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PLANNED HIGHWAY THROUGH ARMENIAN NATURE RESERVE AVERTED

WWF, together with other local and international organizations, celebrates the decision of Armenian President Robert Kocharyan to cancel a plan to build a highway through one of the country's protected areas. After a prolonged battle against the project, the government has scrapped plans to build 17km of a 90km transnational highway from Armenia to Iran through the Shikahogh nature reserve. The victory is even more satisfying as machinery to begin highway construction had already been brought to a village near the reserve. Construction of the highway from the other side of the Meghri mountain ridge was already in progress without any public discussions.



Shikahogh Reserve – Photo: K.Manvelian

According to environmental experts, the proposed route through Shikahogh threatened to destroy at least 30ha of the reserve's area and would inevitably lead to deforestation of the unique virgin oak forests and extermination of many different species. The reserve also boasts over 1,000 types of plants,

many of them endemic, as well as Armenian mouflon (wild sheep) and the endangered Caucasian leopard.

“Shikahogh is the only place where the forests remain intact in our country and is considered to be a treasure not only for Armenia but the rest of the world as well. The highway would split Shikahogh into two parts and not only disturb the course of life in the reserve but would also be easily accessible for poachers and loggers.” said Dr Karen Manvelyan, Director of WWF Caucasus's Armenian representation.

“We are thankful to WWF and many others in the country for their active involvement in the process of saving Shikahogh reserve and for finding the alternative version of the highway,” said Aram Aghasyan, Head of the Protected Territories Department of Armenia's Ministry of Nature Protection.

“We hope the success of this campaign will be used as a model for other campaigns in the future. It can also be used as a model for countries that are in a transitional period with newly established processes of democratization, and that are usually accompanied by the uncontrolled plunder of natural resources.” added Dr. Manvelyan.

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FLOODPLAIN FOREST IN DANGER IN THE SOUTHERN CAUCASUS

The Georgia-Azerbaijan trans-border area of Iori River includes one of the last remnants of floodplain forest in Southern Caucasus, which is an important stopover site for migrating birds and harbors rich flora and fauna. The forest is protected by Chachuna sanctuary (IUCN cat. IV) on the Georgian side and by the Eldar Pine State Nature Reserve (IUCN cat. I) on the Azerbaijanian side, which was named after the endemic Eldar pine site incorporated within the sanctuary.



Chachuna sanctuary - Photo: K. Tolordava

Regrettably, floodplain forests today are among the most degraded forest ecosystems in the ecoregion, due to uncontrolled livestock grazing, illegal

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logging and fuel wood harvesting, poaching, illegal fishing and often inadequately developed infrastructure. A good example of this is the Dali reservoir on the Georgian side. Constructed for irrigation of this arid area, the irrigation plans soon proved to be infeasible and today the reservoir does not fulfill any of its intended purposes. Instead, a 50 meters tall dam blocks the Iori river valley, resulting in a disrupted hydrological regime. These factors prompted the Norwegian Ministry of Environment and WWF Norway to give a supporting hand to the governments of Georgia and Azerbaijan in strengthening the floodplain forests protection regime in the southern Caucasus. WWF Caucasus PO is responsible for leading and carrying out the project. The overall project goal is to save the threatened floodplain forest of the trans-border area of the Iori River, but at this early stage of the project development, the main intention is to stop the deterioration of the forest and to develop an integrated restoration plan that will lay the foundation for implementing measures to secure a future recovery. It will also include a feasibility study on the restoration of natural flood cycle, which will serve in subsequent development of a water management plan and in technical improvement of the water flow mechanism of the Dali reservoir; a study for the establishment of a buffer zone around Chachuna; joint training activities for the PAs staff; creation of the Trans-boundary Cooperation group; and more.

GEORGIA - TWO NATIONAL PARKS IN THE PIPELINE

After the successful implementation of the Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park, Georgia seems ready for two new national parks - the Tbilisi National Park, near the capital of Georgia and the Mtirala National Park in the region of Ajara. Tbilisi National Park is being implemented under the framework of Georgia's "Gift to the Earth" February 8, 2001 commitment, and unites the existing Saguramo Strict Nature Reserve (5 359ha) and the presently-abolished Tbilisi National Park (19 954ha). The funding for the park's establishment is provided by WWF International. At the present time, WWF Caucasus PO and its partners are engaged in specific activities that include land use analyses and mapping of the designated territory; data gathering and rapid biological/socio-economical assessments; preparation of a 10-year management plan as well as a draft law for the establishment of a new protected area.

