

# European Diploma for Protected Areas

## ***VASHLOVANI PROTECTED AREAS (GEORGIA)***

**ON-THE-SPOT APPRAISAL**

**2 – 5 June 2019**



**P. Galland March 2020**

# Background

- European Diploma awarded in 2015 to the Vashlovani Protected Areas (Georgia) with conditions and recommendations, following an appraisal mission in October 2014
- Appraisal mission organized in June 2019 in order to assess the implementation of the 2015 conditions and recommendations, and to discuss the current and future management issues for the next ten years for the **Vashlovani Protected Areas (VPAS)** and its components.
- The expert spent 2 ½ days visiting the area and meeting with local experts and officials; he was accompanied by representatives from the State Agency for Nature Protection and several members of the National Parks administration

# Short presentation

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.

Its area includes **five clusters**, two of them separated from the main protected cluster (Takhti tepha and Eagle gorge).

**Vashlovani reserve** (5025 ha) was established in 1935

**“Vashlovani Protected Areas”** (VPAS – 35 292 ha)

was created on the base of the reserve in 2003; it includes:

- VPAS Vashlovani Strict Nature Reserve (9 962 ha - VNR)
- Vashlovani National Park (25 021 ha - VNP)

## Natural monuments:

- Eagle gorge (98 ha)
- Alazani floodplain forest (201 ha)
- Takhli tepha (10 ha)



