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T-PVS/DE (2015) 2

CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE
AND NATURAL HABITATS

GROUP OF SPECIALISTS ON THE EUROPEAN DIPLOMA FOR PROTECTED AREAS

13 March 2015
Strasbourg, Palais de l'Europe, Room 11

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REPORT
ON-THE-SPOT APPRAISAL
VASHLOVANI PROTECTED AREAS (GEORGIA)
29 SEPTEMBER – 1ST OCTOBER 2014

Document prepared
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BACKGROUND

The mission aimed to appraise the **Vashlovani Protected Areas** (VPAS) suitability for the award of the European diploma.

The visit took place from the 29th September to the 1st October 2014 (**Annex 1**); according to the Council of Europe requirements¹, the appraisal was based on the Regulations of the European diploma of protected areas (**CM/ResDip(2008)1, Appendix 3**).

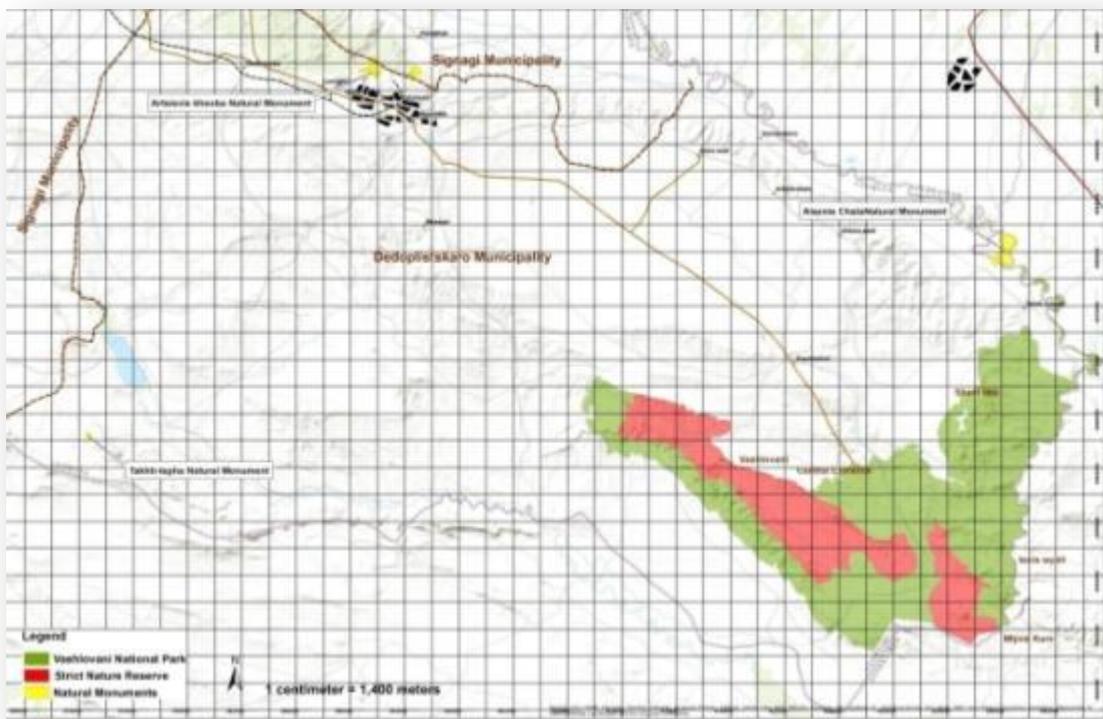
The expert spent 3 days visiting the areas and meeting with local experts and officials; he was accompanied by Tatiana State Masson from the Secretariat of the Bern Convention.

INTRODUCTION

VPAS is located in the extreme South East of Georgia, 180 km from Tbilisi, at the border with Azerbaijan, nearby the small town of Dedoplistskaro (**Map 1**).

The nominated area includes five clusters, some of them separated from each other (**Pictures 1 to 6**):

- the Vashlovani Strict Nature Reserve – 10,143 ha (VSNR);
- the Vashlovani National Park – 24,610.06 ha (VNP);
- the Alazani Riparian Forest Natural Monument – 204,4 ha (ARFNM);
- the Takhti-Tepa Natural Monument – 9,7 ha;
- and the Eagle Canyon Natural Monument – 100,4 ha.



Map 1 – Location and distribution of the clusters of the nominated area (Source: VNPA Administration).

¹ Mail dated July 2014.



Picture 1 –Vashlovani Strict Nature Reserve Park (Source: EMC2I).



Picture 2 – Around the Vashlovani National (Source: EMC2I).



Picture 3 –Around Vashlovani National park (Source: EMC2I).



Picture 4 –Takhti-Tepa Natural Monument (Source: EMC2I).



Picture 5 – Eagle canyon Natural Monument EMC2I). (Source: EMC2I).



Picture 6 – Mijnis Kure, VNP (Source:

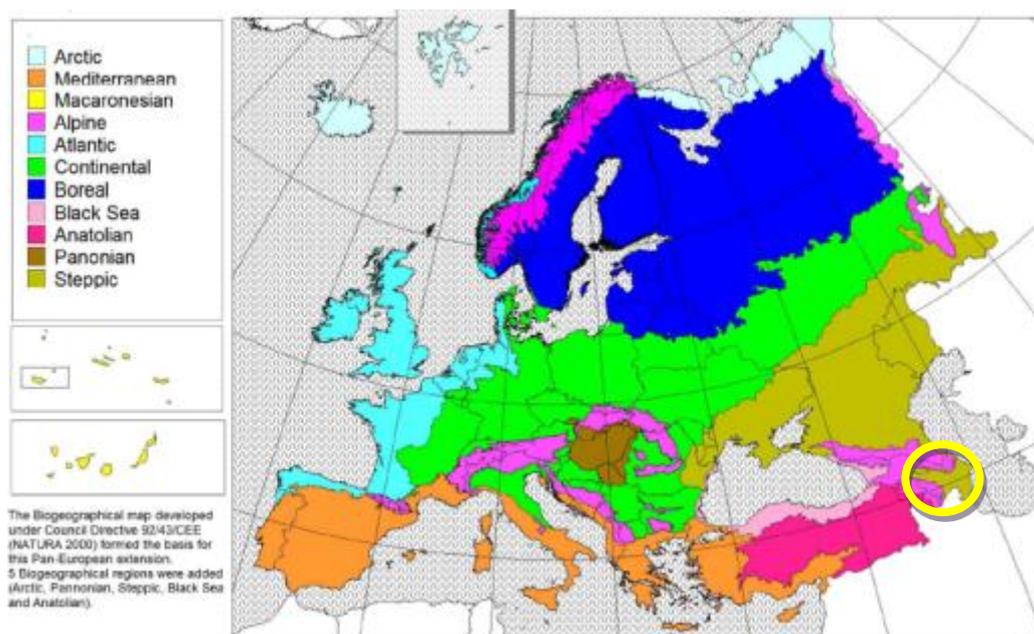
The evaluator visited all clusters, except the ARFNM along the eponym river valley, at the North Eastern border of the VPAS.

