COUNCIL OF EUROPE

CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Strasbourg, 19 September 2017 **T-PVS/Files (2017) 7**
[files07e_2017.docx]

CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE
AND NATURAL HABITATS

Standing Committee

37th meeting
Strasbourg, 5-8 December 2017

_____

Other complaints

Possible threat to Svaneti 1 Candidate Emerald site from Nenskra HPP (Georgia)

- REPORT BY THE GOVERNMENT -

Document prepared by
Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources Protection of Georgia

---

- UPDATED SEPTEMBER 2017 -

საქართველოს გარემოსა და ბუნებრივი რესურსების დაცვის
სამინისტრო
MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES PROTECTION OF GEORGIA

საქართველო, 0114 თბილისი, გ.გულუას ქ. N6; ტელ:2727200, 2727220, ფაქსი:2727237;www.moe.gov.ge 6
G. Gulua Str. 0114, Tbilisi, Georgia, Tel:(+995 32) 2727200, 2727220, Fax:2727237; www.moe.gov.ge

KA060124856815217

 # 8040 **14** **/**
სექტემბერი **/ 2017 წ.**

T
o: Ms. Iva Obretenova Secretary of the
Bern Convention Head of the Biodiversity
Unit

Dear Ms. Iva Obretenova,

On August 21st, 2017 we received electronically from you report from "Green Alternative" concerning the additional research conducted by "Balkani Wildlife Society" related to the complaint NO. 2016/9 - Possible threat to "Svaneti 1" Candidate Emerald Site (GE0000012) from Nenskra Hydro Power Plant development (Georgia). On August 22nd, 2017 Mrs. Maia Bitadze informed you, that the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources Protection will prepare an official response concerning aforementioned report, which you can find attached.

In the presented attachment you can see position on some aspects of the complaint, considering that justifying all the statements would cover wide range of information, therefore we provided some of the examples. On the other hand in our previous letters we justified and explained number of issues, repetition of which we did not consider necessary. Additionally, in the attachment you can see opinions and argumentations of the JSC "Nenskra Hydro" on some critical issues discussed in the complaint.

We hope, that presented information and relevant justification will clerify critical topics in the complaint and will support to take objective decision.

We are ready to provide additional factual information if required and hope that Bern Convention Secretariat will share all materials provided by the Government of Georgia related to this issue with the Bureau members.

Attachment:
Position 9 pages.
Sincerely,

First Deputy Minister Solomon Pavliashvili

ANNEX 1

Position on the Complaint NO. 2016/9 – ”Possible threat to “Svaneti 1” Candidate Emerald Site (GE0000012) from Nenskra Hydro Power Plant development (Georgia) (GEOOOOO12)“

First of all it should be mentioned, that presented research, considering the mentioned methodology and circumstances, causes reasonable doubt whether the assessments conducted by ”Balkani Wildlife Society” (BWS) in Svaneti region were competent, impartial and reliable. The content of the research is mainly based on the survey of the population, their assumptions and speculations in relation to the species and habitats, which creates doubt on credibility of the document. For example: according to our information existence of Leopard is not confirmed not only on project territory, but in whole Svaneti region. Brown Bear area and accordingly its habitats covers whole country territory. Same can be said about Lynx. Wolf spread area and quantity is even larger in Georgia. Therefore, we believe allegations, that Nenskra HPP construction near candidate site, or the areas of the sites selected through the research can have negative impact on mammal population in Georgia are illogical.

Additionally, in 2016 ornithologist from Ilia State University identified and evaluated important bird territories. 25 such territories were identified on the whole country territory, Svaneti region was not identified as important bird territory (SPA) based on this research. As mentioned in our letters sent to the Convention Secretariat in previous months, officially nominated candidate sites “Svaneti 1” and “Svaneti 2” mostly match Svaneti planned protected area territory, but additional report for the complaint indicates otherwise.

As you may know, Emerald candidate site “Svaneti 1” (GE0000012) boarders were selected in 2015 by NACRES. Site obtained candidate statues in November, 2016 by the decision 36th of the Bern Convention Standing Committee (T-PVS/PA (2016) 11). Mentioned site boarders were not changed, therefore indicated information, stated by BWS on changes of the “Svaneti 1” boarders and relevantly possible negative impact is not correct.

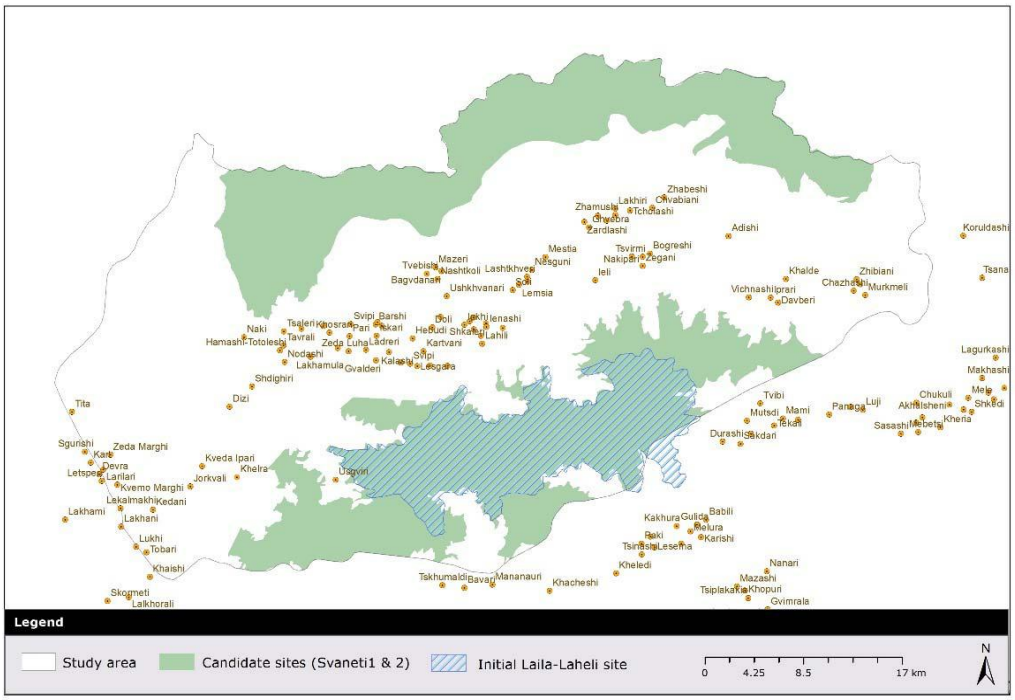
As you know, Emerald site development process started in 2009. In 2009-2010 working meetings were held in Georgia, with the purpose to select important sites for developments of “Emerald Network” site in Georgia. Invited international, also Georgian expert participated in the meeting. At the end potential “Areas of Special Conservation Interest- ASCI” list was elaborated, which covered different regions of Georgia. In Svaneti only so called Laila-Laheli area was selected, which, as experts evaluated, was in compliance with recommendations by the Bern Conversion Standing committee.

By the end of 2010 representatives of the Ministry of Environmental and National Resource Protection proposed additional research on Svaneti territory. Specifically, in addition to the Laila-Laheli area to assess other areas of “Central Caucasus” planned protected territory of Svaneti, with the purpose to include them in the “Emerald Network” site. Mentioned research area covered almost whole Svaneti (please see the Map N1). It should be mentioned, that surrounding areas of current candidate sites “Svaneti 1” and “Svaneti 2”, including area where construction of Nenskra HPP is planned, was not considered on any of the stages ad potential “Areas of Special Conservation Interest-ASCI”.