Mtirala National Park will be the first created under the regional jurisdiction and will cover an area of 16, 000ha. The eastern part of the Black Sea basin where Mtirala is located contains globally unique ecosystems and is a storehouse of forest/shrub land biodiversity with a great number of endemic species. The natural integrity is largely intact, including the unique Colchic forests, but adjacent lands with the same ecosystem types

are threatened by overgrazing, collection of firewood and forest products, agricultural expansion, and land development.



Colchic forest – Photo: N.Zazanashvili

WWF Caucasus initiated the idea of a national park in this area back in 1997, but it failed to materialize. The subject was brought up for a second time after the political events of November 2004, and subsequently, during a recent trip to the region, WWF Caucasus representatives confirmed that the activities in the designated area which is included in WWF's list of "100 European Forests We Should Protect Now" will hopefully be launched in the nearest future.

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WWF AND THE GOVERNMENT OF ARMENIA SIGN A MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING

WWF signed its second memorandum of understanding in the Caucasus, this time with the government of Armenia. WWF has been active in the Caucasus region for more than fourteen years, though more recently in Armenia. WWF's conservation work in the region is based on a series of short- and long-term projects and programmes designed to counter biodiversity loss and provide solutions to the challenge of people to live in harmony with nature. Since 2002, WWF has jointly launched a number of initiatives in Armenia with several important international players in the conservation field. These initiatives include the planning and establishment of new protected areas and assistance for existing ones, the conservation of endangered species (such as the leopard), the sustainable use of natural resources and the strengthening civil society efforts in conservation.



Photo: H. Ghazaryan



Signing ceremony – Photo: F.Moerschel

The scope of the Memorandum covers a range of areas of joint activities that include conservation of flora and fauna, restoration of affected natural ecosystems, deforestation and desertification issues, climate change, ecosystem research activities, recovery of populations of endangered species, and others. WWF will support these efforts with fundraising activities, will be involved in projects and programs that deal with initiation, support and development of model areas for sustainable use of natural resources; will promote the Ministry of nature Protection of Armenia in international activities; will involve its experts in organizing and hosting of conferences and seminars as well as joint training programs; and so on. In coming years, WWF expects to establish an office in Armenia with the necessary capacity and competence required to handle various conservation problems in Armenia.

PRESENTING THE CAUCASUS ECOREGION

ARMENIA

For the rest of the world, Armenia is a cradle of civilisation linked with biblical traditions. It is a land of mystery and romance, of wine and hospitality, of song and dance, snowy mountains, and astonishingly beautiful lakes and ancient churches. As if all of this is not enough, Armenia also boasts unique nature.

As part of the Caucasus - one of the most biologically-rich regions in the world and included in the list of the planet's 25 most diverse and endangered hotspots - this land is home to outstanding mountains, forests, grasslands, lakes, rivers and wetlands, sheltering species such as the Caucasian leopard, the Brown bear, the Bezoar goat, the Caucasian red deer, the Mouflon, the Caucasian black grouse, and the Caspian snow cock. Indeed, vis-à-vis its own inhabitants and the rest of the world, Armenia has a responsibility to safeguard these natural treasures.



Caucasian Leopard – Photo: K.Manvelyan

Armenia is a relatively small, mountainous country located in the Caucasus region. It has total area of 29,740 km² of which 46.8% is covered by agricultural lands, 34.9% by mountains, highlands etc., 12.7% by forests and 5.6% by bodies of water. It is situated in conjunction with different floristic provinces: arid Iranian and mesophil Mediterranean, which gives a country its unique and rich biodiversity. There are approximately 500 vertebrate animals' species (99 are in Red Data List of Armenia) and 3500 vascular plant species (387 are in Red Data List of Armenia).