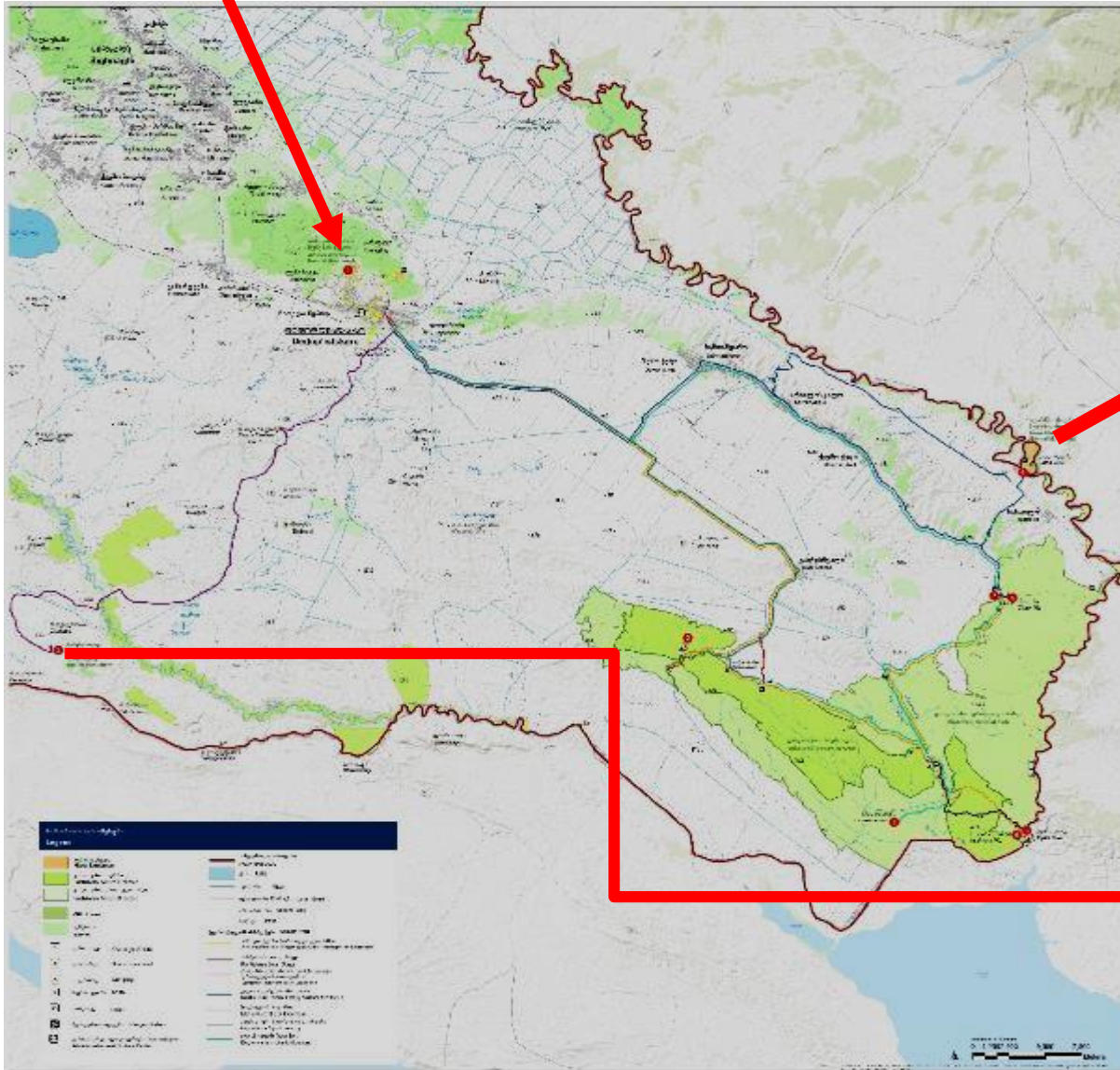




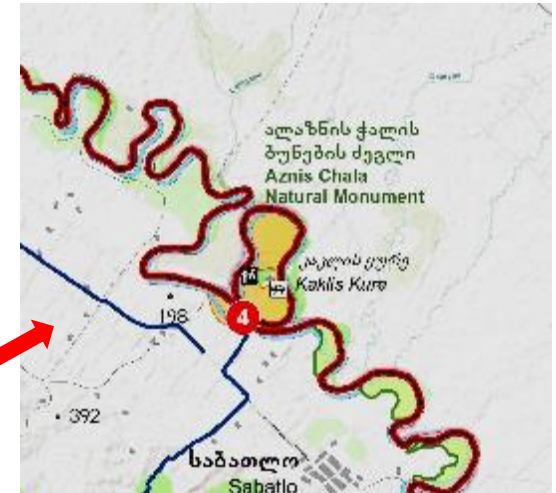


# Vashlovani

Eagel Gorge



Alazani floodplain /  
Aznis Chala (204 ha)



Takhli tepha (10 ha)



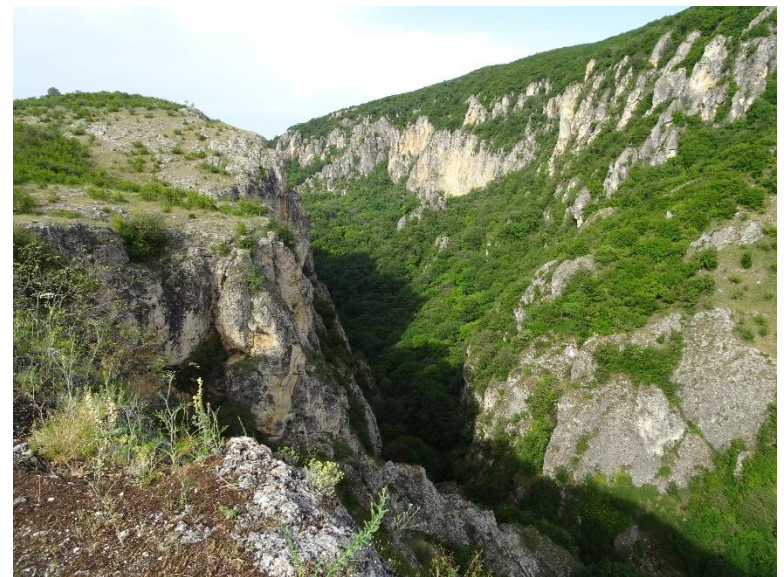
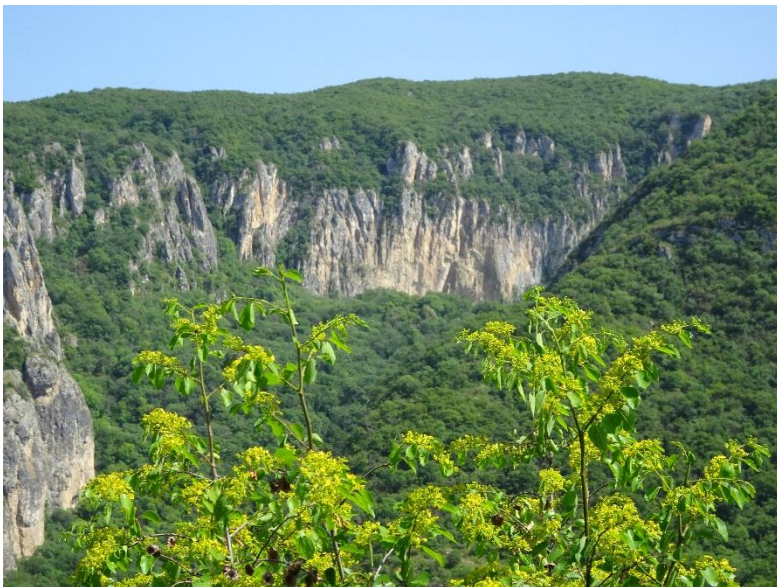


# Eagle Canyon (Artsivis Kheoba)

Artsivi (Eagle) Gorge Natural Monument represents a unique complex consisting of

- a limestone rock canyon
- an adjacent forested area, where the Khornabuji fortress was built (5th c).

The natural monument of Eagle canyon is part of a limestone escarpment that hosts a flora distinct from other landscapes of the protected areas. The local endemic plant species *Campanula kachetika* and a number of rare plant species are found here. In spite of its relatively small size of 500 ha, ten species of birds of prey dwell in Eagle canyon.



# Vashlovani Protected Areas (VPAS)

## Vashlovani National Park (VNP)

### Vashlovani Strict Nature Reserve (VSNR)

- The nominated area is oriented NW-SE and was established to preserve both landscape and natural heritage of Georgia. While there is a relatively high and seasonal (winter) 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 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. The nominated area is a State-owned land.
- In order to achieve the successful implementation of the gazelle reintroduction project it is planned to grant the Samukhi Valley the status of a protected area of multiple usage

# Biogeography and Ecology

- VPAS stretches from 100 m to 800 m above the sea level, in the Kiziki region, Dedoplistskaro District. It covers around 36 000 ha of arid and semi-arid steppic areas as well as Pistachia and Juniperus woodlands, fringed by high cliffs and crossed by deep canyons and ravines.
- Located in the driest part of Georgia, the site is characterised by a **semi-desert dry subtropical climate** and a unique mosaic of landscapes and habitats for flora and fauna species, many of them being rare, endangered and/or endemic, and sparsely represented to date, in the network of the European Diploma holding protected areas.