VPAS stretches from 100 m to 800 m above the sea level², in the Kiziki region, Dedoplistskaro District. It covers around 36000 ha of arid and semi arid steppic areas (**Map 2**), and *Pistacea* and *Juniperus* forests, fringed by high cliffs³ and crossed by deep canyons and ravines⁴.

² Source: application form.

³ Borders of Samukhi valley, Mijnis Kure, ...

⁴ Bear ravines, Pantishara canyon, ...



Map 2 – Biogeographical map, VPAS location.

Located in the driest part of Georgia, the site is characterized by a semi-desert dry subtropical climate and a unique mosaic of landscapes and habitats for flora and fauna, many of them being rare, endangered and/or endemic, and sparsely represented to date, in the network of the European diplomated protected areas.

The nominated area is oriented NW-SE and established to preserve both landscape and natural heritage of Georgia. While there is a relatively high and seasonal pressure from livestock in the VNP and within some parts of the VSNR, its access is limited and difficult.

The VSNR which is the core centre of the nominated area, was founded in 1935, then expanded in 2003 and renamed as the “*Vashlovani Strict Nature Reserve*”; its access is strictly regulated. The other clusters of the nominated area are managed, one as a “*National park*” (VNP) and three as “*Natural monuments*” where most uses and activities are also restricted.

For more details, refer to the application document (T-PVS/DE (2014) 8).

I. APPRAISAL

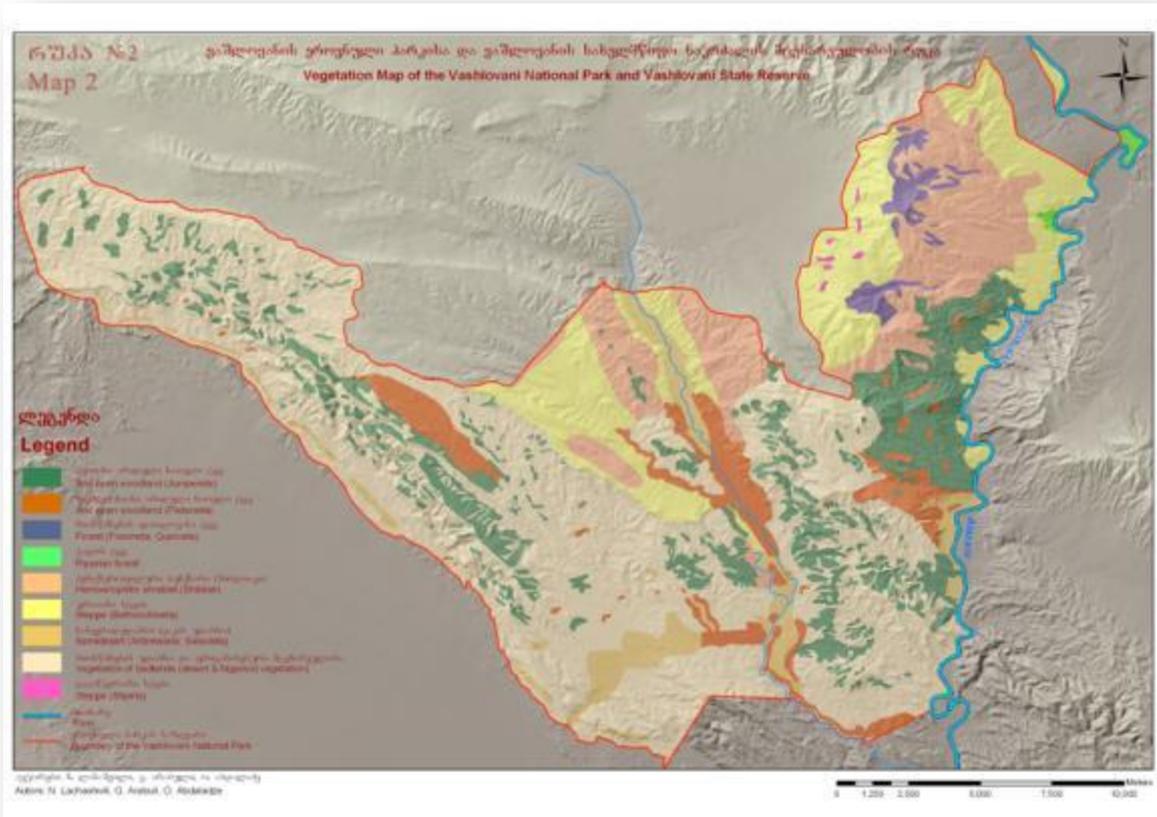
The information hereafter follows CM/ResDip(2008)1 of the regulation of the European diploma of protected areas, **appendix 3**.

I-1 European interest

VPAS comprise many elements that represent the biological and landscape European heritage, in accordance with the European diploma regulation and meeting the criteria for the award of the diploma.

I-1-1 Biological heritage

The nominated area is a mix of steppes, meadows, arid and grove forests, hemixerophylous communities and desert ecosystems; it is the unique representation of all those types of vegetation in Georgia, in only one protected area (**Map 3**).



Map 3 – VPAs vegetation map (Source: VPAs Administration).

Floristic interest

Many flora species characterizing those habitats are endemic, endangered or threatened and several are listed in the Red data book of Georgia and the IUCN Red List.

The wild pistachio (*Pistacia sp*) (Pictures 7 and 8) and the juniperus trees (*Juniperus sp*), abundant in the nominated area, are certainly amongst the most specific and remarkable flora communities, together with the *Artemisia* communities (*Artemisia lerchianae*), in the semi desert areas.



Picture 7 – Pistacia trees (Source: EMC2I).



Picture 8 – Pistacia fruits (Source: EMC2I).

Several specific plant associations must also be mentioned, like *Bothriochioetum*⁵ in the steppic areas, *Juniperetum*⁶ in the arid forests, *Astragalietum*⁷ and other shrubs associations widespread in the

⁵ Ex.: *Bothriocloai schaemum*.

⁶ *Juniperus xycearus, oblonga and polycarpus*.

⁷ Ex.: *Astragalus phaeocephalus and corrugates*.

xeric areas. The “*sakmlisxis light forest*” characterised by the *Pistacieta semi desertosa* is certainly one of the most specific and spectacular flora landscape met in the nominated area. The core area hosts also ancient species of fruit trees⁸ of high genetic interest, as well as various more common forest widespread species communities⁹.

Ten (10) distinct plant communities are found in the nominated area which is an unusual high number, in an area spreading only from 100 to less than 1000 m of elevation: semi-deserts, foothill deserts, “*phrygana-like*” areas¹⁰, arid opened juniperus woodlands, arid opened pistachio woodlands, botriochloa steppes, needle grass steppes, shibliak areas, deciduous foothill forests, and floodplain forests along the Alzani river.

