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**COMMITTEE FOR THE ACTIVITIES OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE IN THE  
FIELD OF BIOLOGICAL AND LANDSCAPE DIVERSITY**

**(CO-DBP)**

**Group of Specialists - European Diploma**

**29 and 30 March 1999**

**Oka National Biosphere Reserve  
(Russian Federation)**

**RENEWAL**

**APPRAISAL REPORT**

**by**

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(Switzerland)**

The Secretariat did not accompany the expert during his visit to the site.

For Resolution (94) 24 awarding the European Diploma, see Appendix I; Appendix II contains a draft resolution on possible renewal in 1999.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The European diploma, category A, was awarded to Oka National Biosphere Reserve on 5 September 1994. The undersigned visited the park on 3, 4 and 5 July 1998 with a view to renewing the diploma in 1999.

The visit provided an opportunity to meet the director of the reserve, Mr Sviatoslav G Priklonski, the assistant directors Y-M Markin and A-S Onufrenia, the scientific staff, a number of wardens and some representatives of local and regional government and the reserve's sponsors.

We were accompanied by Ms Eugenia A Parnasova (Department for Nature Reserve Management, State Committee for Protection of the Environment), who gave us the benefit of her extensive knowledge of languages and of the protected areas.

The situation in the protected area was discussed prior to the visit with Mr Amirkhan M Amirkhanov, Deputy Minister for the Environment, Ms Dobrynina, international relations officer, and Mr Picheliev, deputy director, Department for Nature Reserve Management, and, after the visit, with Mr Yuri A Platonov, deputy director of international relations.

The visit was extremely well organised and we wish to express our sincerest thanks to the many people who helped make this assignment both fruitful and enjoyable.

NB: In Russia, the name of the site is Oksky (this being the adjective derived from the noun Oka). For convenience, we have kept the name Oka, as used when the European diploma was awarded.

## 2. SITUATION AND VALUE OF THE RESERVE

The Oka Reserve is located in the southern part of the Meschchera lowlands, 250 km southeast of Moscow and 75 km east of Ryazan, the principal town of the region of that name. The river Pra marks the southern boundary of the reserve proper, which extends eastward to the river Oka. The altitude is approximately 100 m; average temperatures range from -9° in January to 20° in July; precipitation varies between 500 and 534 mm per year, occasionally rising to as much as 920 mm.

The reserve was established in 1935, added to in 1940 and further extended in 1989 to incorporate the biosphere reserve areas.

It consists of 22,916 ha of strictly protected areas, a 32,806 ha biosphere reserve and a 21,449 ha buffer zone.

The entire region is one of fluvio-glacial sediments with recent alluvia.

The slow-flowing river Pra is noted for its numerous active meanders. Every spring, the river Oka's very wide flood plain is under 1 or 2 m of water, sometimes more. In the reserve there are many smaller water courses as well as some sizeable low-lying swamps and a number of lagoons and lakes.

Extremely varied plant life results from the range of hydrological conditions and soils, with pine forests, alder, birch and oak woodlands, typical marshland vegetation, and flood plain meadows (some maintained by mowing). Over 800 vascular plants occur, including 69 rare species such as *Salvinia natans*, *Najas marina* and *Trapa natans*.

The fauna comprises 38 species of fish, 10 species of amphibians, 6 reptile species, 50 mammal species (including *Desmana moschata*, *Canis lupus*, *Lutra lutra*, *Alces alces* and *Castor fiber*) and 240 species of birds (including *Cicogna nigra*, *Haliaetus albicilla*, *Tetrao urogallus* and *Grus grus*).

The reserve and its surroundings are on an important migration route for birds, providing roosting sites and feeding grounds. At any one time there can be as many as 500,000 geese in the Oka flood plain during the migration season.

The reserve also has a breeding station for several rare species - *Bison bonasus* (for reintroduction in other regions), all the Russian cranes, in particular *Grus leucogeranus*, and birds of prey.

### 3. ADMINISTRATION

The reserve comes under the direct control of the Russian Federation State Committee for Protection of the Environment.

There is a scientific committee comprising representatives of the reserve, the Ryazan Regional Committee for Protection of the Environment, the Ryazan regional authorities, Ryazan Pedagogical University, Moscow University and the WWF. Other bodies, such as the game and fisheries departments, may be invited to participate occasionally.