In last years researches conducted by NACRES identified the most relevant areas for establishment of “Emerald Network”, based on which current candidate Emerald sites: “Svaneti 1” (GE0000012) and “Svaneti 2” (GE0000045) were selected. Final selection procedure for territories of sites “Svaneti 1” and “Svaneti 2” was conducted based on the Bern Convention Standing Committee recommendation # 16 (approved in June, 1989) and new criteria developed on the 33rd meeting of Bern Convention Standing Committee (Decision T-PVS/PA (2013) 13).

Selected territories exceed original “Laila-Laheli “area and covers important sites for execution of Bern Convention and establishment of “Emerald Network”. Mentioned territories are in natural or close to natural conditions and are not under important anthropological impact, that is in compliance

with new criteria developed on the 33rd meeting of Bern Convention Standing Committee (Decision T-PVS/PA (2013) 13).



Map N1 provided by the non-governmental organization NACRES

It should be underlined, that relevance issue of this territories was discussed on biogeographical seminar in Tbilisi in 2015. As you know, in 2012 there was some technical misunderstanding, which resulted in mistakenly announcing whole Svaneti research territory as candidate Emerald site. Bern Convention Secretariat was informed concerning this mistake in 2013-2015 several times by Georgian side. Besides, on biogeographical seminar held in Tbilisi in 2015, representatives of the Biodiversity Service of the Ministry of Environment and National Resources Protection of Georgia, informed participants, that changes of Svaneti and Racha sites boarders were planned. Representatives of the Biodiversity Service and representative of the "Emerald Network working group" Mr. Kakha Artsivadze (NACRES) underlined, that only part of Svaneti research site was considered as potential "Areas of Special Conservation Interest- ASCI". Mentioned information was received by the seminar participants as a note. Relevant decisions and conclusions concerning the sites in Svaneti "Svaneti 1" and "Svaneti 2" covered future correction procedure. Accordingly, consideration from BWS in complaint (T-PVS/Files (2017) 21), that mentioned site modification was conducted unreasonably, is not correct and derives from lack of knowledge of situation.

The main purpose of Bern Convention and therefore, responsibility of Georgia as Convention signatory party, represent preservation of favorable conservation status of species and habitats protected by the convention. With this purpose, its necessary to ensure protection of species and habitats, mentioned under resolution #4 (6.12.1996 and updated version 5.12.2014) and resolution #6 (1998) of Bern Convention Standing Committee, on "Emerald Network" site territory as well as outside of "Emerald Network" site territory.

In standard factsheet of sites "Svaneti 1" and "Svaneti 2" indicated habitats belong to:

1 D4.2 "Basic mountain flushes and streamsides, with a rich arctic-montane flora"

2 E3.4 "Moist or wet eutrophic and mesotrophic grassland"

3 G1.6 Fagus woodland

Following is the statistical information, for understanding mentioned habitats on whole country territory, as well as in Svaneti region. Besides, what part of the presented habitats in Svaneti region is in candidate sites "Svaneti 1" and " Svaneti 2":

D4.2 “Basic mountain flushes and streamsides, with a rich arctic-montane flora“; Total area 105 334 ha
Area in whole Svaneti Territory 172 ha - 0,16%
Current “Emerald Network” coverage territory 50 ha - 29,06%

E3.4 ”Moist or wet eutrophic and mesotrophic grassland“ Total area 169 273 ha
Area in whole Svaneti Territory 629 ha - 0,37%
Current “Emerald Network” coverage territory 70 ha - 11,1%

4. G1.6 Fagus woodland
Total area 1 428 759 ha
Area in whole Svaneti Territory 9662 ha -0,67%
Current “Emerald Network” coverage territory 446 ha -4,8%

In relations to the EIA procedures, BWS and Green Alternative statement that the Nenska HPP doesn't meet EU and international substantive environmental standards and, subsequently, EBRD and EIB standards is not correct and misinterpretation of the reality for the sufficient level environmental standards for the conducted assessments for the Nenskra HPP Project. In addition, EIA and procedures for issuing relevant permits were conducted in accordance with Georgian legislation. Furthermore, during the public discussions international standards and requirements were used. As for the EBRD and EIB requirements, in accordance to the “Nenskra Hydro” information, additional researches were conducted based on this requirements. Research reports are now in process of public discussions and after finalization will be presented to the Ministry for discussion.

Statement that construction of Nenskra HPP started in 2015 is misinterpretation of the facts. Only small scale preliminary investigation works have been undertaken to date including only upgrading of existing municipal roads in the Nenskra valley and geotechnical studies at the dam site.

Alternatives for the project design were evaluated and presented in EIA report. Alternative reservoir locations and dam heights were considered. They are discussed in section 3.3.2 of the 2015 EIA. As company considers, the alternatives assessment was provided on sufficient level this issue was not further assessed in Supplementary E&S Studies. The Supplementary research report was prepared to supplement the existing information and not to repeat information in EIA report prepared in 2015.

JSC Nenskra Hydro is responsible to following National legislative requirements for the development of Nenskra HPP Project and its Environmental and Social Impact Assessment and if after the completion of feasibility study and preparation of the report for 2015 ESIA conceptual changes are made in the design (as indicated in the complaint), resulting in changes in operation conditions, JSC Nenskra Hydro should follow procedures provided in National Regulations with this regard.

We think, that in duration of Biogeographical Seminar planned to be held on 8-9 November, 2017 in Tbilisi, experts will have possibility to discuss this issue on species and habitats level, which is related to the sufficiency of officially nominated candidate sites in 2016 and develop required recommendations.

Herewith, we are sending JSC Nenskra Hydro considerations and arguments with regard to critical issues provided in the compliant.

COMMENTS ON "REVIEW OF KEY BIODIVERSITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS OF NENSKRA HYDROPOWER PROJECT"

INTRODUCTION

First of all we would like to underline that biodiversity surveys carried out in the areas of the planned Nenskra Hydropower Project by Balkani Wildlife Society (BWS) in order to support with biodiversity expertise Association Green Alternative (GA), complainant of Complaint No. 2016/9 - Possible threat to "Svaneti 1" Candidate Emerald Site (GE0000012) from Nenskra Hydro Power Plant development (Georgia) are mostly based on literature review and surveys in June 2016, October 2016, April 2017, July 2017.

Project developer conducted extensive biodiversity surveys from 2011 to 2016, i.e. during 6 years period for all appropriate months and seasons for biodiversity survey objective.

Review of Key Biodiversity and Environmental Problems of Nenskra Hydropower Project prepared by BWS and GA is based on incorrect assumptions and aims misinterpretation of Biodiversity Impact Assessment extensive survey results conducted within the framework of Nenskra HPP ESIA (2015) and the Supplementary E&S studies (2017). Particularly, Balkan Wildlife Society and GA statement that "assessments of biodiversity are of very poor quality; surveys were made mostly in September 2015 when the period was not appropriate for most of the species, endangered species threatened by enhanced permeability of the habitat were not evaluated at all" is a serious misinterpretation of the "Biodiversity Impact Assessment"/Volume 4 of the Supplementary E&S studies prepared by JSC Nenskra Hydro and ESIA 2015.