In total, around 600 species of vascular plants belonging to 363 genera and 88 families are distributed in the nominated area, 4 of them being endemic to Georgia¹¹ and 28 to Caucasus; 19 flora species are listed in the Red data book of Georgia (2003) and 5 others will be listed in the future¹².

Just few species however are listed on the Annexes to the Bern Convention; this should not be interpreted as a lack of rare, endangered or endemic species of European importance within the nominated area; **this shows the need to review the annexes to the Bern Convention so as to make them as accurate and representative as possible of that part of the Pan-European biodiversity. To this end, further works should be initiated by the State Parties, led by the Secretariat of the Bern Convention, seeking to update and complete the Annexes I and II to the Convention, for this eco-region.**

The nominated area has also been pre-selected to be listed on the EMERALD network.

To conclude on its floristic interest, the nominated area can be seen as a typical example of diverse floristic communities in Europe, representative from the European steppic eco-region. Except the Koshrov Strict Nature Reserve in Armenia, no other protected area has been awarded with the European diploma to date, representing this eco-region that can be considered as under-represented in the existing European Diplomed PAs network.

Faunistic interest

According to the information and data available, the nominated area hosts very rare and important fauna species for Europe.

Can be mentioned amongst them, the leopard (*Panthera pardus tuliana*) (**Picture 9**) which was observed several times in the ten last years; the nominated area cannot however be considered to be and/or become in the future a key area for that symbolic species, still breeding in Iran and in the whole Caucasus. Two other spectacular species of mammals are the striped hyena (*Hyaena hyaena*), that has also been observed several times within the VNP, and the goitered gazelle (*Gazella subgutturosa subgutturosa*) whose the reintroduction project started in 2009 (**Picture 10**).

⁸*Punica granatum, Pyrus salicifolia, Pyrus Sakhokiana* endemic from the nominated area, ...

⁹*Popula hybrida, Quercus pedunculifolia, Carpinus caucasicus, Fraxinus excelsior, Ulmus carpinifolia, Acer platanoides, Robinia pseudoacacia, ...*

¹⁰ The phrygana is a dense sclerophytic vegetation of small trees, shrubs and aromatic plants occurring on rangelands on alkaline, poor soils in the Mediterranean regions (equivalent to the Garrigue in Southern France, Italy, Spain, Greece, the Chaparral in California, the Fimbosin South Africa) (Source: NACRES, 2013).

¹¹*Campanula kachetica, Pyrus sakhokiana, Torularia eldarica, Golatella golarica.*

¹² Ex.: *Pistacia mutica, Iris iberica, Tulipa eichler, ...* (Source: VNP administration; Lachashvili, J., and al., 2004 – Synopsis of flora of the Vashlovani State Reserve (East Georgia), Georgian Academy of Sciences, Institute of botany, Tbilisi, 158 p).



Picture 9 – *Panthera pardus tuliana*
(Source: A. Kodiashvili).



Picture 10–*Gazella subgutturosa subgutturosa*
(Source: A. Kodiashvili).

More commonly, the nominated area hosts:

- 70 species of mammals¹³, several of them listed on Annex II to the Bern Convention,¹⁴ and breeding populations of at least 8 large carnivores¹⁵;
- 135 species of birds¹⁶, amongst them 26 species of raptors¹⁷, all listed on Annex II; a breeding natural population of the rare common pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus*) must also be mentioned, as well as rather abundant populations of chukar partridge (*Alectoris chukar*), quail (*Coturnix coturnix*) and little bustard (*Tetrax tetrax*);
- 30 species of reptiles¹⁸ including an important breeding population of the spectacular Lebetine viper (*Vipera lebetina*), listed also on Annex II (**Picture 11**), Caucasian Agama (*Agama caucasica*) (**Picture 12**), and Caucasian sand boa (*Eryx jaculus*).



Picture 11 – *Vipera lebetina*
(Source: A. Kodiashvili).



Picture 12 – Caucasian agama
(Source: A. Kodiashvili).

- 16 species of fish are reported to date in the Alazani river that limits the nominated area on East; amongst them, *Silurus glanis* and *Lucioperca lucioperca*. Although most fish taxa were not

¹³ According to the data provided to the expert during the mission and instead of 62 mentioned in the application form.

¹⁴ *Gazella subgutturosa subgutturosa*, *Panthera pardus tuliana*, *Hyaena hyaena*, *Hystrix cristata*, *Lynx lynx*, *Lutra lutra*, *Rhinolophus sp*, *Sciurus anomalus*, *Pipistrellus pygmaeus*, ...

¹⁵ Ex.: *Ursus arctos*, *Lynx lynx*, *Canis lupus*, *Hyaena hyaena*, *Lutra lutra*, *Felis sylvestris*, *Felis chaus*, *Canis aureus*.

¹⁶ According to the application form and instead of 58 species listed in the document provided to the expert during the mission.

¹⁷ *Gyps fulvus*, *Gypaetus barbatus* occasionally, *Aegypius monachus*, *Neophron percnopterus*, *Haliaeetus albicilla*, ...

¹⁸ According to the application form (28 species were listed in VNP, Source: document provided to the expert during his mission).

assessed yet for the IUCN Red List, they are of European interest, and several of them are listed on Annex III to the Bern Convention¹⁹.

A reintroduction project of the goitered gazelle in the nominated area is on-going. This species disappeared from the area in the 20th century, due to hunting and poaching. Ten specimens (10) were kept in Turkey and released in 2009, then 18 others from Azerbaijan¹, in 2013. Several specimens were predated - probably by wolves - but it is estimated that five were still present at the time of the mission, nearby the nominated area, where they bred in 2014²⁰.

While those results are positive, it is however too early to conclude on the full success of the project that aims to rehabilitate a minimum viable population of 30-50 gazelles; the release of additional specimens is planned and a monitoring programme is carried out, as well as awareness activities for the local people. This programme is implemented in relation with the IUCN caprinae specialist group²¹ⁱⁱ and it is supported by the WWF.

The compatibility between the long-term conservation of the gazelle and farming activities in general is a key issue; this issue is addressed by an on-going programme, supported by UNDP and funded by the EU, aiming to rehabilitate 8,700 ha of degraded pastures in the VPAS²², and to introduce and implement sustainable pasture management practices among farmers and sheep-breeders.

Although the nominated area is not outstanding from the fauna point of view, it meets the general criteria for the award of the European diploma and comprises representative fauna species and habitats which are of European importance; the presence, even occasional in some cases, of rare and threatened species such as the leopard, hyena and gazelle, amongst others, contributes to build up its biological and ecological values and to strengthen its European interest.