# European interest

- Georgia is part of the global 200 eco-region set up by WWF
- Georgia is among the 35 hotspots of global biodiversity
- **The nominated area can be seen as a typical example of diverse floristic communities in Europe, representative from the European steppic eco-region**



# Uniqueness of Vashlovani Protected Areas:

- The best example of the diversity of animal and plant species is the country
- Very high levels of endemism
- Red list species
- Rare and endangered species
- The relict juniper and pistachio arid forests
- Alazani unique floodplain forests
- The highest concentration of reptiles and mammals in Georgia
- The highest diversification of predatory birds in Georgia
- A winter place for rare bird species
- Great diversity of entomofauna
- Unique paleontological fossil flora and fauna
- Rare forms of relief
- Historical-cultural monuments
- The possibility of cross-border cooperation





# Geological features

- the protected areas and the surrounding territory is formed from **neogene and quaternary sedimentary rocks**. Surface limestone appears at the Artsivis Kheoba natural monument. The tectonics of the region are characterised by narrow anticlines and depressions which are separated from each other by faults. Among the morpho-structural forms, the following are significant: eroded valleys, river terraces, ravines, badlands, pseudokarst, mud volcanoes, artificial caves and denudation witnesses. Dry climatic conditions have provided for the specific forms of relief.



- The eroded ravines and valleys constitute the so-called “badlands” and form the main part of the VNR



- One of the protected areas’ most remarkable geological features is the **Takhti-Tepha mud-volcano natural monument**. The volcano is several meters high, set on the crest of a ridge. On top of the hillock there is a single, round mud crater between 3.5 and 4 meters in diameter



# Pantishara Canyon and Datvi gorge

- The analysis of geological strata showed that in different periods it had been a sea bottom. It is confirmed by sea fauna discovered in rocks strata. The relief developed on the continental sediments is represented by smothered hillocks and plain surfaces. In Pantishara Canyon and Datvi gorge, erosion has created columns and “Town swallow”.
- Shells of the mollusks maintained in sediments of bare layers are easily noticeable.
- In Datvi gorge on the territory of Vashlovani protected area, bones of elephant were discovered (the biggest is a back bone of 87 cm, dated at 2 000 000 years old).



# Areulebi - Alesilebi

- Areulebi is a Georgian name that translates as a place where it is easy to get lost. The landscape represents a network of mostly dry and often very deep and narrow gullies with eroded slopes that are sometimes very steep or even vertical.
- Areulebi includes so-called 'Alesilebi' – precipices that can be 70 mas high as 70 m

The habitat includes fragments of various vegetation types, such as arid open juniper and pistachio woodland, shibliak and desert vegetation. Areulebi covers a large proportion of the park (approximately 195 sq. km in total).





# Vegetation and Habitats

VPAS vegetation is a mosaic of steppes, meadows, arid and grove forests, hemixerophytic communities and desert ecosystems; this combination of vegetation types is unique in Georgia.

The most common plant communities include:

- Lowland and foothills deserts
- Phrygana-like vegetation
- Steppe
- Shibliak-like hemixerophilous scrub
- Arid light woodlands
- Foothills deciduous forest.

There are also patches of flood plain forest with hygrophilous vegetation



# Floristic interest

- Many plant 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. 13 “red listed” species of plants of Georgia are commonly found in VPAS:

*Juniperus foetidissima* Willd. \*\*\*

*Juniperus polycarpus* K.

*Acer ibericum* M. Bieb. \*\*\*

*Pistacia mutica* Fisch. & C.A.Mey. \*\*\*

*Celtis glabrata* Spreng. \*\*\*

- The wild pistachio (*Pistacia* sp) and the juniperus trees (*Juniperus* spp), abundant in the nominated area, are certainly amongst the most specific and remarkable floristic features, together with the *Artemisia* communities (*Artemisia lerchiana*), in the semi desert areas.





# Faunistic interest

- The nominated area hosts very rare and important fauna species for Europe. Among them can be mentioned : the **leopard (*Panthera pardus tuliana*)** which was last observed about ten years ago; 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 reintroduction projects have started in 2009.
- Mammals- 62 species; several of them listed on Annex II to the Bern Convention, and breeding populations of at least 8 large carnivores are found; the assemblage of large mammals is especially noteworthy: jackal, fox, lynx, brown bear, wolf, jungle cat, etc. The protected areas are also rich of with Chiropteras: *Myotis emarginatus*, *Rhinolopus hipposideros*, *Rhinolophus mehelyi*.

## Other groups:

- **Birds-135 species**; amongst them 26 species of raptors, all listed on Annex II. Various birds of prey are found in large numbers including imperial eagle, griffon vulture, Egyptian vulture, black vulture, buzzards, short-toad snake eagle, etc.
- **Reptiles-30 species** including Mediterranean tortoise, Caucasian agama, Caucasian sand boa and an important breeding population of the spectacular Lebetine viper (*Vipera lebetina*), listed also on Annex II
- **Amphibians- 4 species**, including *Bufo viridis*, *Bufo bufo* , *Hyla arborea*, *Rana ridibunda*;
- in the Caucasus region ***Ablephorus pannonicus*** (lizard) is found only in Vashlovani National Park.