The surveys for flora, vegetation and habitats were undertaken during 2011-2014 and in 2015 in May, June, July, August and September, including all appropriate months of the year for flora, vegetation and habitats assessment. It should be noted that fauna surveys have been conducted during the period 2011-2014 and 2015-2016. The survey areas for fauna were greatly increased in 2016 and included surveys (and camera trapping) being undertaken from the snow line down to the power house area.

Information provided in review prepared by Balkan Wildlife Society and GA that "The Chuberi and Nakra communities signed a Collective statement regarding the Nenskra hydropower plant with more than 300 signatures against the project" is incorrect and misinterpretation of the reality as during the Open house sessions held on 22-24 August 2017 in Project impact area Nenskra community members told to the panel of specialists that a person had gone to the communities to collect signatures, they signed them but they didn't know what it was for. Hence we can conclude that statement above is irrelevant.

1. EU AND INTERNATIONAL SUBSTANTIVE ENVIRONMENTAL STANDARDS INFRINGEMENT

The majority of the information presented in BWS and GA's Report centers around the Government of Georgia's handling of the Candidate Emerald site and the boundary amendments which have taken place (apparently) since the inception of the Nenskra HPP project. Based on the assumption that the Candidate Emerald Site boundaries should not have been changed, BWS and GA concludes that the project will violate a number of Directives and Conventions.

The Government of Georgia has informed JSC Nenskra Hydro that the Candidate Emerald Site Boundaries for Svaneti 1 have been ratified by the Bern Convention (November 2016), therefore all of the biodiversity assessments for the Project, is based on the boundaries approved in November 2016 for Svaneti 1 Candidate Emerald Site.

JSC Nenskra Hydro has conducted Appropriate Assessment (Annex 5, Vol 4) for investigating any impacts upon the conservation status of the qualifying features of the candidate Emerald Site, and the assessment concluded that there will be no significant impacts of Nenskra HPP Project and in-combination projects on the conservation status of the receptors brought forward for the Appropriate Assessment.

Below is provided short explanation on the issues raised in the Complaint No. 2016/9:

2. ESIA PROCEDURE INFRINGEMENT

BWS and Green alternative statement that the Nenska HPP doesn't meet EU and international substantive environmental standards and, subsequently, EBRD and EIB standards is not correct and misinterpretation of the reality for the high level environmental standards for the conducted assessments for the Nenskra HPP Project. In addition, it should be underlined that supplementary package preparation is not required according to national EIA procedure and construction permit has been issued on EIA prepared in 2015 based national consultation and evaluation procedures.

Sstatement that construction of Nenskra HPP started in 2015 is misinterpretation of the facts. Only small scale preliminary investigation works have been undertaken to date including only upgrading of existing municipal roads in the Nenskra valley and geotechnical studies at the dam site.

Alternatives for the project design were evaluated at sufficient level. Alternative reservoir locations and dam heights were considered. They are discussed in section 3.3.2 of the 2015 EIA. As the alternatives assessment was provided on sufficient level this issue was not further assessed in Supplementary E&S Studies. The Supplementary Studies Document was not written to duplicate the information in the 2015 EIA, but to supplement it.

JSC Nenskra Hydro is following National legislative requirements for the development of Nenskra HPP Project and its Environmental and Social Impact Assessment and in case of "conceptual changes in the design since the completion of the feasibility study and issue of the 2015 ESIA" is resulted in slight modifications of some project parts, JSC Nenskra Hydro will follow procedures provided in National Regulations with this regard.

3. UNCLEAR DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT AND OF OTHER PROJECTS

BWS and GA comments focus on lack of information regarding the project description, hydrology, impact on the operation of the Enguri HPP.

However, it seems that both organizations had concentrated on Volume 4 of the Supplementary E&S Studies (biodiversity) and had not reviewed Volume 2 (project definition) and Volume 5 (water quality, hydrology and geomorphology), which provides the information which both organizations claim is missing.

4. ESIA AND SUPPLEMENTARY PACKAGE OF POOR QUALITY

As mentioned above extensive field surveys were undertaken during two years (2015 and 2016) and were designed to supplement the data already collated in 2011-2014 appropriate seasons for flora, vegetation, habitats and fauna surveys. All of the species assessed and taken forward for further consideration are those species which were considered to be both: present and likely to be subject to impact as a result of the proposed Nenskra HPP Project. Therefore species found above the tree line, were not taken forward for further assessment. Habitat assessment has been conducted including all habitats mentioned in BWS and GA’s comments. A broad habitat mapping exercise of the Nenskra and Nakra Valleys was undertaken based on international standards. For the broad habitat mapping, a corridor, 2km either side of the River Nenskra and the River Nakra was surveyed and mapped (Chapter Habitat Assessment of the Vol. 4). Field surveys were conducted in appropriate season for all species and habitats. Quantitative and qualitative assessment of all species and habitats are provided in Vol. 4. Biodiversity Impact Assessment and Annexes to Vol. 4.

All impacts on terrestrial and aquatic biodiversity including flora, vegetation, habitats, mammals, birds and river fish are assessed in Sections 4-7 and in Chapter 8 Mitigation Strategy of the Vol.4 are provided relevant and appropriate mitigation measures aiming to achieve no let loss of terrestrial and aquatic biodiversity and where appropriate a net gain of biodiversity for the valued receptors identified in Chapters 4 –7 of the Vol. 4. Hence statement of BWS and GA is the misinterpretation of the proposed mitigation, enhancement and compensation measures provided in Vol.4 and annexes of Vol.4.

The value of habitats are provided in detail in Annex 1 to the Vol.4 and its loss is already calculated and mapped in these documents. Further actions are proposed for compensation of the habitat loss in order to develop detailed Reforestation Management Plan. Reforestation Strategy with clear rationale of its implementation in Annex 6 to Vol. 4 is already provided in the Supplementary

Package. Hence judgment of BWS and GA with this regard is based on misinterpretation of survey data and content of Vol.4 and its Annexes.

According to extensive field survey conducted through the years 2011-2015 only 1 specimen of *Paracynoglossum imeretinum-endemic species to Georgia* is recorded in the project impact zone and details of this assessment are provided in Annex to Vol.4 with clear description of the habitat and qualitative and quantitative data of this species and its presence is identified as "Unicum – a single individual." Due to this circumstances, prior to implementation of a mitigation strategy for *Paracynoglossum imeretinum*, its presence needs to be confirmed again and if the species occurrence is proved relevant mitigation measures provided in Chapter 8 of the Vol. 4 will be implemented. Anti-poaching measures in the form of education will be implemented. There is also the possibility of funding for a ranger.

The value of habitats are provided in detail in Annex 1 to the Vol.4 and its loss is already calculated and mapped in these documents. Further actions are proposed for compensation of the habitat loss in order to develop detailed Reforestation Management Plan. Reforestation Strategy with clear rationale of its implementation in Annex 6 to Vol. 4 is already provided in the Supplementary Package. Hence judgment of Balkan Wildlife society and GA with this regard is based on misinterpretation of survey data and content of Vol.4 and its Annexes.

In the review of Balkan wildlife Society and GA is indicated that "A negotiation with the Government is proposed to identify "*conservation project(s) to (part) fund to aid in the creation of the proposed Svaneti Protected Area*". But the protected area boundaries were modified before its creation in order to exclude the Nenskra and Nakra valleys." We want to underline that negotiation to identify conservation projects to (part) fund to aid creation of the proposed Svaneti Area are not dependent on its location or boundaries.