Tigran's elder is the only globally threatened plant included in the IUCN Red List. Among the globally threatened vertebrate animal species found in Armenia are the Western Barbastelle, Geoffroy's Bat, Schaub's Bat, Mediterranean Horseshoe Bat, Lesser Horseshoe Bat, Mehely's Horseshoe Bat, Common Otter, Wild Goat, Armenian Mouflon, Birch Mouse, Dahl's Jird, Corn Crake, Imperial Eagle, Lesser Kestrel, Marbled Duck, Darevsky's Viper, Common Tortoise, and Long-billed Curlew. A wide array of ecosystems is concentrated into a relatively small area in Armenia, contributing to the uniquely high biodiversity. The major ecosystems include forests, freshwater, high mountains, dry mountain shrub lands, steppe, semi-desert, and wetland communities.



Fight between Armenian Mouflon – Photo: H.Ghazaryan

Armenia has a long history of nature conservation. As the Armenian historian Movses Khorenatsi noted, Khosrov forest was given a status of hunting ground during the reign of king Khosrov II Kotak (Short). Since those ancient times, this area has been named the “Khosrov Forest” and has remained the least affected by human impact.

In Armenia, the system of protected areas was established in 1958. The strategic task of the protected areas network is the conservation of all biological and landscape diversity in the natural

complexes. Currently, Armenia has three reserves (Khosrov, Shikahogh and Erebuni), two national parks (Sevan and Dilijan) and twenty-three sanctuaries (under the authority of different organizations and without a management infrastructure). Total coverage of the protected areas is 316446 ha, including the surface of Lake Sevan.

Unfortunately, Armenia cannot escape the inevitable risks of a country in transition, and as a result its natural heritage is at serious risk. Illegal logging, fuel wood harvesting, timber trade, overgrazing, poaching and illegal trade, overfishing, infrastructure development, and the pollution of rivers and wetlands have led to habitat degradation, to the decline of species populations and to the disruption of ecological processes which are also essential to human well-being. Based on a global assessment of its Ecological Footprint in 2004, the resource use in Armenia seems already to exceed its bio-capacity by 67 percent. This overshoot puts pressure on the prospects for future development of the entire country.



The Ministry for Nature Protection of Armenia has elaborated a strategy for biodiversity conservation as well as a strategy for development of the country's protected areas system, which have been approved by the Government. The plan calls for the strengthening of existing strict nature reserves and national parks and for the creation of several new ones. Several international organizations (GEF, World Bank, UNDP, UNEP, USAID, KFW, and WWF) are conducting programmes connected with nature protection in Armenia.

Since 2002, the WWF Caucasus Programme Office has been conducting different projects in Armenia.

- Sustainable use of medicinal plants resources in the Caucasus Ecoregion
- Creation of ecoregional strategy for the long-term conservation and sustainable use of biological resources in the Caucasus
- Recovery of the Bezoar goat in its natural range
- Conservation of the leopard in the Caucasus Ecoregion
- Strengthening conservation alliances through CEPF coordination in the Caucasus

INTRODUCING THE WWF CAUCASUS PROGRAMME OFFICE STAFF

MAKA BITSADZE - CEPF/WWF Program Country Coordinator

Maka graduated in 1997 from Tbilisi State University, Faculty of Biology and Medicine, where she specialized in the field of Ecological Genetics (1992-1997). In 1998, she did her post-graduate studies at the Genetics Department, also at Tbilisi State University. In 2003, she did her post-graduate work at Tromso University in Norway on regulation, assessment and holistic analysis of genetically modified organisms` in. From 1998 to 2004, Maka worked at the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Natural Resources of Georgia, and from 2000 to 2002 she also worked as a researcher at the Genetics Department of the Tbilisi State University.

Since June 2005, Maka has been a member of the WWF family.



Why did you decide to join WWF?

After a long and very beneficial experience obtained from working at a governmental institution (I 'm speaking about the Ministry where I worked for approximately six years), it was very interesting to look at environmental problems from a different perspective and to be involved in the field of environment protection as an NGO representative. At the same time, WWF was always a very interesting and attractive international NGO for me and I did not lose an opportunity to start work in this organization.

What was your impression of WWF before you started working at the organisation, and how does your initial impression match with your current position?

