= 32%)
other broadleaved species	on 510 000 ha	(= 34%)

The National Forest Inventory is carried out every ten years, and 40% of the area is treated on the basis of 5-year management plans.

Forest fire prevention and control

Human misuse of fire (accompanied with deforestation during the past years) and grazing practices were no doubt largely responsible for most of the forest destruction. Unfortunately unrestricted grazing and uncontrolled fires, caused accidentally and often due to agricultural burnings, still occur throughout the Albania.

A well-organized fire prevention programme is still absent in Albania. A permanent observation-signalization system/net (with several fire towers per district) is available in fire-endangered forests of the whole

country and operated by the Forest Service during the fire season. The availability of fire suppression infrastructure and equipment, however, is still very insufficient.

The legislative frame of forest fire control is incorporated into the law "On Forests and Forest Service Police", being accompanied by the by-law "On Forest Fire and Pest Control" and a special Regulation "Forest Fires".

Forest Fire Statistics

Forest fires are collected by the Forest Districts and evaluated by the General Forest Directorate. Most of the forest fires in Albania occur at the end of spring and in summer. The main causes of fires are human negligence, and to a lesser extent due to arson or caused by lightning. Fire data for the period 1981-1993 are given in Table 1.

Fire programme needs

Humans are responsible for almost all wildfires in Albania, due to people's careless and destructive behaviour. The use of slogans for public awareness-raising, e.g. forest animals with fire-prevention slogans as used in other countries, is not applied in Albania. An improved fire-prevention programme is needed which must go along with technical fire-management measures. For instance, lookout towers for fire detection are available, but they are not accompanied by other necessary means such as a fire danger rating system or the involvement of the media. There is modest equipment available for forest fire suppression, but it is far from being sufficient.

Albania urgently needs technical assistance from other countries to build up forest fire management capabilities and basics in fire research. For this purpose the General Directorate of Forestry & Pastures, the Forest & Pastures Research Institute and the Forestry Faculty need to exchange information with other countries and the expertise of national/international institutions. The training of specialists in this field is indispensable, and provision of equipment is urgently needed.

District	Number of Forest Fires between 1989 and 1993					Total Number of Fires	Area Burned (ha)
	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993		
Berat	-	4	-	15	18	37	11
Diber	10	18	12	20	58	118	64
Durres	-	19	-	3	10	32	23
Elbasan	7	3	4	38	32	84	56
Fier	4	-	2	19	16	41	47
Gramsh	-	2	-	11	22	35	25
Gjirokaster	-	4	25	48	31	144	88
Kolonje	3	9	3	33	38	86	118
Korce	9	16	1	49	52	127	170
Kruje	1	6	1	16	10	34	42
Kukes	16	20	14	25	15	90	55
Lezhe	10	12	16	22	20	80	99
Librazhd	8	4	8	15	14	49	64
Lushnje	-	3	-	1	5	9	40
Mat	2	18	1	22	70	113	117
Mirdite	5	28	35	59	44	216	171
Permet	-	5	-	-	2	7	5
Pogradec	1	-	1	2	1	5	4
Puka	17	31	26	80	88	242	208
Sarande	1	15	-	5	12	33	125
Skrapar	-	2	-	5	17	23	76
Shkodar	-	9	3	7	25	44	103
Tepelene	-	3	-	8	12	23	39
Tirane	5	14	4	37	48	109	123
Tropoje	2	4	2	38	9	55	52

Vlore	1	24	26	35	7	93	145
Total	102	273	184	613	676	1,929	2,070

Preliminary fire data of 1994: 509 forest fires on 400 ha

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Call for Support

In Spring 1994 the Editor of International Forest Fire News visited Albania. An agreement was made that the Fire Ecology Research Group will support Albania to build up fire management and research capabilities. A new research unit has been established at the Forest Research Institute in Tirana. This unit is lacking basic literature on forest fires. The readers of International Forest Fire News are kindly requested to support the new research facility and the governmental fire protection unit by providing reprints, brochures, books, training and demonstration materials on fire research and fire management, on a cost-free base. Please mail the materials to:

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