5. MOST SIGNIFICANT RISKS FOR BIODIVERSITY

In Vol. 4 and its Annexes habitats of conservation concern are considered to be those habitats which contain viable populations of Georgian Red List, IUCN Red List, as well as those habitats and species listed in the EC Habitats Directive and their assessment is provided in Vol. 4 and its Annexes. Impact on habitats are identified and assessed based on extensive field study through 2011-2016 years. According to Article 6(3) of the Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC), an Appropriate Assessment has been undertaken and Retrospective Appropriate Assessment Screening Report /Annex 5 to Vol. 4 has been prepared. All of the information provided Annex 5 has been taken from the Emerald – Standard data form for the candidate Svaneti Emerald Site; the assessment of significant likely effects found that the Project and in-combination projects would not impact upon the conservation status of the qualifying features of the candidate Emerald Site. Therefore an Appropriate Assessment, Stage 2, is not required.

However, it is acknowledged that the creation of a reservoir will lead to the loss of habitats. While there are small areas of high conservation habitat within the reservoir area, the level of logging which has been undertaken in this area is considered to have degraded the habitats significantly. The assessments showed that habitats present in the CHAA are not considered to be highly threatened or unique ecosystems and the area in which the reservoir is to be located, while forested, has been modified by man and so does not represent pristine natural habitat. A re-forestation plan will be implemented in order to compensate for the loss of habitats within the reservoir area.

As stated previously the presence of *Paracynoglossum imeretinum*, needs to be confirmed again. According to extensive field survey conducted through the years 2011-2015 only 1 specimen of *Paracynoglossum imeretinum-endemic species to Georgia* is recorded in the project impact zone and details of this assessment are provided in Annex to Vol.4 with clear description of the habitat and qualitative and quantitative data of this species and its presence is identified as "Unicum – a single individual." Due to this circumstances prior to implementation of a mitigation strategy for *Paracynoglossum imeretinum*, its presence needs to be confirmed again and if the species occurrence is proved relevant mitigation measures provided in Chapter 8 of the Vol. 4 will be implemented.

The faunal impact assessment was undertaken on species which were considered to be present and likely to be subject to impact by the Project. The fauna surveys undertaken since 2011 have not found any traces of the West nor the Persian leopard and during the interviews with the local hunters,

there was no mention that Leopard was present, hence this species was not taken into account. Tur were not included in the assessment as they were considered to inhabit areas outside of the reservoir footprint, and resulting impact zone. In addition we want to underline that both these species are alpine and the habitats in the area are not favorable for these species.

The issue of poaching has been addressed within the Supplementary E&S Studies Package. Hunting by the work force during the construction phase will be banned. An education programme will be implemented in the local schools, in order to reinforce the message that hunting is illegal.

Impacts on birds were assessed, based on data collated over a number of years and seasons. In particular Red List species were considered, based on their seasonal movement and likely nest locations, e.g. it was considered that species such as booted eagle would be nesting within the reservoir area footprint.

The Nenskra HPP project will impact fish habitat in the 2km section from the dam reservoir due to the reduced flow rate and degraded water, however this will be a short-term impact. It is expected that some of the tributaries will have increased population due to favorable conditions in terms of survival of juvenile trout and spawning areas with lower flow rates.

JSC Nenskra Hydro will start fish monitoring in September 2017, this will be an activity that will be maintained during construction and operations. The purpose of this monitoring is to gather data to be able to make decisions to manage any impact. If the monitoring shows negative impacts, measures will be put in place, this could include construction of fish ponds in the area and/or improving/creating spawning areas and other.

Thus, as mentioned above additional fish surveys will be undertaken prior to the main construction phase, i.e. before any flow changes take place in the Nenskra and Nakra rivers. Therefore statement of Balkan Wildlife Society and GA is not true that complete extermination of 9 fish species will occur before they are even assessed.

Balkan Wildlife Society and Green Alternative have confused the scope of the CIA with that of a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA). The CIA follows the approach recommended by the IFC, and provides quantitative metrics to support the conclusions. The Green Alternative differing opinion appears to be based on expert qualitative opinion. The scope of the CIA does not extend downstream from the Enguri dam, as the functioning of the Enguri dam-reservoir will not be significantly changed because of the Nenskra HPP project. The Nenskra HPP project is designed to be able to function without modifying the operation of the Enguri HPP.

- UPDATED JULY 2017 -

7/4/2017 საქართველოს გარემოსა და ბუნებრივი რესურსების დაცვის სამინისტრო

MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES PROTECTION OF GEORGIA

KA060138917288417

საქართველო, 0114 თბილისი, გ.გულუას ქ. N6; ტელ:2727200, 2727220,
ფაქსი:2727237; www.moe.gov.ge 6 G. Gulua Str. 0114, Tbilisi, Georgia,
Tel:(+995 32) 2727200, 2727220, Fax:2727237; www.moe.gov.ge

5860 04 / July / 2017

To: Ms. Iva Obretenova
Secretary of the Bern Convention
Head of the Biodiversity Unit

Dear Ms. Iva Obretenova,

In response to your letter N:DG-II IO/vdc dated 11.04.2017, concerning additional explanations about Nenskra hydropower development in Svaneti Region, I would like to notify you the following information:

I avail myself of this opportunity to renew to you the assurances of the highest consideration in the name of Georgia, and express our readiness to put all efforts to meet commitments undertaken under the Bern Convention. Please be sure that the fulfilment of international obligations and among them the protection of the species and habitats enlisted in the Bern Convention Appendices are priorities not only for the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources Protection and its administration, but also for the entire Government of Georgia (GoG).

As you are aware, Georgia ratified Bern Convention in 2008. Environmental governance, environmental information systems and, in general, information available on species and habitats were not up to required quality by that time: they were mainly based on environmental management standards used by the post-soviet transitional states and outdated information collected during the soviet period. These entailed certain lapse during the implementation of international agreements and incorporation of respective requirements into the national law.

A factually new era has started in our country in terms of improved environmental management and updating/elaboration of environmental information systems and databases once the Government of Georgia, through the ratification of the EU-Georgia Association Agreement in

HiputmAZB2yU6CJaAK

2014, declared its firm position to endorse and adopt modern international legal standards of environmental democracy and governance. In this regard important is that EU Directives, that should be gradually approximated by Georgia, fully comply with multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) signed by Georgia, including the Bern Convention - this fact accelerated the obligations fulfilment process incurred under the Bern Convention.

Improvement/upgrading of environmental management and environmental information systems & databases is clearly proved by the progress that the country has made during the last 2-3 years with the support of international partners and donors.

Considering all the above mentioned, the Ministry demonstrates its willingness to continue active communication with the Secretariat in order to ensure substantial comprehension and analysis of the discussed matter. We repeatedly declare our readiness to adhere to principles and objectives of the Bern Convention, and on the project planning and implementation stages comprehensively assess potential impacts on biodiversity in order to ensure planning of relevant mitigation measures.

Moreover, we would like to inform you about our intension to intensify Phase 3 of the Emerald Network development process in

Georgia and, as already mentioned, start progressive designation of the Emerald Network Sites. We believe that Georgia claims to be a pioneer in the region in terms of designation of Emerald Sites on the national level, like it is in case of other international processes such as the Eastern Partnership (EaP) mechanism.