I gained my first and theoretical impression of WWF and its activities from its mission statement - ``to stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature ...``. After one year of work in the WWF Caucasus PO, I can say that the mission statement fully complies with WWF's real activities.

Describe the work you do presently

For the time being, my position is - Country Coordinator of the CEPF Regional Programme for biodiversity conservation in the Caucasus Hotspot. I would like to say a few words about this Regional Programme: The Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF) launched its Regional Programme for the Caucasus Biodiversity Hotspot in June, 2004. The Programme currently includes the following five countries of the Hotspot - Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Russia and Turkey. The main purpose of the Programme is to ensure that civil society is engaged in efforts to conserve the biodiversity of the Caucasus Hotspot. The Programme will run from June 2004 to June 2008.

How do you estimate the importance of CEPF/WWF collaboration?

CEPF and WWF have combined their efforts in conserving biodiversity in the Caucasus Hotspot by establishing a joint coordination mechanism for implementation of the CEPF Regional Programme and Ecoregional Conservation Plan. This joint / bilateral effort will take two main purposes into consideration: a) to ensure that the implementation of CEPF Investment Strategy will contribute to achieving medium-term goals formulated in the Ecoregional Conservation Plan and b) to engage civil-society groups in biodiversity conservation efforts. It should be emphasized that with nearly 15 years of experience, WWF Caucasus PO is clearly well-positioned for facilitating implementation of the CEPF Regional Programme in the Caucasus Hotspot. The CEPF Regional Programme will contribute to WWF Caucasus PO and other key conservation groups in achievement the vision for biodiversity conservation in the Caucasus Hotspot.

What are the most important aspects of the CEPF Regional Programme in the Caucasus

The pivotal aspect of the CEPF Regional Programme can be expressed through a simple slogan ``Biodiversity Conservation without Borders``. Despite political and cultural differences occurred in countries of the Hotspot, key conservationists of the five Caucasus countries cooperate for conservation of region's biodiversity in the frame of the CEPF Regional Programme - this is a very important aspect of the above-mentioned Programme. More importantly, at the local level, the CEPF Regional programme provides

funding for different civil society groups that hope to work in alliance with each other and relevant regional governments to make conservation a reality on the ground.

What are the challenges under the CEPF Regional Programme in the Caucasus?

The major and important challenge of the CEPF Regional Programme is the so called ``*corridor approach for transboundary cooperation*``. In other words - the CEPF Regional Programme is the first and unique chance for transboundary cooperation between countries of the Caucasus Hotspot. The corridor approach provides unprecedented opportunities for promoting transboundary collaboration in the Caucasus, as each corridor crosses the boundaries of two or more countries of the hotspot. In addition, the notable challenge of the CEPF Regional Programme is that the implementation of CEPF Investment Strategy will contribute to achieving the medium-term goals of the Ecoregional Conservation Plan.

Your expectations from the CEPF Regional Programme

If I start talking about my particular conservation expectations from this Regional Programme, I cannot be brief in my conversation. Actually, I will say in general that I, personally, expect inestimable results for conservation from the CEPF Regional Programme. I would like to express my general expectation in terms of improvement of transboundary cooperation. It is well known that political conflicts make transboundary conservation difficult. For the time being, transboundary areas in the Caucasus Hotspot are vulnerable as a result of unsustainable and illegal use of biodiversity resources. Correspondingly, a regional approach and transboundary environmental activities are inevitable for proper biodiversity conservation at a regional level. I do hope that the CEPF Regional Programme will help local people to understand that it is in their best long-term interest to work with their neighbors to protect and manage shared sites and territories of biological and natural resources. I have to emphasize that the transboundary cooperation supported by the CEPF Regional Programme will serve as a fundamental not only for biodiversity conservation but also for stability and economic development in the region.

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NEW FACES

Ivane Tsiklauri

Freshwater Officer

Ivane Tsiklauri joined WWF Caucasus in July 2005. His responsibilities are to prepare annual work plans for freshwater activities of WWF Caucasus Programme Office and coordinate its implementation; to coordinate implementation of freshwater field projects; to prepare annual reports on freshwater activities of CauPO.

Previously he worked for International Relations and Conventions Department, at the Ministry of Environment of Georgia.

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