I-1-2 Landscape interest

In echo to these ecological features, the landscape of the nominated area is also of great values and interest, for three main reasons, at least:

- its **diversity**: the biological and ecological features of the nominated area is reflected in the overall landscape which is composed of a variety of types of natural and semi natural habitats such as “*areulebi*” - that provide excellent habitats for the large raptors chukars, bats²³ and other rare and threatened species, steppes and scrubs, woodlands, riverine forests, spectacular cliffs, canyons, ravines, rivers valleys and springs;
- its overall **aesthetic**: this diversity makes the nominated area very aesthetic and builds landscape units of remarkable beauty;
- its **mixed natural and anthropogenic components**: the nominated area hosts traditional sheep farming activities that contribute to maintain the steppe ecosystem in the VNP, where there are allowed. Those activities put however a high pressure on the overall ecosystem, affect locally its integrity (**Picture 13**) and would need to be managed in a more sustainable way. Signs of grazing can be also seen even in the VSNR, where farming activities are legally forbidden (**Picture 14**).

¹⁹ *Aspius aspius*, *Chalcalburnus chalcoïdes*, *Silurus glanis*.

²⁰ Com. pers.

²¹ Shirvan Nature Reserve, Azerbaïdjan.

²² http://www.ge.undp.org/content/georgia/en/home/operations/projects/environment_and_energy/pastures.html .

²³ Ex.: *Rhinolophus mehelyi*, vulnerable according to the IUCN Red List (Source.: IUCN).



Picture 13 – Overgrazing signs in VNP
(Source: EMC2I).



Picture 14 – Grazing signs in the VSNR
(Source: EMC2I).

VPAS are also situated in an historical area; the Kiziki region is well known as an ancient settlement and hosts many historical monuments; signs of ancient human presence can be seen within the nominated area which is also crossed by the silk road. However, those signs do not contribute directly and significantly to the European importance of the nominated area, with regard to the European diploma regulation.

To conclude, the nominated area comprises several diverse representative elements of the natural and cultural landscape heritage which are of European importance, typical from that part of Europe. Grazing activities are however an issue for the long term preservation of the main landscape characteristics of the nominated area which contribute to its European importance; this issue should be addressed by the State Party in the nearest future, in a way to stop and prevent further degradation of the steppic landscape and ecosystem.



Picture 15 – Ravine landscape, VSNR and VNP
(Source: EMC2I).



Picture 16 – *Phryganas* landscape, VSNR
(Source: EMC2I).



Picture 17 – Bear ravine, VNP (Source: EMC2I).



Picture 18 – Pantishara canyon, VSNR
(Source: EMC2I).

I-2 Protection measures

VPAS is a complex of five protected area, managed under several different legal regimes, covering around 36 000 ha²⁴.

I-2-1 The VSNR

This VSNR was formally designated in 1935 and corresponds to the category I of the IUCN PAs classification. Historically, four new PAs were added in 2003, the VNP (IUCN category II) and three Natural monuments, AFFR, Artsivis Kheoba (Eagle Canyon) and Takhti Tefha (IUCN category III).

The VSNR benefits from a strong and strict protection regime and all socioeconomic activities are forbidden. Only research, monitoring and fire control activities and works are allowed; restricted tourism uses can be allowed, only on foot or by horse, and on specific trails.

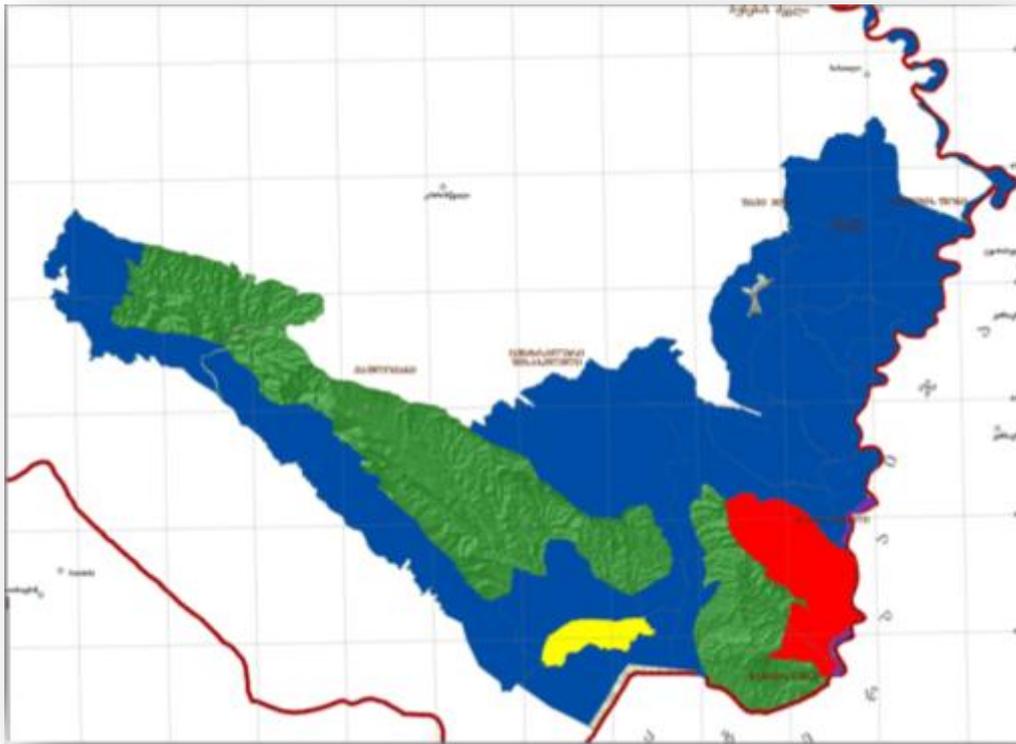
I-2-2 The VNP

According to the information provided to the expert²⁵, VNP comprises five “zones” where uses and activities are more or less strictly regulated, depending on their specific management goals (**Map 4**):

- the *nature strict protection zone* (1 936 ha): dedicated to research and limited recreational and ecotourism uses and activities only; it benefits from the same regulation as the VSNR; most uses and activities are totally forbidden and some are strictly regulated;
- the *restoration zone* (467 ha): assigned to restoration works; its main management objective is to stop further degradation and engage a restoration process of the ecosystems. Extractions, damages, farming activities, hunting, logging, recreation, and any other uses or activities that could alter the ecosystems, as well as their components, are forbidden; in addition to the uses and activities allowed in the previous zone, management measures are allowed, under the control of the park administration;
- the *traditional use zone* (22 008 ha): opened to economic uses and activities which are compatible with the natural features of the park. Only sustainable uses of natural resources and traditional methods are allowed, in addition to the ones mentioned here above. Grazing by “*toushuri*”, a local and traditional sheep, is the most important activity; any use of non renewable resources is forbidden, as well as pollutions, introduction of exotic species and ploughing and sowing activities. Visitors can also be limited, if excessive; this area should be adapted when the elaboration of on-going “*grazing plan*” will be adopted; **this grazing plan should be submitted to the Group of specialist before its adoption by the State Party;**
- the *visitor zone* (107 ha): this zone hosts accommodations and facilities linked to the recreational activities. It includes infrastructures such as visitor and information centres, camping sites, cabins, hiking and riding trails, picnic grounds. Visitors are welcome, but they must respect the park regulation;
- the *administration zone* (22 ha): it includes VPAS Administration infrastructures and facilities.