With regards to the complaint in relation to the Nenskra hydropower plant project submitted to the Secretariat by CSO “Green Alternative”, we express our readiness to actively and closely cooperate with the Secretariat. Principal officials of the Ministry and sectorial experts are ready to visit you and meet the Bureau members and respective experts before planned 18-19 September session in order to clarify details about the discussed grievance. Therefore, we kindly ask you to organize such meeting at your earliest convenience in Strasbourg or alternatively we propose to host the Bureau members and specialists in Georgia, and organize field visits to the sites that are excluded due to high anthropogenic pressure from Svaneti Survey site as well as to the Areas of Special Conservation Interest that are included in the boundaries of the Candidate Svaneti 1 (GE0000012) and Svaneti 2 (GE0000045) Emerald Sites.

You’re esteemed acceptance of our proposal to a meeting is what we look forward to. Taking into consideration sensitivity of the issue and the time constraints, we would much appreciate if you confirm the dates and venue of our meeting as soon as practically possible.

Specifically in response to the questions regarding the Nenskra hydropower plant project included in your letter of April 11, 2017 we have prepared detailed answers that are attached as appendix herein.

Appendix: 5 pages

Sincerely,

Deputy Minister Maia Bitadze

APPENDIX

DETAILED EXPLANATIONS TO THE QUESTIONS OUTLINED IN THE LETTER OF APRIL 11, 2017 OF THE BERN CONVENTION SECRETARIAT

1. The conservation plans for the territories removed from the initial Svaneti 1 candidate Emerald site, which were evaluated as having many biodiversity assets in particular with respect of the Emerald Network species and habitats

Georgia launched main activities for the development of the Emerald Network in 2009, and the Network creation process was divided into three phases. To be mentioned, the Species Conservation Centre NACRES has been representing the State in the frames of the Emerald Network's development process.

On the first phase, NACRES implemented preliminary study. Specifically, they collected scientific information about the Bern Convention species that are recorded in Georgia, and also identified habitats to be preserved for the protection of these species. However, it should be mentioned, that mainly existing, outdated scientific data were collected on the first phase. In particular, the draft Management Plan that was designed in 2007 for the establishment of the Central Caucasus Planned Protected Areas (specifically Planned Protected Areas of Zemo Svaneti and Racha-Lechkhumi-Kvemo Svaneti) on the bases of the outdated information was used to describe Svaneti Survey Site. According to the poor practices used by that times, new protected areas were often created using old maps; demarcation, delimitation, or species and habitats description were not executed in-situ. Due to the mentioned, factually entire territory of Zemo Svaneti Region, among them settlements, infrastructural facilities, degraded areas, areas impacted by human activities, etc. were included into the planned protected areas. Areas envisaged for Svaneti Survey Site of the Emerald Network were also delineated within these areas because during that times the country did not have sufficient financial resources to execute detailed studies. By the end of the first phase, potential Areas of Special Conservation Interest (among them Svaneti Survey Site) were identified on the basis of the collected information, and candidate Emerald Sites for the Emerald Network should be selected from them.

Phase 2 (2013-2016) of this process envisaged the specification and in-situ verification of data that were collected on Phase 1; new potential sites were also selected that notably enhanced identification of the Bern Convention species and habitats. Species and habitats distribution maps were prepared as a result. It should be mentioned that Georgia had already signed the Association Agreement by that time. Respectively, a new strategic vision was formulated and international processes, requirements and contexts were better comprehended.

Pertinent field surveys were implemented for Svaneti Planned Protected Areas and potential Svaneti Survey Site in 2015, independently from each other. These studies were used to identify: areas of special conservation interest that are important for rare species and occupied by high value habitats; areas of low conservation value (settlements; private land plots; licensed logging and inert materials extraction areas; areas of traditional use and hunting areas; pastures and hay lands; roads and other infrastructure).

Survey findings were used to specify boundaries of both Svaneti Planned Protected Areas and Emerald Sites. Respective maps were prepared. As a result, only intact, unique areas characterized with extremely high biodiversity and minimum anthropogenic load were selected. Planned activities factually could not affect these territories that meet designation criteria both Georgian legislation and the Bern Convention.

Candidate Svaneti 1 (GE0000012) and Svaneti 2 (GE0000045) Emerald Sites were selected as a result of this process, and they were officially nominated on 36th meeting of the Standing Committee. The mentioned sites majorly coincide with newly selected territory of the Planned Protected Areas.

Phase 3 of the Emerald Network development process that comprises 2017-2020 period should finally establish and put it into operation the Emerald Network. We have planned to designate - that is to assign a status of Area of Special Conservation Interests – to some of officially nominated

Candidate Emerald Sites already in 2017, and designated others gradually by 2020. Through such decision, the GoG will undertake an obligation for the protection of Areas of Special Conservation Interest (ASCI) and species recorded there.

Our priority is to prepare conservation plans for the Candidate Emerald Sites. As underlined in our letter N2082, dated 01.03.2017, to the Bern Convention Committee, the GoG listed the Svaneti Site among survey areas in 2012; however, it was not proposed as a Candidate Emerald Site. The initial survey areas covered a vast range of habitat types, including habitats of low conservation value. Managing such a large and diverse areas effectively would have been very difficult. This is the reason why there has been no attempt to prepare conservation plans since 2012 for this large area of interest. Now when boundaries of Candidate Svaneti 1 and Svaneti 2 Emerald sites are established (November 2016), we intend to define conservation measures that will protect these 2 sites until they are designated as Emerald sites.

Biodiversity studies were implemented for the Nenskra Hydropower Project, and they were recognized by all reviewers as relevant and of excellent quality. Field investigations and impact analysis were conducted at the scale of the Nenskra and Nakra watersheds. It is anticipated that there will be no significant impacts on the conservation status of the receptors (habitats and species) brought forward for the Biodiversity Impact Assessment (brown bear, lynx and otter). Monitoring and mitigation has been planned for the Nenskra Project. If these measures are implemented, then it is assessed that in long term, there will be no significant effects on the receptor species and, as a result, there will be no significant impacts on the integrity of the target watersheds, including the area that the GoG identified as the initial Svaneti Survey Site.

A number of the potential Lenders of the Nenskra Hydropower project are based in Europe. European Legislation has therefore been applied to the Impact Assessment process. The project corridor is outside of the candidate Svaneti 1 and Svaneti 2 Emerald Sites; however, it is within 1km of Svaneti 1 Site. Therefore, the first stage of an Appropriate Assessment (Article 6(3) of the EU Habitats Directive) has been completed and publicly disclosed. It concluded that the Project is not anticipated to have a likely significant effect on the Candidate Svaneti 1 Emerald Site. Despite the assessment that the project will have non-significant effect on the Candidate Svaneti 1 Site, the project has sought to implement conservation measures which would benefit Svaneti 1 Candidate Site even before it is a nominated Emerald Site. The Nenskra Project is also committed to work with the GoG and fund conservation initiatives under its Environmental & Social Management Plan, as Svaneti 1 boundaries coincide with the proposed Svaneti Protected Area. Besides to the above mentioned, according to the EIA Report that was submitted in 2015 to obtain the Environmental Impact Permit, Nenskra Hydro committed to implement compensation measures; prepare compensation / restoration plans and respective biorestoration specifications, as well as the conservation programme of rare plant species.