The staff has been cut from 165 five years ago to around 142 people (40 are employed in the scientific department, 49 as wardens, 12 in administration and 41 in general services).

The main problem at present is funding the reserve's activities. For several years now, only the basic salaries have been paid and even these are in danger of being reduced. The running costs are now barely covered by the State and the reserve has only survived thanks to the goodwill of the regional authorities and a few local sponsors, who cover the basic expenses.

### 4. MANAGEMENT

#### 4.1 General

The Oka Reserve is a typical example of a "Zapovednik", ie a strictly protected reserve which, since its inception, has been the subject of ongoing scientific research recorded each year in the Nature Reports.

Accordingly, the central zone is left virtually undisturbed, with only limited activities in the peripheral zones.

#### 4.2 Zones

These are:

- the core reserve, in which all commercial and nearly all recreational activity are banned (the only exceptions being motorless boat traffic on the Pra, angling and berry and mushroom picking in one or two isolated sites);
- areas close to the Oka managed as part of the reserve, in which habitat suitable for the desman has been created;
- the sizeable peripheral areas which form part of the biosphere reserve and protect the core nature reserve (except for two-thirds of the northern boundary), where commercial forestry and agriculture - and hunting - are allowed under close supervision;
- the 1 km wide buffer zone, additional to the peripheral areas, in which any activity likely to have an adverse effect on the reserve is banned.

The lack of a buffer zone in the northern sectors is not a problem. The land in question is partly woodland and partly given over to extensive agriculture.

#### 4.3 Fauna

The fauna is kept under close observation. The desman, which is found in the Oka flood zone, is threatened mainly by loss of habitat as a result of construction of a drainage canal in 1967, although a scheme to create man-made lakes has already improved the situation. The other threat to the species is the use of nylon fishing nets, particularly when nets or sections of net are discarded in the lagoons.

The reserve advises the Ryazan regional authorities on game management but receives no payment for this service. Note that the reserve provides a habitat for two-thirds of the elk population and thus has large stocks of a prized game species.

Poaching is on the increase. The main target is fish and the poachers normally come from outside the local area.

The bison and crane breeding programme is being pursued with great vigour. It is run by the reserve's staff with numerous contacts, support and activities at international level.

#### 4.4 Flora

Monitoring is carried out on sample squares of vegetation and on several tree species and herbaceous plants.

#### 4.5 Forestry

All commercial forestry came to an end in the core reserve in 1935. It is still practised outside the close reserve in areas which form part of the biosphere reserve, but the timber extraction rate has fallen from 40,000 to 1,000 m<sup>3</sup> per year since the area was declared a protected zone.

To compensate for unauthorised felling near the northern the reserve received an area of woodland from the parties responsible.

Forest fires, mainly due to carelessness on the part of visitors along the Pra river and farmers on the northern boundary, are a regular occurrence. Fortunately, they tend to be relatively contained by wayside firebreaks.

#### 4.6 Agriculture

Farming is limited to small-scale crop growing and animal husbandry in the immediate vicinity of the wardens' houses, which are scattered about the reserve. One meadow enclave on the bank of the Pra (outside the reserve) was still being mown for hay when hydrological conditions permitted. It is gradually falling into disuse. Grazing and mowing are still practised near the Oka on the periphery of the reserve.

#### 4.7 Cultural heritage

Traces remain of the many peoples who either passed through or settled in the region, including a tumulus and various burial sites. The museum is housed in a former glass-making factory. The cultural heritage is, generally speaking, relatively unpromoted.

#### 4.8 Transport links

The reserve is served by a small number of tracks. One of these, which is in a poor state of repair, runs through the reserve. This is the only transport link to a handful of villages located in the north. A permit is needed in order to use it and its impact is very limited.

### 5. EDUCATION, INFORMATION

The museum has presentations on the main species found in the reserve. Guided tours are organised, as well as activity holidays for students and children. A nature trail has recently been created.

The educational activities are expanding and more staff have been assigned to this work. Unfortunately, progress is hampered by lack of funds, making it difficult, for example, to accommodate schoolchildren and students interested in wildlife.