²⁴ To be further determined; according to the application form, the nominated area covers 35 054 ha on page 4 and 35 068 on page 9 and it would cover more than 36 000 ha according additional information provided to the expert by more recent mail (see note hereafter).

²⁵ Mail dated 23 January 2015, from Dimitri Beridze, Agency of Protected Areas.



Map 4 – VNP zonation (Source: VNP administration).

The VNP administration also manages the **three natural monuments** that are parts of the nominated area; the regulation of those monuments is less restrictive, while collection of materials for scientific purposes is controlled and requires special authorizations from the park administration.

In conclusion, the legal regime of protection of the nominated area, as a whole, fills the European diploma requirements.

Grazing activities should however be more strictly regulated, especially in the VNP where they are developed in sensitive zones and exceed the carrying capacity of the area, otherwise they will compromise the European importance of the nominated area in the future. While this issue is already addressed by the PAS management plan (Objective 1.2.2, PO 6 and 7), the State Party should be urged to better enforce the existing regulation and stop farming activities, even occasional, in the VSNR and in the VNP, in the zones where they are not allowed, and to remove the existing shelters that are situated in or at the immediate vicinity of the areas where grazing is legally forbidden (eg. VSNR, as well as the part of the VNP territory that is outside the traditional use zone).

I-2-3 Merits and protection system

a. Administration and management of VPAS

a.1 Organisation

The nominated area is placed under the authority of the VPAs administration, which reports to the Agency of protected areas, at national level. According to the data provided to the expert, the staff consists of 32 employees²⁶: 1 Director, 6 administrative officials, 2 chief district rangers and 23 rangers.

Most employees have a high level education, 14 of them being graduated from the University and 12 having a high school degree.

²⁶Source: VNP administration.

They cover a large array of skills and fields of expertise: law, economy, engineering, business and administration, accountability, geomorphology, geography, biology, zoology, veterinary, agronomy, ...

a.2 Equipments and services

The VPAs Administration manages a large building, situated at Dedoplistkaro; this building hosts the office of the VPAs, a visitor centre, a small museum and basic accommodations for visitors²⁷.

It manages also a series of infrastructures that include (**Map 5**):

- 4 entrances equipped with ranger stations or shelters;
- 1 parking;
- 7 picnic areas with small recreational equipments;
- 8 field recreational cabins and small equipments devoted to tourism activities;
- 16 two-person bungalows, in 3 different locations within the nominated area;
- 4 campsites with adapted facilities²⁸ and having a capacity for 20 people (**Picture 19 to 21**);
- 3 scenic roads where visitors can be allowed to circulate;
- 3 viewing points;
- 6 riding trails;
- 5 signalized hiking trails (**Picture 22**).



Picture 19 – Tourist accommodations, VNP (Source: EMC2I).



Picture 20 – Tourist camp, VNP (Source: EMC2I).



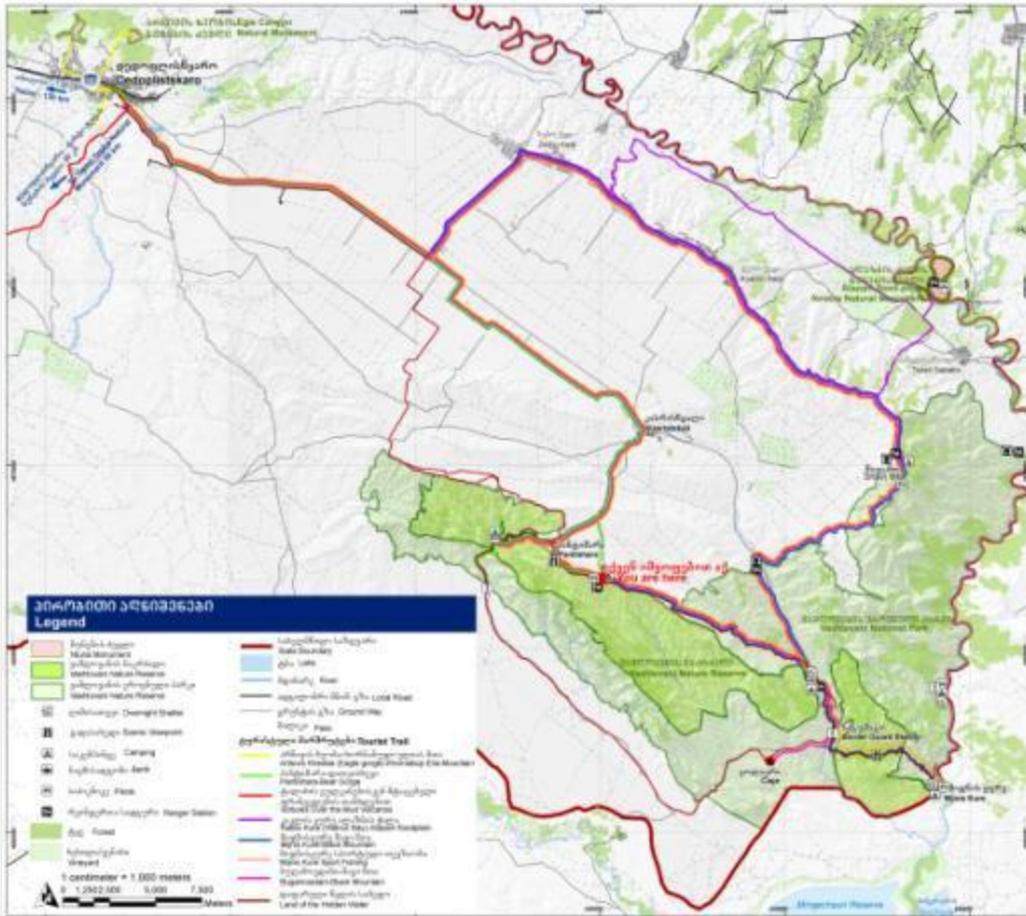
Picture 21 – Ranger station, VNP (Source: EMC2I).



Picture 22 – Hiking signalization, VNP (Source: EMC2I).

²⁷A capacity to host 7 visitors in excellent conditions.

²⁸Fireplaces, toilets, bins.



Map 5 – Map of VPAs infrastructures (Source: VPAs Administration).