2. Plans and actions undertaken to inform local populations and civil society actors on the Nenskra HPP development and its potential impacts

In response to your second question, we would like to state that we take it crucial to inform population and civil society about the Nenskra HPP development project and its potential impacts, and engage them into the decision-making process. Georgia is a party to the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention) and acknowledges the need and necessity to fulfil its requirements. The national law also requires organization of public hearings during a decision making process. Therefore, the Ministry paid particular attention to public disclosure matters throughout the public hearing process, and applied international requirements and standards to this process. In this terms, we also took into account that the IFIs have their own strict environmental and social policies for decision making on project funding, and this was the case of Nenskra HPP as well. The above mentioned and vivid public interest around this project extremely increased the responsibility of the Ministry.

Considering that the Nenskra HPP seeks financing of several Lenders, including the ADB, EBRD, EIB, AIIB, KDB and SACE, Nenskra Hydro JSC has ensured meaningful public information process that is still continuing in this manner.

In 2015, as part of the national ESIA process, public consultation meetings were organized in the Nenskra and Nakra valleys. During the preparation of the supplementary environmental & social studies in 2015 and 2016, several other public consultation meetings were held in Chuberi (Nenskra) and Naki (Nakra). During these meetings, the Nenskra HPP components, potential impacts of the project and the proposed environmental and social mitigation strategy were presented in detail. The list of public meetings is given in the Stakeholder Engagement Plan, which is a publicly disclosed document.

All environmental and social studies (2015 ESIA, 2017 Supplementary E&S studies), including a detailed project description, have been prepared in English and Georgian. These documents are available in hardcopies in community halls in the Nenskra and Nakra valleys. They are also disclosed on the Project website (www.nenskra.com) as well as on the ADB, EBRD and EIB websites.

Following the start of public disclosure of the environmental and social studies (2015 ESIA, 2017 Supplementary E&S studies) in March 2017, several meetings have been organized in Tbilisi (Civil Society organizations and Nenskra/Nakra communities living in Tbilisi) and locally in the two valleys with the communities. Public consultation is an on-going process and will continue throughout 2017.

Bearing in mind potential negative impacts of the project on socio-economic factors and environment, in order to ensure higher efficiency of the public disclosure process, the Ministry has applied international standards to ensure more comprehensive discussion of public concerns and arranged several public meetings in Tbilisi instead of 1 public hearing that is requested by the national law (2015). Besides, legally established permit issuing process was extended up to 3 months to ensure the involvement of non-governmental sector, among them the Association Green Alternative in the public consultations process.

German expert, was engaged into the preliminary review process for biodiversity impact assessment due to sensitivity of the project territory. He ensured additional review of the volume/ report sections devoted to impacts on biodiversity and fish.

EIA Report for the Nenskra Hydropower Development Project was revised in line with experts' recommendations before it was resubmitted for the second stage of the permit issuing process. Like the first stage, the Ministry decided to apply stricter international standards and gave extended deadline to experts to prepare their conclusion in order to ensure substantial review and decision-making on the EIA Report, as well to ensure engagement of NGO sector and Association Green Alternative among others in the review process.

As a result, the Conclusion of the Ecological Examination has defined mitigation measures and permit terms for Nenskra JSC to reduce environmental impacts. They incorporate recommendations of Franz Schrader, German expert. Nenskra JSC was obliged to fulfil additional surveys in the project area.

3. The plans for any public consultation on the ESIA study which is now finalised

Stakeholder engagement strategy of the Nenskra HPP is described in details in the Stakeholder Engagement Plan issued in March 2017. This document provides all commitments and plans made by the Nenskra Project to engage the local communities and larger public throughout 2017, main construction period and operation phase.

Several meetings and focus groups are planned to be organized to further discuss the content and conclusions of the 2017 Supplementary E&S studies. By the end of 2017, when the bulk of planned public consultations meetings will be completed, the Nenskra Project will finalize the Supplementary E&S studies to take into account the comments made by local communities and the Civil Society Organisations.

- MARCH 2017 -

საქართველოს გარემოსა და ბუნებრივი რესურსების დაცვის სამინისტრო

MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES PROTECTION OF GEORGIA

KA060119268132317

საქართველო, 0114 თბილისი, გ.გულუას ქ. N6; ტელ:2727200, 2727220,
ფაქსი:2727237; www.moe.gov.ge 6 G. Gulua Str. 0114, Tbilisi, Georgia, Tel:(+995
32) 2727200, 2727220, Fax:2727237; www.moe.gov.ge

 # 2082 **01**
/ March / 2017

Mr. Eladio Fernandez-Galiano
Head of the Culture, Nature and
Heritage Department
Directorate of Democratic
Governance

Dear Mr. Fernandez – Galiano,

In *response to your letter* 11.01.2017 N:DG-II IO/vdc concerning the complaint submitted to the Secretariat of the Bern Convention by the Association Green Alternative in 2016: possible breach by Georgia of Bern Convention which would result from the permission given by the authorities for the construction of Nenskra Hydropower Project, please note the following statements:

The status of the Nenskra Hydropower Project:

The Project Implementation Agreement between Georgian Government and JSC "Nenskra Hydropower" was signed in September, 2015. General (EPC) contract was signed in September, 2015. The positive conclusion of the Ecological Examination for the implementation of Nenskra Hydropower Plant project and construction permit were awarded in October, 2015. From October 2015 to November 2016 EPC contractor mobilized for geotechnical investigations at the dam site and upgrade of existing municipal road in Nenskra Valley. The main construction period is scheduled to start in September, 2017.

Details about the ESIA implemented before granting a construction permission and the status of the additional studiescommissioned to complete the ESIA:

- National ESIA prepared in 2011, 2014 and 2015. Draft ESIA submitted to GoG in April 2015. Public Consultations conducted in June 2015 and complementary information added in the ESIA in August 2015 following MoENRP requirements and other stakeholders comments. Final ESIA submitted in August 2015 and Construction Permit awarded in Oct. 2015 with EEC conditions.
- Supplementary E&S studies commissioned by JSCNH from August 2016 following requirements of potential international Lenders. Biodiversity investigations performed in autumn 2015 and spring 2016 in the Project footprint and within the larger Nenskra and Nakra rivers watersheds. Supplementary E&S studies planned to be disclosed in March 2017.
- Since October, 2015, JSCNH gradually implements the terms set in the positive conclusion of the Ecological Examination for the Nenskra Hydro Power Project, and executes relevant studies to fulfil the requirements of the Construction Permit and associated Ecological Examination Conclusion conditions.

Eventual measures put in place to assess the cumulative impact of all hydropower installations in the Svaneti region:

- The ESIA conducted in 2015 did analyze the cumulative effects of the hydropower schemes along the Nenskra- Enguri river systems on local, regional and global climate.
- A Cumulative Impact Assessment was further conducted in 2016 as part of the Supplementary E&S studies at the scale of the Enguri watershed, covering all hydropower installations planned by the Ministry of Energy. The report is planned to be disclosed together with the other Supplementary E&S studies in March 2017.

Rationale behind the decision to exclude certain areas from the territory of the firstly proposed Emerald site "Svaneti1":

In 2012, GoG listed the Svaneti Site (not Svaneti 1) as an area of interest for biodiversity conservation (survey area) however it was not proposed as a Candidate Emerald Site. This has been confirmed by NACRES, our national Emerald Network Coordinating body.