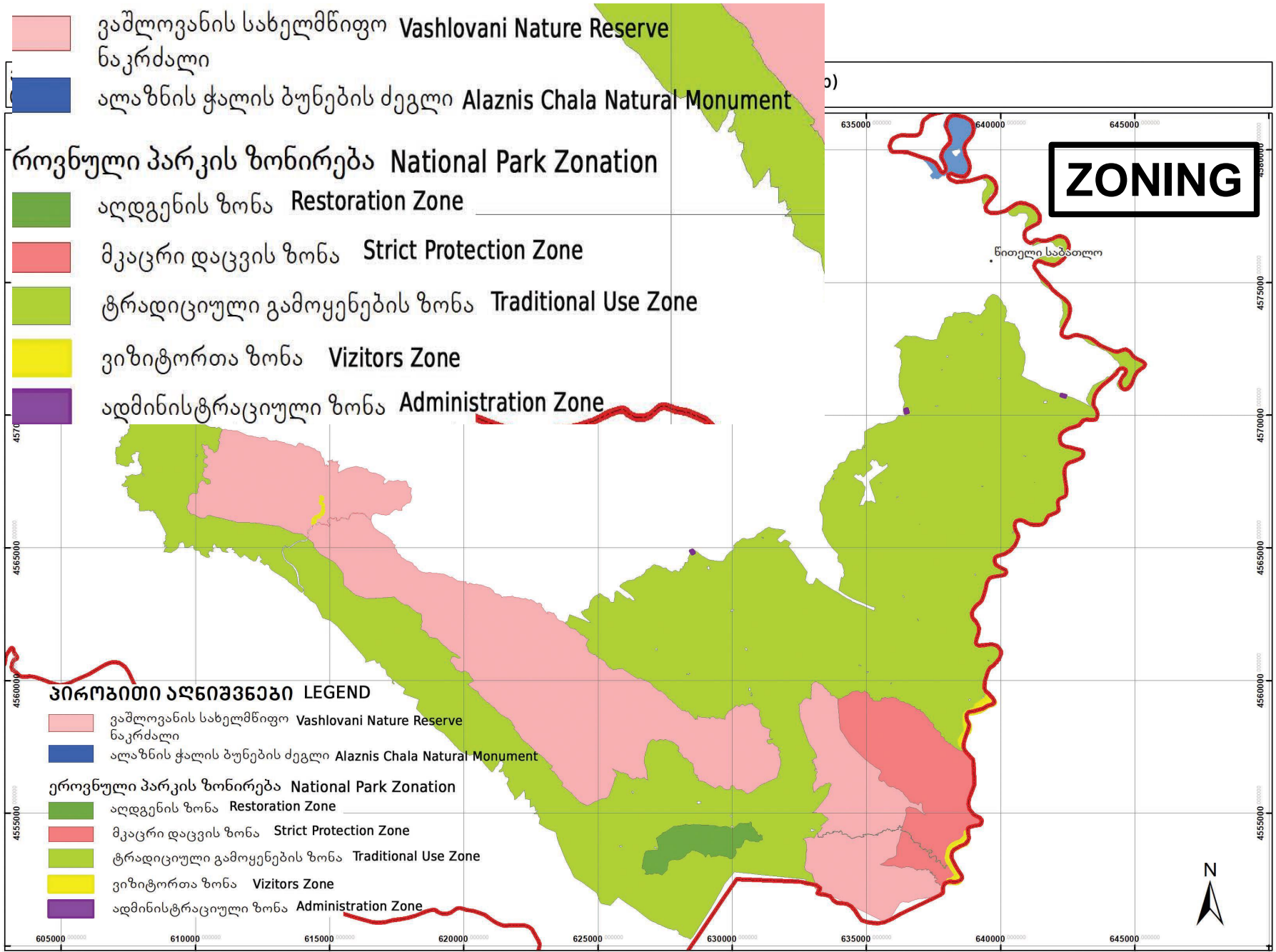
# Protection measures

- VPAS is a complex of five protected area, managed under several different legal regimes, covering around 36 '000 ha
- This VSNR (strict nature reserve) was formally designated in 1935 and corresponds to the category I of the IUCN protected areas PAs classification. Historically, four new protected areas were added in 2003:
  - the VNP (IUCN category II)
  - 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.

# Park Governance

- **Advisory council:** 20 members – meet at least twice a year (municipalities, chalet managers, livestock owners, tourism sector, conservation organisations). Meets the legal requirement, but its efficiency is challenged by NGOs
- **Scientific Council:** 12 members (Academy, Natural History Museum, Universities).  
→ council members have been associated to the preparation of the Management Plan
- Good relation with local communities – but pressure from local shepherds associations





ვაშლოვანის სახელმწიფო ნაკრძალი Vashlovani Nature Reserve

ალაზნის ქალის ბუნების ძეგლი Alaznis Chala Natural Monument

როვნული პარკის ზონირება National Park Zonation

აღდგენის ზონა Restoration Zone

მკაცრი დაცვის ზონა Strict Protection Zone

ტრადიციული გამოყენების ზონა Traditional Use Zone

ვიზიტორთა ზონა Visitors Zone

ადმინისტრაციული ზონა Administration Zone

**ZONING**

ნითელი საბაზო

**პირობითი აღნიშვნები LEGEND**

ვაშლოვანის სახელმწიფო ნაკრძალი Vashlovani Nature Reserve  
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 ადმინისტრაციული ზონა Administration Zone