Fields tours, bird watching, motorcar tours, « *drawing* » in nature, photo and videos sessions, various events (festivals, exhibitions, handcrafts,...) and sport fishing services are also proposed by the VPAs Administration, to the visitors; the local population is involved closely in the organization of those activities.

a.3 Budget

According to the figures provided by the VPAs Administration²⁹, the budget of the nominated area is around 407 000 Gel/year (around 182 000 Euros), 274 000 Gel from the State budget and 133 000 from the Caucasian Nature Fund³⁰, supported by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

In addition to this “core budget”, the VPAs got additional funds from various sources, such as the Global Environment Facility (GEF), the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF), the World Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF), Conservation international and the Acacia Conservation Fund (ACF).

The VPAs are also supported by private donors and its administration cooperates with diverse technical and financial partners, on specific programmes and/or projects, like on large carnivore monitoring and/or public awareness.

Globally, the financial capacities of the VPAs are acceptable compared to the international standards of the protected areas of European importance and can be considered as filling the European

²⁹ Mail Dimitri Beridze supra.

³⁰ Source: note supra.

diploma regulation that requires an “*exemplary way of management*”; this budget is however only partly secured.

The State Party should be encouraged to secure the overall budget of the nominated area and to increase its own contribution.

a.4 Technical aspects

A VPAs management plan was adopted for the period 2013-2019; it is being implemented. This plan was not available in a working language, but the State Party kindly provided the expert with a non official translation of parts of it.

This plan is divided in 6 programmes (protection, conservation and sustainable uses, public relations, visitors, monitoring and administration) and it contains clear operational objectives and indicators, as well as “strategic actions”; it also addresses the main issues and concerns in regards to the protection of the nominated area and the sustainable use of the natural resources, in particular grazing activities, logging and restoration of the degraded areas; a chapter deals with the reintroduction of the gazelle and contains a risk assessment.

This management plan seems to provide a satisfactory baseline for the management of the whole nominated area, to meet the standards of the European diploma regulation and to fill the European diploma regulation requirements. **Further assurance and commitments should however be required from the State party that appropriate and sufficient funding will be provided in the next five years – along the first period of award of the diploma - so that all programmes and activities contained in the management plan are fully implemented, by its end.**

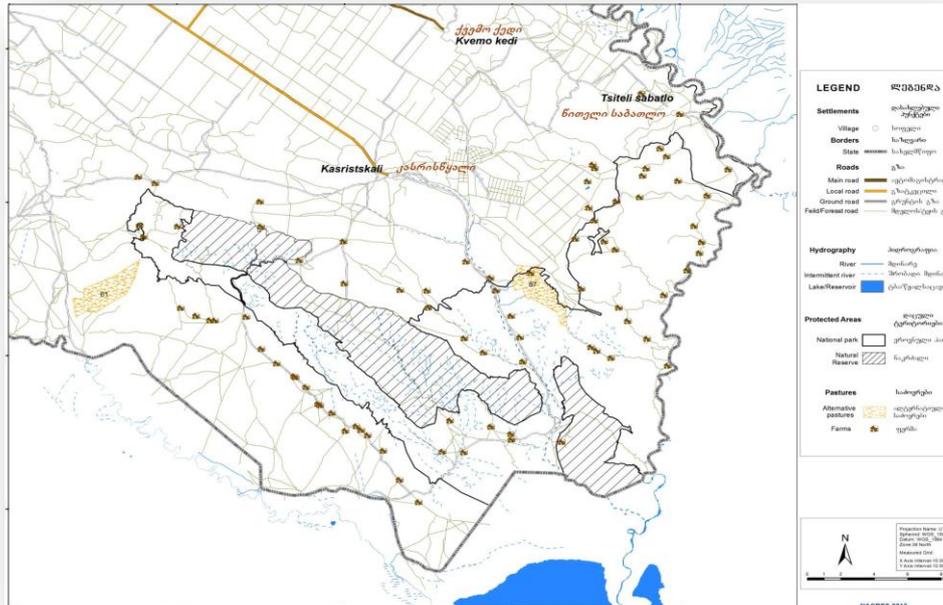
b. Regulations and effects of socio-economic activities

Most uses and activities not compatible with the long-term preservation of the biological and landscape features of the nominated area are forbidden.

The main activity that interferes with the long term preservation of the nominated area is grazing; grazing has apparently shaped the Vashlovani opened landscapes over the years and created the ecological mosaic currently found throughout the park³¹.

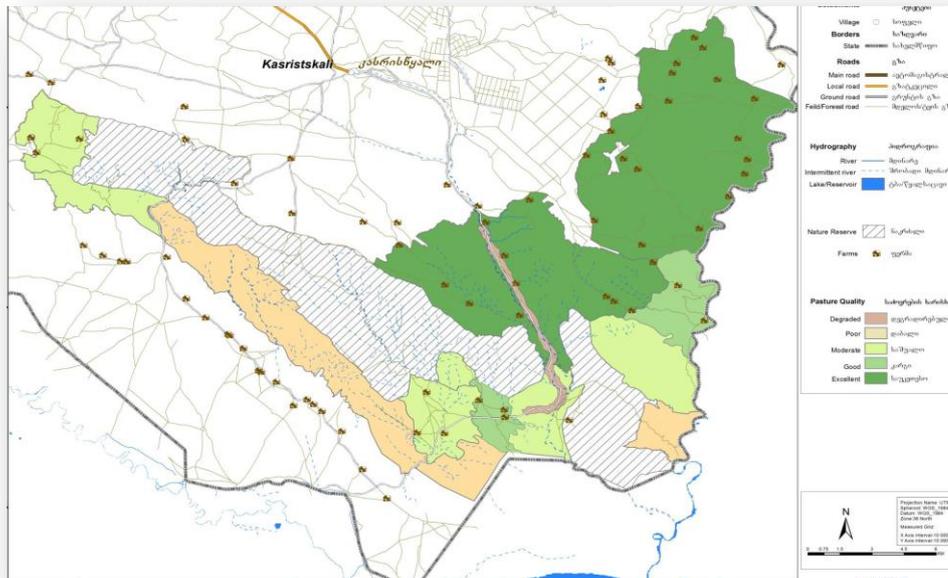
Parts of the VNP and the adjacent areas are traditionally used as winter pastures for livestock. Around 45 000 sheep distributed in 45 shelters/farms (**Map 6**) come every year from the Teshuti mountains, North East of Georgia, to winter in the VPAs; it takes them 10-14 days to reach the nominated area, where they stay from October to May.

³¹Source: NACRES, 2013 - Assessment of Pastures in Vashlovani National Park, Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation Benefits and Dividends for Local Communities (UNDP/EU), 40 p.