Svaneti 1 is the site proposed by GoG in 2016 as candidate Emerald Site, and not in 2012.

Georgian party treated therefore the area of interest as a survey area and this was continuously communicated to the Bern Convention Secretariat. This information was also communicated to participants of Biogeographical Seminar that was organized in Tbilisi in 2015. It was repeatedly highlighted that boundaries of Racha and Svaneti Sites were not final and Georgian party treated them as a survey area.

In 2016 we revised the survey areas of several potential candidate Emerald sites. For the Svaneti area, the reasons were as follows:

a. The original zone of interest was 2338.48 km² in area, covering a vast range of habitat types, including habitats of low conservation value such as urban conurbation, farm land, ski resort, infrastructure and areas subjected to intense deforestation. Setting management goals and actually managing such a large and diverse area effectively, would be very difficult.

b. NACRES performed additional field surveys in 2013-2015. They revealed that the original zone of interest (2011) - which was delineated based on scientific literature - could not meet the established criteria. The "Revised Criteria for assessing the National Lists of proposed Areas of Special Conservation Interest (ASCIs) at biogeographical level and procedure for examining and approving Emerald candidate sites", adopted by the Standing Committee of the Bern Convention on its 33th meeting, recommends incorporating a number of criteria during identification of Emerald Network sites, such as: presence of habitats and species protected under the Convention Appendices; Diversity and abundance of species: important areas for migratory species; Low anthropogenic load; Etc.

c. These criteria have provided the basis for proposing Svaneti 1 and Svaneti 2 sites out of the original Svaneti area of interest, as they can meet the mentioned criteria best. This decision will also allow Georgia to maintain ecological characteristics of our candidate Emerald Sites until their fully inclusion in the Emerald network is achievable.

The sites Georgia proposed in 2016 are now the country's official candidate Emerald Sites. In the Enguri River watershed, Svaneti 1 and Svaneti 2 are the only officially nominated candidate sites.

Status of the eventual plans to create a National park in the upper Nenskra and Nakra Valleys:

- There are no plans to create a protected area in the upper Nenskra Valley.
- The Government examines the possibility to create a protected area within the proposed Svaneti 1 and Svaneti 2 sites. Svaneti 2 essentially coincides with the proposed Protected Area of Zemo Svaneti designated in 2015 in the frames of the Protected Areas Program in Georgia (Ecoregion Conservation Program, Phase III, KfW). This proposed Protected Area of Zemo Svaneti would partly cover the upper Nakra valleys, although Nenskra HPP Project territory is out of the boundaries of the proposed Protected Area of Zemo Svaneti.

Plans of the National Authorities of Georgia to propose its current candidate Emerald Site for official adoption to the

Standing Committee to the Bern Convention:

- In 2017 Georgia plans to start submitting procedures for several candidate Emerald Sites to the Bern Convention Standing Committee for approval, which are currently examined for the selection.

Please be informed, that the Ministry takes issues concerning the Bern Convention and introduction of directives for habitats and species with high responsibility. Additionally, elaboration process for several draft laws is ongoing. Legal issues related to establishment Emerald territory and management is identified in Biodiversity protection draft law, also, New Forest Code considers Emerald sites as potential reserve territories for expansion of protected areas and/or establishing new one. Above mentioned will create additional bases for preservation of territories with priority and high conservation value in the country.

We are ready to provide additional information available to us if required.

Annex: "Development of Emerald Network in Georgia", Narrative Report sent to Bern Secretariat from "NACRES" in 2015

Sincerely yours,

First Deputy Minister Solomon Pavliashvili

Funded by the European Union
EUROPEAN UNION
COUNCIL OF EUROPE CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE
Implemented by the Council of Europe
NACRES

The Joint Programme between the European Union and the Council of Europe for the Preparation of the Emerald Network of Nature Protection Sites, Phase II

Development of Emerald Network in Georgia

NARRATIVE REPORT

Joint programme Council of Europe / European Union

"Support for the implementation of the Convention on biological diversity programme of work on protected areas in the EU Neighbourhood policy East area and Russia: extension of the implementation of the EU's NATURA 2000 principles through the Emerald Network"

Centre for Biodiversity Conservation and Research - NACRES

2015

1. INTRODUCTION

„Development of the Emerald Network of Nature Protection Sites is an important international tool of implementing the Bern Convention" (Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats, 1979). The participant parties to the Convention have assumed obligations that are aimed at the preservation of wildlife species and habitats. Georgia has joined the Bern Convention in 2009.

The development of the Emerald Network is part of the Association Agreement signed by Georgia and the EU in 2014 (Appendix XXVI, Article 306). The agreement requires Georgia to identify the sites of special conservation interest (ASCI), designate them appropriately, and manage them sustainably.

In 2014, Georgian government approved the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) 2014-2020 - a strategic and operational policy document aiming at biodiversity conservation, protection of species, habitats, and genetic resources of Georgia. The development of the Emerald Network and the protection of species and habitats under the Bern Convention form an integral part of NBSAP.

The current project aims at the support of the establishment and development of the Emerald Network in Georgia.

The first phase of the development of the Emerald Network in Georgia was implemented during 2009-2011. The second phase has been in progress since 2013. It involves a critical assessment of candidate Emerald sites at the biogeographic level to determine the level they can ensure the long-term survival of the species and habitats listed in the resolutions of the Bern Convention. The specific objective of the assessment is to verify whether each of the proposed sites hosts sufficiently large and representative samples of listed habitats and species or gives a proportionate response for the most rare habitats and species.

NACRES is responsible for the technical implementation of the project in close cooperation with the Georgian Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources Protection.

2. PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

The tasks to be accomplished under the administrative arrangement between the Council of Europe and NACRES - Centre for Biodiversity Conservation and Research for the reported period were as follows:

1. Organization of workshops and seminars aimed at the following:

- Explaining the Emerald process and upcoming biogeographic evaluation to scientific community, representatives of relevant Ministries (environment, landplaning, forestry, and agriculture) and NGOs in the nature conservation sector;
- Planning the preparation for the biogeographic evaluation by the national authorities, discussing the completion of the Emerald Network at national level.
- The identification and description of additional sites, according to the results of the quality check of the 2014 database for the country;
- Organise a national coordination meeting, aimed at organizing the participation of the national delegation to the Emerald biogeographic Seminar targeting the country in 2015 [Biogeographic evaluation Seminar for Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia for all habitats and species (except birds) and all biogeographic regions, including Black Sea and Caspian Sea (Tbilisi, Georgia, 27-29/05/15));

2. Implement a self-evaluation exercise, using the 2014 national database of proposed Emerald sites and the country reference database, in order to detect gaps in the Emerald network proposed already and spot the needs for additional sites.

Activity should include:

- Implementing the recommendations presented in the QA/QC report prepared by the project scientific experts on the 2014 Emerald database;
- Reviewing and amending the country reference database, according to the regional QA/QC report, for the presence in the country of the species and habitats from Resolutions No. 6 (1998) and No. 4 (1996) of the Bern Convention;
- Checking and revising the databases of the Emerald sites proposed in 2014, for the presence of eventual additional new species and habitats from the revised country reference database;
- Identifying additional potential Emerald sites, using the revised reference database of the country, aiming at the completeness of the Emerald Network on the territory of the country to ensure the long-term survival of the species and habitats in the country reference database;

3. Organise field surveys to potential Emerald sites to check the presence of species and habitats which are in the revised reference database, but no Emerald sites are yet proposed for them;
4. Revise and complete the Emerald site database according to the new SDF format (new and modified fields), using the new Emerald software;
5. Prepare a visibility material (paper or electronic), to be used for communicating and disseminating information on the Emerald Network to local communities/young public.