### 6. RESEARCH

A number of indicator species are monitored. These include *Desmana moschata*, *Alces alces*, *Vulpes vulpes*, *Alcedo atthis*, *Merops apiaster*, *Natrix natrix*, some Tetraonides, *Formica rufa* and some species of *Aedes*. Regular bird counts are carried out as well as studies of several species or groups of species such as woodpeckers and flycatchers.

A number of long-term observation areas have been set up to monitor the vegetation.

This long-term research, carried out in what are virtually unspoilt surroundings, is valuable and has been going on ever since the reserve was established. Unfortunately the findings are still not published in any accessible form.

## 7. ACTION TAKEN ON RECOMMENDATIONS

### Condition

1. Any regionalisation or privatisation measures must on no account affect the reserve's present protected status.

This condition has been met in full. Oka remains a State reserve, under the direct control of central government. Privatisation measures have led to extensification of farming in the area around the reserve, which is a welcome development. Any new commercial activity or construction work in the buffer zone where land has been privatised must be approved by the reserve's management.

### Recommendations

1. Sufficient resources should be made available to ensure adequate operation of the reserve and the continuation of scientific research.

The situation is extremely unsatisfactory. The State is virtually only paying the wages (of a scaled-down staff) and is threatening to reduce even these. There are hardly any funds to cover running costs. The reserve is only managing to survive thanks to the support of a few sponsors (local authorities and private companies).

2. In the Lopata zone, the reserve should be extended south-eastwards as far as the river Pra in order to include some typical water meadows not yet represented in the reserve, a number of oxbows and a portion of the Oka river bank.

This proposal is still on the agenda and will be implemented as soon as there is an opportunity to assign all or part of the land to the reserve.

3. Take the necessary steps to guarantee the water quality of the river Oka.

The reserve officials can only monitor the water quality. They cannot do anything to preserve or improve it. This recommendation should therefore be dropped. Note that the quality of the river Pra, which flows into the reserve, is excellent. It is guaranteed in the long term by the establishment of Meschera National Park, which covers the upper basin of the Pra. The only source of pollution, a factory located upstream, has been eliminated.

4. Efforts to educate and inform the public should be enhanced and stepped up in a way which makes full use of the reserve's assets and the large stock of scientific data available.

The environmental education activities have been successfully developed, mainly in collaboration with the Zapovedniks environmental education centre in Moscow. The chief obstacle is lack of funding.

5. Consideration should be given to applying a stricter system of protection to all or part of the peripheral zone (the biosphere reserve), and everything possible done to maintain the forest vegetation by appropriate management.

This recommendation has been carefully observed. The reserve is in charge of the management plan. Commercial forestry has been greatly reduced and research is under way to make it as environmentally responsible as possible. We propose that this recommendation be dropped, as it is already implicit in the objectives of the biosphere reserve.

#### New recommendations

We propose that two recommendations be added. One is to encourage incorporation into the reserve of land situated along the Pra which forms an enclave in the core zone and which is gradually falling into disuse as hay meadow. The other is aimed at supporting the efforts to regenerate desman habitat in the buffer zone.

### 8. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, we recommend that award of the European diploma, category A, to Oka State Reserve be renewed. Its value and extent and the excellent manner in which it has been protected make it a site of European interest.

In order to improve protection of the reserve's natural assets in the long term, the renewal of the award should be subject to the condition that any regionalisation or privatisation measures have no adverse effect on the reserve's present protected status. Renewal should also carry the following recommendations:

1. Sufficient resources should be made available to ensure proper operation of the reserve and continued scientific research.
2. In the Lopata zone, the reserve should be extended south-eastward as far as the river Pra in order to include some typical water meadow not yet represented in the reserve, a number of oxbows and a portion of the Oka river bank.
3. Efforts to educate and inform the public should be enhanced and stepped up in a way which makes full use of the reserve's assets and the large stock of scientific data available.
4. Efforts should be made to encourage the handover to Oka National Reserve of the hay meadows located on the left bank of the Pra, to the south of grid squares 169 to 171 in the central forest section.
5. The measures to regenerate desman habitat in the Oka plain should be continued and ways of mitigating the adverse effect of the drainage canal explored.