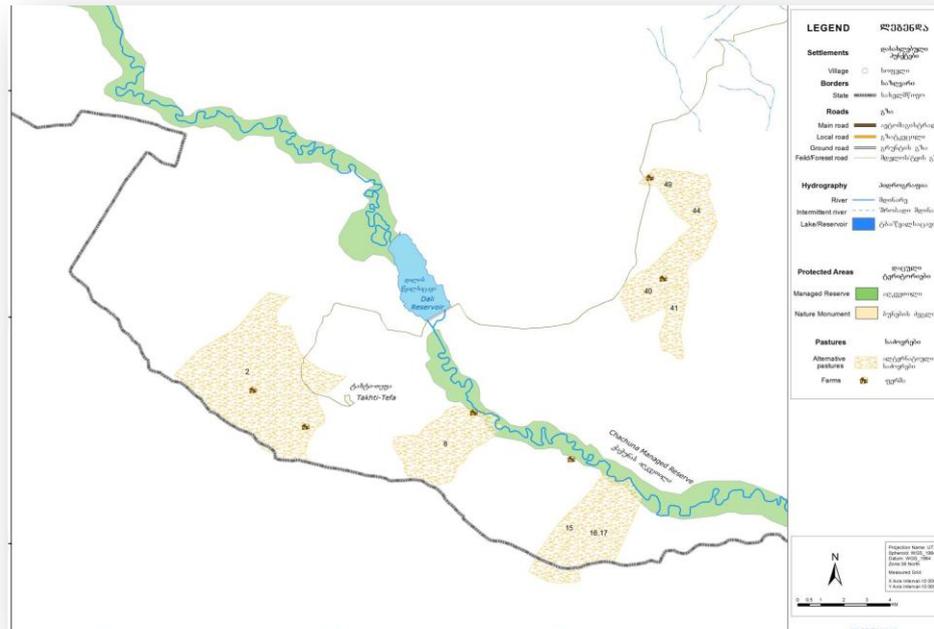
Map 6 – Distribution of the shelters within the VPAs (Source: NACRES, 2013).

Several farms are situated in or at the immediate border of the VSNR; many of them are nearby zones which have been degraded in the past, by grazing (**Map 7**).



Map 7 – Pasture classification by biomass in VPAS (Source: NACRES 2013).

Some are also located in zones of the VNP which are not assigned to grazing activities and where those activities should not be conducted; this has the effect of increasing the concentration of livestock in parts of the nominated area which are sensitive from an ecological perspective and which should thus benefit from a strict protection regime. The result – observed by the expert during his field visit - is an increase in grazing pressure, and local overgrazing. **The future “grazing plan” under preparation, should address those issues and provide alternatives.**



Map 8 – Potential alternative pastures in VNPAs (Source: NACRES, 2013).

Assessments of grazing in the VPAs and studies on alternative grazing areas were recently carried out by NACRES; in a first step, alternative pasture areas were pre-identified further South of the VPAs (**Map 8**)³²; however, other works and assessments on some of those alternative areas, seemed to show that those grazing areas are not appropriate and cannot be considered as good alternatives³³. Additional surveys on that matter are on-going, in the frame of the EU project mentioned above; their conclusions are not already available.

Moreover, according to the state of knowledge³⁴, most pressure from grazing is observed at pastures that are within a walking distance of 5 km radius from the settlements. Hence, in order to minimize the grazing pressure on the nominated area, all settlements located nearby the VSNR, should be dismantled and moved further away from the reserve and other sensitive natural habitats, at a reasonable distance from them, in appropriate alternative areas.

In any case, the grazing activities within the nominated site, should be limited to the carrying capacity of the ecosystem in general, and more efforts should be done by the VPAS Administration, with the support of the PA Agency, to enforce the existing regulation and control those activities in the most sensitive areas of the nominated area; the possibility to increase the level of the fines for offense to the grazing legislation should also be considered.

The State Party should also be urged to remove the settlements situated in the restoration zone of the VNPAs, and near the VSNR; it should also assess further the possibility to use alternative pasture areas. A comprehensive grazing plan, with clear zoning and production targets and limits, should be proposed to the Group of specialists in the nearest future, that guarantees the long-term preservation of the European importance and the biological and landscape values of the nominated area.

³² NACRES, 2013 - Sustainable Management of Pastures in Georgia to Demonstrate, Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation Benefits and Dividends for Local Communities (UNDP/EU); NACRES - Centre for Biodiversity

Conservation & Research, Tbilisi 2013, 40 p.

³³ GIS-Lab.ltd, 2014 – Assessment for the feasibility of targeted pastures as comparable alternatives for currently used pastures, GIS-Lab ltd, Tbilisi, 2014, 17p.

³⁴ Gintzburger, G. (2012). Rangelands Condition and Assessment Vashlovani National Park and Associated Project Areas. A Mission Report for Fauna and Flora International.

To conclude on that matter and for information, the first key results of the UNDP programme mentioned here above are the following³⁵, amongst others:

- a map based on GIS analysis and fieldwork, consolidating information on vegetation types and their spread in the VPAS;
- a map specifying the exact locations of the 45 existing farms and pastures (see here above);
- a comprehensive assessment of Tushetian shepherds livelihoods (socio-economic attitudes, dependency on pastures, ...), and identification of opportunities for shepherds livelihood improvement;
- establishment of fences around four plots with different vegetation types, to draw out long-term pasture monitoring system and build an appropriate methodology for botanical surveys.

c. Zoning

See §I-2-2.

d. Ownership title

The nominated area is a State owned land.

e. Land-use plans

There is no specific other uses and activities in the nominated area, in addition to those assessed here above and/or linked to the VPAS management.

f. Development work

No specific comments

g. Management plan for the area

As mentioned above, a management plan was approved for the period 2013-2019³⁶; it covers the whole nominated area.

The State Party should be encouraged to complete all programmes and activities planned during that period, and allocate regular appropriate fund to the VPAS Administration.

Would the nominated area be awarded, the State Party should be invited to elaborate a new plan, in due time, in order to cover the whole period of award (5 years).

h. Public access and reception facilities and infrastructures

Public access is strictly regulated and the nominated area offers various equipments and accommodations for tourists and visitors (around 7 000 persons/year).

Except the headquarter building - which is well managed - most existing field infrastructures are in poor conditions and would need maintenance works and major renovation. A specific programme should be prepared and funded by the State Party, to renew these infrastructures, so as they meet the international standards.

i. Scientific studies needed and activities of research bodies

For historical reasons, Georgia has excellent scientists working in the field of biodiversity research for long, and the state of knowledge on environment in Georgia is rather good, while it needs to be updated and complemented.

Only old data and information were provided to the expert, for example on the species distribution and demography, observed in the nominated area. The last data available on the key umbrella species were collected by NACRES in 2004 and the expert did not get recent data on their seasonal distribution and density in the area. The last baseline inventory of the VSNR flora, was also carried more than ten years ago, in 2003-2004.

³⁵Source: UNDP website.

³⁶Decree n°500-N 23 April 2009.

