In this issue:

- NGOs Respond to Shikaokh Reserve Highway Threat
- NGOs Help Strengthen Protected Areas in the Caucasus
- Azerbaijan Center Protects Mountain Goat in the Zakatala Reserve
- NGO Ecology and Bird Conservation in Absheron Reserve
- Armenia Association Strengthens Protection in Khosrov Forest Reserve
- Yerevan Grantees Workshop
- Heavy Spring Rains Hit Key Georgian Conservation Sites
- Ecotourism Development in Kazbegi Mountains
- Reptile and Amphibian Priorities Identified for the Caucasus
- May Conservation Diary

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**NGOs Respond to Shikaokh Reserve Highway Threat**

May 5, 2005. WWF Caucasus Armenia office organized an urgent meeting of environmental NGOs to respond to plans from the country’s Ministry of Transport for a new highway that would slice through the middle of the Shikaokh Reserve Forest.

It is estimated that the Kapan-Tsav-Shvanidzor highway would cut through 28-30 km of forest, endangering some 14,000 big and more than 90,000 small trees. The project would cost up to US $16m provided from the state budget, and construction would take approximately 2 years.

Destruction of the only oak forest in Armenia could bring about the disappearance of many endemic animals and plants including bezoar goat (*Capra aegagrus*), leopard (*Panthera pardus*), Armenian mouflon (*Ovis ammon*), and others included in the Armenian and global IUCN threatened species lists.

NGOs gathered at the meeting successfully applied to the Minister for Environmental Protection in Armenia, who agreed to put forward an alternative route plan to the Ministry of Transportation. Please contact kmanvelyan@wwfcaucasus.am for further information.
NGOs Help Strengthen Protected Areas in the Caucasus

Several of the 28 small grants recently awarded by the WWF Caucasus Small Grants Fund focus on one important issue – support to governments on protected territories management and their technical equipping. The projects will be implemented in several sites in the East Lesser Caucasus Corridor that stretches across Azerbaijan and Armenia. Capacity building activities will help improve efficiency and support conservation of threatened species in the respective areas. All four projects will include:

- Elaboration and approval of management plans for each reserve or sanctuary;
- Purchasing and transferring of special equipment to the reserves (boats, cars, binoculars, uniforms, horses and other necessary equipment);
- Establishing and/or maintaining monitoring programs;
- Publication and distribution of brochures;
- Training for reserve staff and seminars for the wider public.

The projects address conservation of particular threatened species, as well as improvement of overall conditions in the protected areas and sanctuaries. Read about the first four projects below.

Azerbaijan’s Center for Biodiversity Protects Mountain Goat in the Zakatala Reserve

Azerbaijani non-governmental organization "Center for Biodiversity" is implementing a new project to improve protection for the Dagestanian tur (Capra cylindricornis), an endangered species of mountain goat in the Zakatala Nature Reserve.

One of the oldest reserves in the Caucasus, it was established in 1929, and now covers 23,844 ha. It borders the Lagodekhy Reserve in Georgia and the Tlyarata sanctuary in Russia and has an incredible wealth of fauna and flora, including 816 species of vascular plants and a number of threatened animals, such as the otter (Lutra lutra), 3 bat species including the small horseshoe bat (Rhinolophus hipposideros), the European barbastelle (Barbastella barbastellus), and Geoffroy’s bat (Myotis emarginatus), as well as Mediterranean turtle (Testudo graeca), Caucasian toad (Bufo verrucosissimus) and Caucasian parsley frog (Pelodytes Caucasicus).
NGO Ecology and Bird Conservation in Absheron Reserve

The Azerbaijani NGO “Ecology and Bird Conservation” has started work on a project to improve the protection of Caspian seal breeding-grounds and the habitats of priority bird species in the Absheron sanctuary, a unique wetland where tens of thousands of birds winter.

The reserve was created in 1969 for the conservation of the goitred gazelle (Gazella subgutturosa), the Caspian seal (Phoca caspica), and a number of water and near-water birds. Plenty of seals appear here in the spring and autumn, with about a thousand inhabiting the sanctuary and its neighboring islands. As project coordinator Mr. Babaev says: “The Caspian seal is the only representative of Pinnipeds included in “Guinness’ Book (of World Records) as the smallest seal in the World Ocean”.

The Caspian seal is a globally threatened species and a priority for CEPF investment. Its numbers have been catastrophically reduced from 1,5 million individuals at the beginning of the 20th century down to 300,000 or 400,000 at the end of the century.

Armenia Tourist Association Strengthens Protection in the Khosrov Forest Reserve

Established in 1958, the Khosrov Forest National Reserve is a crucial part of the Lesser Caucasus priority conservation corridor. The Armenian Tourist Association is set to implement an increased protection program for the Kakavaberd region of the reserve. The area is characterized by rich flora and fauna diversity, in particular a number of threatened mammals including bezoar goat, Armenian mouflon, Caucasian brown bear (Ursus arctos meridionalis) and the highly endangered Caucasian leopard (Panthera pardus).

Yerevan Grantees Workshop

Following similar events in Tbilisi and Baku, a workshop on project implementation and reporting issues took place in Armenia. As the Caucasus includes multiple countries with different types of accounting and taxation legislation, half of each orientation workshop is dedicated to financial reporting. The Armenian organization “Khustup”, the Armenian Botanical Society, the Armenia Tourist Association and the Institute of Zoology of the Armenian Academy of Science were among the grantees who attended the workshop.
Heavy Spring Rains Hit Key Georgian Conservation Sites

Heavy rains in Georgia at the end of April spelt disaster for many in the country’s priority conservation corridors. Nearly twice the usual amount of rainfall swelled Georgia’s main rivers - the Mtkvari, Rioni, Lajanuri, Liakhvi and Tskhenistskali - causing flooding in the Higher and Lower Svaneti, Mountain Achara, Racha, Imereti, Gardabani, Samtskhe-Javakheti, Tskaltubo, Lechkhumi and Samegrelo.