### 9. References

An. Scientific Foundations for Protection and Rational Use of Bird Resources. Proceedings of Oka State Biosphere Reserve, Vol. XIX. Ryazan, 1995.

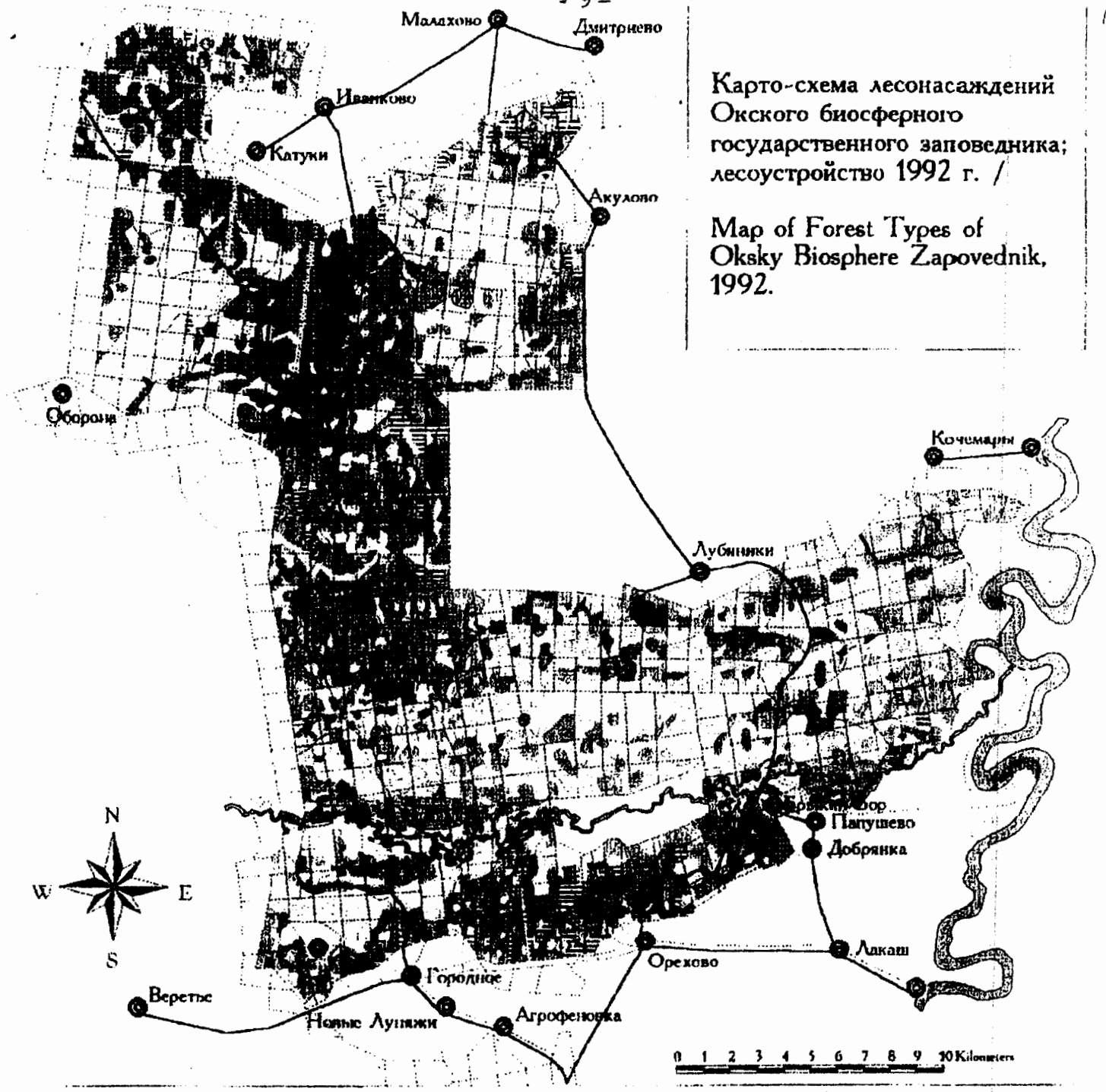
Priklonski, S-G and V-N Thikhomirov. 1989. The Oka reserve. In: Reserves in the European part of the Russian Federation. Moscow.