Those comments are similar to the recommendations of a recent study carried out by NACRES³⁷, concluding on a series of priorities, to summarize:

- to list all species of plants endemic to Georgia and the Caucasus and those included in the National red data book;
- to complement the existing flora inventories so as to cover some of the “lower plant” groups and focus on species characteristic of key habitats (e.g. *Pistacia* and *Juniperus* woodlands);
- to work further on small mammals including bats and passerine birds that are good indicators of key habitats;
- to collect existing data on invertebrates and carry out baseline surveys on priority groups, such as *Lepidoptera*, butterflies, as well as *Orthoptera*, *Coleoptera* and *Arachnids*;
- to complement the existing inventories of mammals, birds and reptiles and work on their distribution and abundance;
- to work further on fauna population size estimates, in general;
- to assess and improve the field monitoring protocols and all other methodological tools; adapt the existing handbook on monitoring accordingly.

More efforts should be made by the State Party and by the VPAS Administration, with support from NACRES and other scientific institutions, to build a reliable baseline of information on the VPAS natural heritage, giving the VPAS Administration the possibility to monitor the European importance of the nominated area, in the mid and long terms.

The lack of human capacities of the VPAS Administration was raised during the mission, as a bottleneck in developing such monitoring programme that is considered important and to be a priority by the local officials. Such programme would require more efforts and funding from the State Party.

The State Party should be strongly encouraged to develop such efforts and build a strong monitoring programme focused on the most specific natural and landscape features of the nominated area, and the anthropogenic pressures on it.

j. Possible membership of other international networks

VPAS is part of the EMERALD network.

k. Relationship

The PA Agency and the VPAS Administration are familiar of international organisations, public (UNDP, UE, WB, Biodiversity Convention, Bern and Bonn Conventions,...) and private (IUCN, WWF, FFI,). They also cooperate with other countries from the region, on several programs of activities (e.g.: leopard and gazelle conservation).

l. Diverse

Finally, the composition of the nominated area was discussed during the mission.

The site nominated includes five clusters; three of them are separated from the two main parts of it, the VSNR and the VNP.

While there is no doubt on the European importance and the management of those two main clusters, the award of the three natural monuments, raise however the following question:

- the Takhti-Tepa Natural Monument which is a small mud-volcano (9 ha), doesn't have a significant biological or landscape interest *per se*, and it is geographically far away from the four other clusters. The expert was also told during his visit that similar geological sites, larger and more attractive, would exist in the same area; but they are not protected due to their proximity to the national border with Azerbaijan;
- their European importance, based on the European diploma regulation, is not obvious

³⁷Source: VPAS Administration.

- all three clusters are separated from each other and from what is the “*core*” of the nominated area.

Nevertheless, all clusters of the nominated area are managed as a whole, by the VPAS Administration. For that reason, **the expert proposes to keep all of them within the nominated area.**

CONCLUSION

Referring to the art. 5, § 1.a of CM/ResDip(2008)1 of the Committee of the Ministers, it is proposed to the Group of specialists, that the award of the European diploma to the Vashlovani Protected Areas (VPAS) be recommended to the Committee of Ministers, with the following conditions and recommendations:

The State Party should:

Condition 1: by the end of 2015, **remove** all existing shelters, stop grazing activities at a reasonable distance to be determined and submitted to the Group of specialists, from the borders of the Vashlovani Strict Nature Reserve, and enforce strictly the existing regulation on grazing in the VPAs;

Condition 2: **accelerate** the on-going process of elaboration of a comprehensive grazing management plan, with clear objectives, timeframe and indicators, for the dismantlement and relocation of grazing equipments and activities outside the *nature strict protection* and *restoration* zones of the Vashlovani National Park, and, by the end of 2016, **submit** a proposal to the Group of specialists of the European diploma; alternatives grazing areas should be proposed, located at a reasonable distance from the borders of the sensitive zones; the State Party is also urged **to enforce** the existing legislation on grazing in the whole diplomed area, accordingly and without delay, and **to limit** grazing activities to the VPAs carrying capacity (*to be determined*);

Recommendation 1: develop and fund an operational and comprehensive monitoring program of the Diploma area; this program should be focused on the most specific natural and landscape features of the diplomed area, and on the anthropogenic pressures on it;

Recommendation 2: prepare and implement a program to maintain and renovate the field equipments and infrastructures for tourists and visitors;

Recommendation 3: pursue, update and complement inventories and mapping of species and habitats (distribution, abundance, state of conservation and tendencies), consistently with the EMERALD standards and requirements;

Recommendation 4: secure the VPAS core budget, from internal sources preferably, and provide funding to ensure that the 2013-2019 management plan is fully implemented;

Recommendation 5: start the process of renewing the management plan on due time, so as to cover the whole period of award of the VPAs with the European diploma;

Recommendation 6: improve further the level of expertise and skills of the staff, especially in the field ecology, knowledge and monitoring of species and acknowledge the State Party for its on-going efforts on that matter.

St Cergue, 26th January 2015.

Annex 1: Programme of the visit

September 29-October 1, 2015

A Program of an Experts Visit

Main Destinations: Tbilisi; Dedoplistskaro/Vashlovani Protected Areas

Georgia

DAY 1Monday 29 September

11:00-Inception meeting with Rati Japaridze, Head of the Agency of Protected Areas, Tbilisi

11:30 Meeting with project manager Tornike Phulariani. UNDP Project: Sustainable Management of Pastures in Georgia

12:00 Meeting with experts from WWF –Ilia Osepashvili and the director of Tbilisi Zoo-Zura Gurielidze (Working on Gazelles)

12:30 Meeting with representative of NACRES-Biodiversity Conservation and Research Center-Irakli Shavgulidze (Leopard, pastures)

13:00 Meeting with the chief Specialist of Biodiversity protection of the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources protection of Georgia, Nona Khelaia ,Head of the Planr department Toma Dekanoidze, chief specialist of scientific research and monitoring Khatun Tsiklauri and Representative of Institute of Botany Niko Lachashvili

13:30 Lunch

14:30 Travel to Dedoplistskaro

16:00 Check in at the guest house

16:30 Tour at the Visitor Center

17:00 Meeting with the Staff of the Vashlovani Protected Areas

18:00 Dinner

DAY 2

Tuesday 30 September

9:00 Breakfast

Visit of the areas.

14:00 lunch

17:30 Return from the areas

18:00 Dinner

DAY 3

Wednesday 1 October:

9:00-Breakfast

10:00 Visit of the areas continued

13:00 Lunch

14:00 Presentation of Head of the Administration Merab Piroshmanashvili about the Vashlov Protected Areas and Meeting with Stakeholders:

Head of Dedoplistskaro Municipal Administration-Nika Janiashvili

Head of Dedoplistskaro municipality Culture and youth department-Tamar Tamazashvili

Chief Specialist of International Relations office –Khatuna QoQuashvili

Head of Vashlovani Friends Association-Amiran Kodiashvili

Editor of local Newspaper "Shirazi"-Inga Shiolashvili

Journalist of web portal www.qiziyi.ge Ilia Mardkoplshvili

16:00 Departure from Dedoplistskaro to Tbilisi

ⁱ Kept in Shervan Nature Reserve, Azerbaïdjan.

ⁱⁱⁱ Com. pPers.