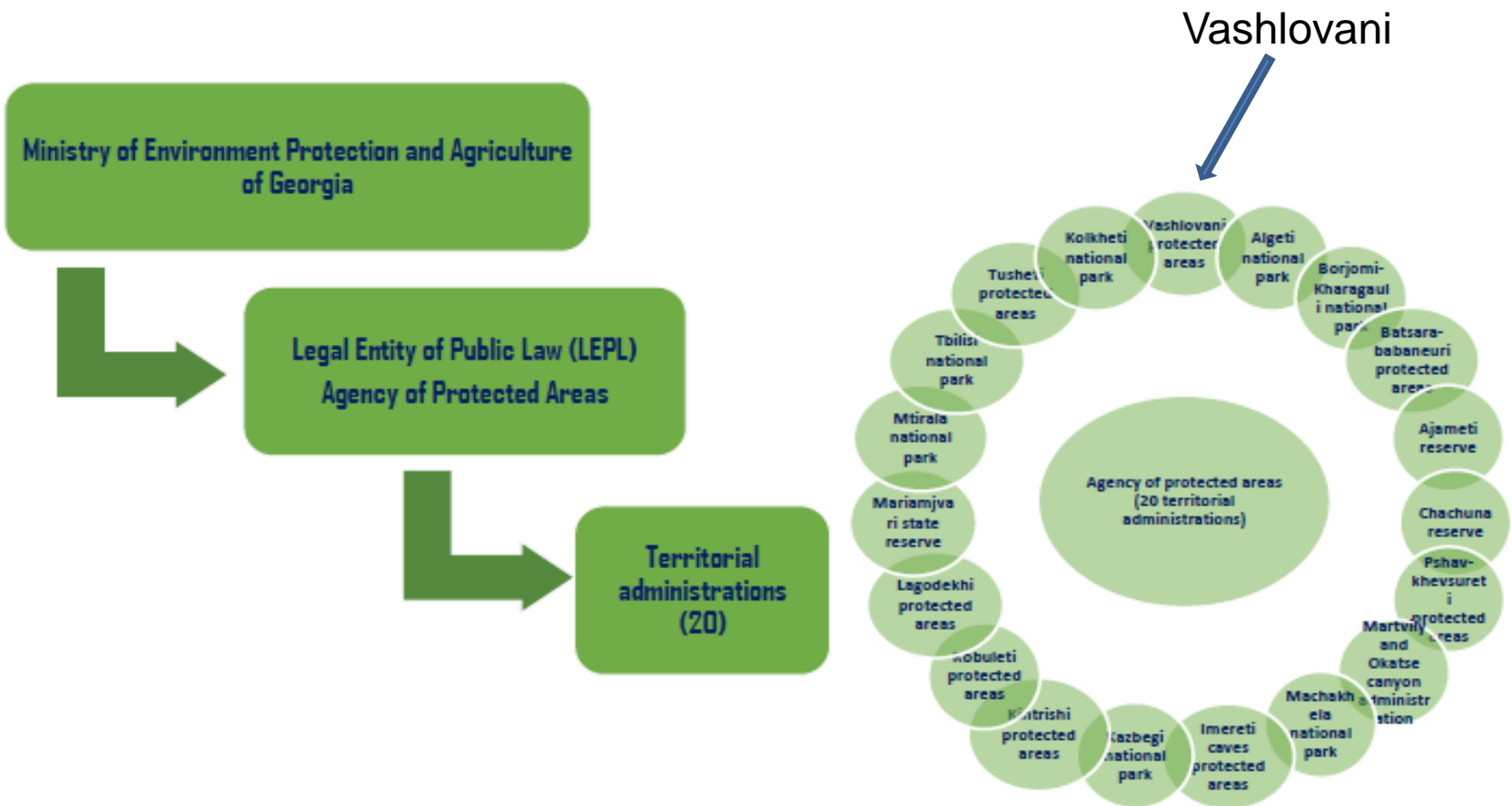


VNP comprises five “zones” where uses and activities are more or less strictly regulated

- the nature strict protection zone – 1 '930 ha (1'936 ha): dedicated to research and limited recreational and ecotourism uses and activities only; most uses and activities are totally forbidden and some are strictly regulated;
- the restoration zone – 448 ha (467 ha): its main management objective is to stop further degradation and engage a restoration process of the ecosystems. Extractions, damages, farming activities, hunting, logging, recreation, are forbidden;
- the traditional use zone – 22 '539 ha (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. Grazing by “toushuri”, a local and traditional sheep, is the most important activity; Visitation can also be limited, if excessive;
- the visitor zone – 101 ha (107 ha): this zone hosts accommodations and facilities linked to the recreational activities. It includes infrastructures such as visitor and information centers, camping sites, cabins, hiking and riding trails, picnic grounds.
- the administration zone - 3 ha (22 ha): it includes VPAS Administration facilities.