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UKa

Карто-схема лесонасаждений  
Окского биосферного  
государственного заповедника;  
лесоустройство 1992 г. /

Map of Forest Types of  
Oksky Biosphere Zapovednik,  
1992.



Цифровая карта Окского биосферного  
заповедника подготовлена при поддержке  
Всемирного Фонда Дикой Природы  
  
Digital Map of Oksky Biosphere Reserve  
was developed with support of  
World Wide Fund for Nature.  
  
Original Source Scale 1:100,000

Map edited by I. Lyayenko  
WWF Russia, ©1997



Основной элемент леса / Dominant Tree Species	Группы возраста / Age Class				Культуры / Plantation	
	Молодые / Young	Среднево- зрастные / Middle Age	Полно- возрастные / Matured	Старые и переставшие расти / Old growing	Несовре- менные / Spruce	Смешанные / Mixed
Сосна / Pine						
Ель / Spruce						
Липа / Linden						
Дуб / Oak						
Ольха / Alder						
Береза / Birch						
Оси́на, тополь / Asp, Poplar						
Ива / Willow						
Остальные породы / Other						

# COUNCIL OF EUROPE COMMITTEE OF MINISTERS

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## RESOLUTION (94) 24

### **ON THE AWARD OF THE EUROPEAN DIPLOMA TO THE OKA NATIONAL BIOSPHERE RESERVE (Russian Federation)**

*(Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 5 September 1994  
at the 516th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies)*

The Committee of Ministers, under the terms of Article 15.a of the Statute of the Council of Europe,

Having regard to Resolution (65) 6 instituting the European Diploma;

Having regard to the proposals of the Steering Committee for the Conservation and Management of the Environment and Natural Habitats (CDPE);

Having noted the agreement of the Government of the Russian Federation;

After having deliberated,

Solemnly awards the European Diploma, Category A, to the Oka National Biosphere Reserve (1935 boundaries) in accordance with the regulations for the European Diploma (Resolution (91) 16);

Places the aforesaid area under the patronage of the Council of Europe until 5 September 1999;

Attaches the following condition to the award: that any eventual measures to regionalise or privatise the site be such as to have no adverse effect on the reserve's present status of protection;

Attaches the following recommendations to the award:

1. sufficient resources should be made available to ensure adequate operation of the reserve and the continuation of scientific research;
2. in the Lopata zone, the reserve should be extended south-eastward as far as the River Pra in order to include some typical flood-prone meadows not yet represented in the reserve, a number of oxbows and a portion of the Oka river bank;
3. measures should be taken to guarantee the quality of the River Oka's waters;
4. efforts to educate and inform the public should be enhanced and stepped up in a way which makes full use of the reserve's assets and the numerous scientific findings that are available;
5. consideration should be given to applying a stricter system of protection to all or part of the peripheral zone (the biosphere reserve), and everything possible done to maintain the forest vegetation by appropriate management.

## APPENDIX II

## DRAFT RESOLUTION (99) ...

The Committee of Ministers, under the terms of Article 15a of the Statute of the Council of Europe,

Having regard to Resolution (65) 6 instituting the European Diploma;

Having regard to the proposals of the Committee for the activities of the Council of Europe in the field of biological and landscape diversity (CO-DBP);

Renews until the 5 September 2004 the European Diploma awarded to the Oka National Biosphere Reserve

Attaches the following condition to the renewal:

- Any regionalisation or privatisation measures must on no account affect the reserve's present protected status.

Attaches the following recommendations to the renewal:

1. Sufficient resources should be made available to ensure proper operation of the reserve and continued scientific research.
2. In the Lopata zone, the reserve should be extended south-eastward as far as the river Pra in order to include some typical water meadow not yet represented in the reserve, a number of oxbows and a portion of the Oka river bank.
3. Efforts to educate and inform the public should be enhanced and stepped up in a way which makes full use of the reserve's assets and the large stock of scientific data available.
4. Efforts should be made to encourage the handover to Oka National Reserve of the hay meadows located on the left bank of the Pra, to the south of grid squares 169 to 171 in the central forest section.
5. The measures to regenerate desman habitat in the Oka plain should be continued and ways of mitigating the adverse effect of the drainage canal explored.