Up to 1,000 houses and their surrounding lands were devastated by floods as were bridges and roads, cutting many villages off from the center of the country. Hundreds of farmers lost livestock and crops. The government announced a state of emergency and mobilized rescue and armed forces for recovery operations.

A number of CEPF important priority sites were affected by the flood with landslides damaging villages in Lechkhumi (Svaneti), Keda and Khulo (Mountain Achara). Accurate figures are not yet known as estimates cannot be made until the water levels decrease. Unfortunately, weather forecasts made by the Georgian Hydro-Meteorological Center were not very hopeful in early May. In Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, the level of the Kura River had risen to critical levels.

Ecotourism Development in Kazbegi Mountains

Standing at 2,200 m above sea level in Khevi, the village of Juta in the Greater Caucasus Conservation Corridor, suffers the same problems and constraints as many Georgian mountain villages. Opportunities for stock-breeding and potato farming are limited, so villagers are forced to make use of resources they have. However, if managed sustainably these rich flora and fauna can potentially become alternative sources of income.

The Kazbegi region is well known for its beautiful nature and medicinal climate so ecotourism development is one of the best solutions both for the local population and for the region’s biodiversity.

With assistance from our small grants fund, The International Association of Ecology and Tourism, a Georgian NGO, has just started work on a feasibility study for ecotourism in the Chaukhi massif region and the Greater Caucasus Mountains.

As Dr. Beso Barkalaia, project coordinator, says, “The project includes creation of basic tourist facilities, training of local representatives and the publication of an advertising booklet to spread the word about Juta. Three local families will be hired to build the camp and only natural materials will be used. While toilets, showers and a canteen will be permanent buildings, the tourist houses could be taken down out of season.”

Up to 300 guests can be accommodated by the center during the season. The village will gain an additional two tourist trails with the center becoming village property once the project is complete.
Reptile and Amphibian Priorities Identified for the Caucasus

Experts gathering at a conference in St. Petersburg in April identified a number of priorities for cooperation in reptile conservation across the Caucasus Hotspot.

Hosted by the European Herpetological Society with support from our small grants fund, 20 experts from Russia, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkey and the UK, gathered to discuss the problems of both amphibian and reptile conservation and to identify focal species for conservation.

The following issues were discussed:

- Protection of territories with highest species’ diversity;
- Trans-boundary projects;
- Establishment of micro-reserves;
- Preparation of action plans.

Participants agreed that vipers (vipera spp.) and the common tortoise (Testudo graeca) are priority species, as well as a large number of amphibians such as Caucasian salamander (Mertensiella caucasica) and Caucasian parsley frog (Pelodytes caucasicus).

All forum participants agreed to participate in a Scientific-Coordination Council for cooperation with CEPF and WWF Caucasus Small Grants Fund.

Reminder

Do not miss your chance – the deadline for the Call for Proposals announced last month is May 31. Please, remember that the new Call for Proposals for WWF Caucasus Small Grants Fund supported by CEPF is still open.

Non-governmental organizations, state institutions, groups of experts and private entities are eligible to apply. Project proposals must be submitted before the deadline to respective Country Coordinators in the appropriate format. Detailed funding priorities, application forms and guidelines are available online at www.panda.org/caucasus/cepf. Please, also refer to the Ecosystem Profile accessible at http://www.cepf.net/xp/cepf/where_we_work/caucasus/full_strategy.xml

For any questions arising feel free to contact or visit the Country Coordinators. All contact details are given below.
May Conservation Diary

May 17–19. Planning Workshop on Caprine Species Conservation in the Caucasus Hotspot will be conducted in Georgia by the Association of Friends of Nature Tskhratskaro. This event is financed from WWF Caucasus Small Grants Fund. Up to 20 experts from the overall region are invited to participate in justification of priority direction for Caprinae species conservation.

May 26–27. Regional Team Meeting in Tbilisi is planned for the end of May. The Team meets twice a year to coordinate and facilitate project implementation. Coordinators from within the region and representatives from CEPF headquarters will discuss on-going activities of the project and evaluate progress. CEPF Senior Managing Director Dan Martin and Chris Holtz, CEPF Grant Director for the Caucasus and Philippines hotspots, will visit the Caucasus region and participate in the Regional Team Meeting. Reviewing proposals received in response to the new Call for Proposals is also planned.

Useful resources for biodiversity conservationists:

- www.cepf.net – Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund
- www.biodiversityhotspots.org – Biodiversity Hotspots
- www.cenn.org - CENN
- www.rec-caucasus.org – REC Caucasus
- www.iucn.org – IUCN-The World Conservation Union
- www.birdlife.org – BirdLife International
- www.foe.co.uk – Friends of the Earth
- www.nacres.org - NACRES
- www.womenaid.org/environment - WomenAid International
- www.aaunet.org - Birds of Armenia
- www.orientation.am - Professional and Entrepreneur Orientation Union
- www.armeniatrie.org - Armenia Tree
- www.sacredearthnetwork.org – Sacred Earth Network
- www.rec.org – Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe
- www.oecd.org/env/eap - OECD, Environmental Directorate

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www.panda.org/caucasus/cepf