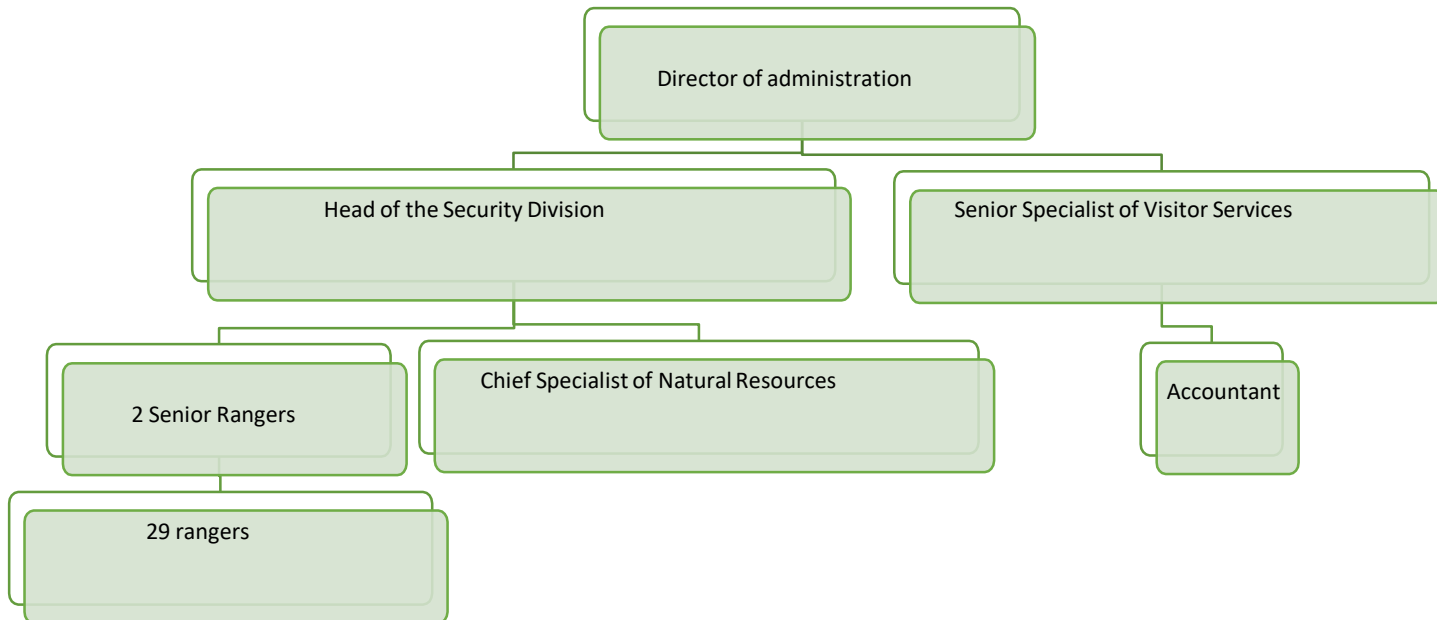


- The VNP administration also manages the three natural monuments that are parts of the nominated area; the regulation of those monuments is less restrictive, while collection of materials for scientific purposes is controlled and requires special authorizations from the park administration.



# Administrative structure of VNP

- The protected areas are placed under the authority of the VPAS administration, which reports to the Agency of protected areas, at national level n





# Management Plan

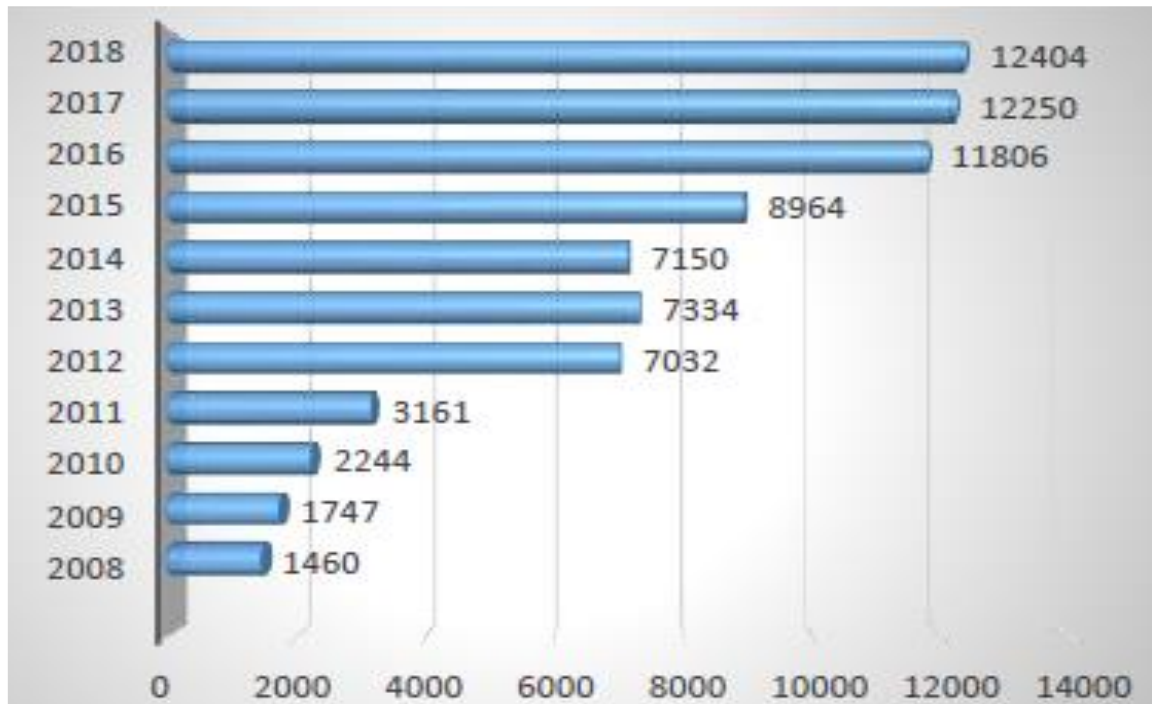
- A six-year (2014-2020) management plan was developed and implemented. Vashlovani Management Plan was approved - Decree №18, January 3, 2014 by the Government of Georgia. It is valid until January 3, 2020. The plan was elaborated with the support of the Caucasus Nature Fund CNF.
- The management plan will be updated by the year 2020 and will be a 9-year management plan. The preparation of the plan is ensured within the GEF/UNDP project “Enhancing the Financial Sustainability of Protected Areas System in Georgia”. It i’s already decided and agreed with the donor that at the end of 2019 works for management plan preparation will be started. The plan is complemented by the **eco-tourism development strategy** and the **pasture management plans**.
- Funding of the administration of Vashlovani Protected Areas includes finances of the State Budget, own revenues and Caucasus Nature Fund; these resources are ensuring the implementation of the management plan for the years of 2014-2020.

Within the duties of the administration, the following main activities can be emphasized;

- **Law enforcement** within the protected area – 32 rangers are in charge of law enforcement;
- The rangers are **patrolling** according to the protection stations – the 32 rangers are patrolling during 24 hours, according to 8 protection stations.
- Carry out **anti-fire measures**
- **Relationship with local people** and people who use natural resources in the traditional use zone. Meetings with local communities are regularly held on different challenging issues
- Control the existing **infrastructure condition** (care, development, accomplishment).
- Restoration and renovation of **roads** in the area. Annually, in spring the restoration of the roads is implemented by the park administration.
- **Monitoring of biodiversity** (including phototraps) - Rangers permanently collect information in the field..
- **Visitor assistance** and ensure their safety.
- Staff **training** is carried out on a case-by-case basis. Main training topics are: law enforcement, pasture management, visitor service, safety regulations, primary activities in fire-fighting, etc

# Tourism and infrastructures

- Vashlovani National Park itself supports development of tourism business in Dedoplistskaro. The number of visitors in Vashlovani Protected Areas has been significantly increasing over the last few years which prompted the establishment of various tourist objects in and around Dedoplistskaro. For example: cafes, wine cellars, guest houses and hotels, hiking equipment rental service, etc.  
➔ VPAS is becoming one attractive destination among local and international visitors.





# Research and scientific studies needed

List of the recommendations (study carried out by NACRES. environmental NGO ):

- 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

# Main issues for VPAS

*The management in general is good, and there are only a few issues to consider for the upcoming period. Financing is sufficient, though it strongly depends upon the Caucasus Nature Fund (CNF).*

- The **renewal of the management plan**, including the pasture management plan and a tourism strategy, is a key issue for the coming years
- **Scientific inventories** and data collection deserves more attention
- **Tourism** is also an issue. The number of visitors has been increasing significantly in the recent years, but it is still quite far from reaching the carrying capacity
- **The transboundary cooperation** with the Azerbaijan neighboring country appears to be very good; in particular the re-introduction of the gazelle, jointly operated by both countries. Adjacent protected areas established on both sides of the border are a guarantee for the integrity of the ecosystems and their natural functioning.
- **Winter grazing** is an important issue; thanks to recent measures, derived from the **Pasture Management Plan**, the situation seems to be largely under control. Winter grazing has been part of the ecosystem management for many centuries and has largely contributed the shaping of the landscape
- The State of Georgia is exploring different possibilities of **international recognition** for their PAs (IUCN Green List, Emerald Network, Ramsar, Biosphere reserve, etc.) The State Agency should carefully consider what are the best designations for the best sites in order to avoid confusion among authorities and general public.

# Review of the Conditions and recommendations of 2015 / Resolution CM/ResDip(2015)1

## Conditions (2)

1. ***By the end of 2015, remove the shelters located on the immediate border of the Vashlovani Strict Nature Reserve, and rigorously enforce the existing regulation for grazing in the reserve;***

In 2016 the Agency together with the representatives of the National Agency of Public Registry, conducted the demarcation of the boundaries. Based on the demarcation works, the area was excluded as the part of Strict Nature Reserve and was given the status of National park. Besides, the livestock breeding shelters and surrounding areas of Mijnskure-Takhistskali section of Vashlovani National Park (strict protection zone) has been prohibited to be used for winter grazing. In compensation, some extra territories have been added to the strict protection zone.



2. ***Accelerate the drafting process of a comprehensive sustainable grazing management plan, taking into account the socio-economic context and the effects of grazing, positive and negative, on the long-term conservation of the features of the Vashlovani Protected Areas; this plan will address the matter of dismantlement and relocation of grazing equipment and activities outside the strict nature protection areas and the restoration of degraded zones of the Vashlovani National Park. A draft will be submitted to the Group of Specialists on the European Diploma by the end of 2016, [...] the State Party is also urged to enforce the existing regulation on grazing in the whole Diploma area [...]***

The Agency of Protected Areas with the financial cooperation of the EU and UNDP, has completed the Project “Sustainable management of pastures in Georgia to demonstrate climate change mitigation and adaptation benefits and dividends for local communities”. The project referred to the winter shelters of livestock on protected areas and the nearby located 45 farms of Vashlovani. The most important component of the project was preparation **of Pasture Management Plan of Vashlovani Protected Areas** which was elaborated in 2017.

Due to administrative problems, the plan was not communicated to the Ssecretariat in time; however, it has been sent in July 2019, just after the mission (English summary and link to the full Georgian version).

# **Recommendations (7):**

- 1. Develop and fund an operational and comprehensive monitoring programme of the Diploma area; this programme should be focused on the specific natural and landscape features of the Diploma area and the anthropogenic pressures on it;***

A comprehensive Monitoring Programme is in place and the administration actively uses the developed software to conduct monitoring on the “Red Listed” species spread on the given area. The database is being updated permanently and at this stage information of the last two years is already available on the web-site.

- 2. Prepare and implement a programme to maintain and renovate field equipment and the infrastructure for tourists and visitors;***

Finances from the state budget as well as from different donor organizations are allocated each year to ensure the maintenance and renovation of field equipment and eco- tourist infrastructure for visitors. For instance, for maintaining and upgrading field equipment and infrastructure a 3-year project is implemented in cooperation with CNF

**3. Pursue, update and complement inventories and mapping of species and habitats (distribution, abundance, state of conservation and tendencies), taking into account the Emerald Network's standards and requirements;**

The Monitoring of key species is continuously being carried out in order to provide an inventory and to update the database of species and habitats. For the herbaceous plants, special monitoring stations are arranged. Maps on potential timber distribution areas also exist in VPA Administration. The active working process on the map of Protected areas of Kakheti – is underway.

**4. Secure the Vashlovani Protected Areas core budget, from internal sources preferably, and provide funding to ensure that the 2013-19 management plan is fully implemented;**

Funding of the administration of Vashlovani Protected Areas is being implemented with the finances of the State Budget, own revenues and Caucasus Nature Fund; these resources are ensuring the implementation of the management plan for the years of 2014-2020.



***5. Start the process of drafting the next management plan in a timely manner, so that the whole award period of the European Diploma for the Vashlovani Protected Areas is covered;***

A six-year (2014-2020) management plan was developed and implemented. Vashlovani Management Plan was approved - Decree №18, January 3, 2014 by the Government of Georgia. It is valid until January 3, 2020. The plan was elaborated with the support of the Caucasus Nature Fund CNF. The management plan will be updated by the year 2020 and will be a 9-year management plan.

***6. Improve further the expertise and skills of the staff members, especially in the field of ecology and the knowledge and monitoring of species;***

The Agency of Protected Areas together with CNF and TJS programmes implements capacity building activities for the administration staff in order to enhance qualifications and knowledge of employees and hence ensure better management skills and service quality in the Diploma holding area.

**7. Continue and develop cross-border co-operation for the protection of large carnivores.**

WWF Caucasus Office, the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture of Georgia, the Agency of Protected Areas of Georgia and the relevant environmental institutions of the Republic of Azerbaijan are implementing the following project: “Ecoregional Nature Protection Programme” of Iori-Mingechauri Transboundary Protected Areas. The transfer of gazelles from Shirvan National Park of the Republic of Azerbaijan to Vashlovani Protected Area has been made. The number of gazelles have increased and reached up to 100 individuals in 2019.

# Conclusions and Recommendations

In general, the visit has ***confirmed the European interest of the Vashlovani Protected Areas***. The management is efficient, and ***the natural values are very well preserved***. Despite some delays, the 2 conditions and most of the recommendations of 2015 have been fulfilled.

The staff is very dedicated and the ***financing from different sources appears to be secured***. The relations with the local authorities and people are very good and a close collaboration has been established, namely in the field of tourism and sustainable development.

➔ ***We therefore propose to renew the European Diploma to Vashlovani Protected Areas for a ten years period, with following recommendations:***



1. Finalise and start implementing in 2020 a **new Management Plan** for the next 9-years period. Include specific provisions dedicated to **climate change** and how to address this issue in relation to the long-term preservation of species and habitats typical from the area.
2. Continue to fully **implement the Pasture Management Plan** as part of the general Management Plan. Carefully monitor the pasture activities and the respect of the lease contracts by the farmers. Secure the corresponding budgets from state and other sources.
3. Collect all the available **scientific data** and integrate them into the database under construction. Present a systematic list of habitats with short description and respective coverage in the Vashlovani Protected Areas. Establish a comprehensive **list of endemic, rare and threatened species** with differentiation between the Caucasus, Georgian and local respective species.

4. Continue working closely with the **local authorities and communities**, especially in the field of tourism and sustainable development.
5. Continue maintaining and improving the **visitors' infrastructures** in the park; carefully control the motor traffic on the roads inside the protected areas and monitor the visitors' activities.
6. Pursue and develop **international collaboration** with the Republic of Azerbaijan, especially focusing on ungulate and large mammals' conservation.
7. Use more the **European Diploma designation** in promotional activities and display its logo; carefully consider other potential international designations, in order to avoid confusion among local authorities and population.



*"African Georgia"*

**Thank you for your attention**