2.1 Organisation of workshops and seminars

2.2.1 Activities:

 # 1.1 Explaining the Emerald process and upcoming biogeographic evaluation to scientific community, representatives of relevant Ministries (environment, landplaning, forestry, and agriculture) and NGOs in the nature conservation sector;

#1.2 Planning the preparation for the biogeographic evaluation by the national authorities, discussing the completion of the Emerald Network at national level

#1.4 Organise a national coordination meeting, aimed at organizing the participation of the national delegation to the Emerald biogeographic Seminar targeting the country in 2015 [Biogeographic evaluation Seminar for Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia for all habitats and species (except birds) and all biogeographic regions, including Black Sea and Caspian Sea (Tbilisi, Georgia, 27-29/05/15));

A series of meetings (12.02.2015, 18.04.2015 and 21.04.205 - Appendix 6/1) was held in order to update and inform project experts, academic circles and NGOs as well as all other key stakeholders (Appendix 6/2) on the goals and objectives the Emerald Network process and on the upcoming biogeographic seminar. Specifically meetings were organised with the Emerald Team Experts, representatives of various academic institutions such as Ilia University, Agrarian University, the Institute of Botany, the Institute of Zoology, and Tbilisi Zoo; NGOs including WWF Caucasus office, Green Alternative, Campester, REC - Caucasus, National Association of Local Self-Governance, CENN and etc (Appendix 6/2. 24.04.2015). In the meetings, we updated the participants on current activities in the Emerald process as well as on the results of the quality check of the 2014 database. We also discussed in detail project data (maps, database etc.) that were prepared for the biogeographic seminar.

The stakeholders were provided specific information on the upcoming biogeographic seminar, its aims and procedures. The Emerald Team Leader informed the participants on procedures of the establishment of the Emerald Network, selection of sites and evaluation of the obtained data as well as on follow up activities as to how we should implement any recommendations, provided by the seminar.

Another series of meetings was organised with representatives of governmental agencies in order to inform key decision-makers – high-ranking officials such as deputy ministers, heads of departments and agencies, as well as specialists from relevant ministries and agencies (Appendix 6/1)

– on the goals and objectives of the Emerald Network, and ultimately gain their support to the process. Specifically meetings were held at the following ministries: Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources Protection (MoE) of Georgia, Ministry of Agriculture of Georgia, Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure, Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development, Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure and Ministry of Energy of Georgia. In all of these meetings we were accompanied by Mr. Ioseb Kartsivadze – Head of Biodiversity Service of MoE, and Ms. Teona Karchava Senior Specialist of the same Service. Additional meetings were held with agencies under MoE: Agency of Protected Areas and National Forestry Agency. Since most candidate ASCI's coincide with existing protected areas or include a significant portion of state-owned forest, the above-mentioned agencies are among the key stakeholders in the process of Emerald Network development and management.

During the meetings with governmental representatives we stressed the objectives of the Bern Convention and the obligations of the country under the Association Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, of the one part, and Georgia, of the other part. "Emerald Team" experts also explained the actual process of the establishment of the Emerald Network and that of ASIC selection. The governmental stakeholders were informed on such aspects as the importance of the Emerald Network and how it would effectively function as well as on general principles of ASCI management. Meeting participants were provided with copies of the special publication, prepared by the project, on the development of the Emerald Network, the birds and habitats directives and the Bern Convention.

In addition to the above-mentioned meetings, information on the project was provided to relevant international organizations, operating in Georgia including UNDP, WB, KfW, GIZ, EU etc. and to the relevant on-going projects (E.g. EU/UNDP Project: "Sustainable Management of Pastures in Georgia to Demonstrate Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation Benefits and Dividends for Local Communities", "Sustainable Forest Management" supported by the Austrian Development Agency (ADA)). Our focus was on those projects that are currently working on important strategic and policy documents such as Georgian National Forest Policy, Forest Code of Georgia, and Second National Action Program to Combat Desertification, Pasture Management Plans, etc. It was our intention to ensure that the Emerald Network issues be adequately reflected in those documents. Our meetings were especially important with the team of experts working on the new biodiversity law of Georgia under MoE. The new law is to replace all existing legislation on biodiversity protection and should fill in most of the current gaps including those on the establishment and management of international ecological networks, including the Emerald Network.

For the long-term perspective it is important to note that as a result of joint efforts of the Emerald team and a corresponding agency of the Ministry of Environmental Protection, the procedure of formation of the Emerald Network is reflected in two major drafts of law that will in the nearest future regulate conservation of biodiversity, formation of environmental networks (including international networks) and the use of natural resources. These drafts are:

„Draft law on biodiversity" – Chapter 3 (Area Included In The Emerald Network Or A Special Protection Area For Birds) regulates the formation and management of networks of international significance such as the Emerald Network and Important Bird Area.

The Forest code of Georgia (new version) –Chapter 9 (Protected Forests and High Conservation Status Forest) determines the selection of areas of high conservation value within Georgian Forest Fund as well as issues related to the Emerald Network and forest use.

Two meetings (2.10.2015 and 3.11.2015 Mike Garforth and Lika Salia) were held with the team working on the establishment of Central Caucasus National Park . We discussed the importance of proposed ASCI's in that region and the importance of their inclusion in the planned national park. We exchanged the data including GIS maps showing the distribution of habitats and species under the Bern Convention.

Apart from the above-mentioned meetings, the Emerald Team organised two workshops that were attended by representatives of the National Forestry Agency of the Ministry of Environmental Protection. It should be mentioned that 40% of Georgian territory is covered by forests, a major

portion of which includes habitats listed in Resolution No. 4 (1996). Thus, state owned forests are important in the formation of the Emerald Network in Georgia and the National Forestry Agency, which manages state-owned forests, will play a crucial role with regard to the management of future ASCI.

As mentioned above, the Emerald Team organised two workshops with the aim to increase the awareness of the representatives of the National Forestry Agency (13.02.2015 – 5.05.2015 Appendix 6/3) regarding Bern Convention and the Emerald Network. We discussed ASCI selection procedure, protection of forest habitats under Bern Convention and Georgia-EU Association Agreement. The participants were given copies of the publication that was prepared earlier in the previous project. The publication provides information on the formation and management of the Emerald Network, Bern Convention, and on habitats and bird directives. During the final discussion, the participants focused on the current situation in Georgia and the data collected throughout the project. Further steps were outlined regarding the planning and implementation of activities aimed at the protection of forest habitats. Namely, Deputy Chairman of the National Forestry Agency suggested forming a working group which would includes Emerald Team members and representatives of the National Forestry Agency. This group would focus on information exchange and the formation of the network.

2.1.2 Activity #1.3

The identification and description of additional sites, according to the results of the quality check of the 2014 database for the country;

In the biogeographic seminar both national and international experts and other participants raised the importance of selecting new sites. For this purpose, "Emerald team" members conducted follow up meetings and discussions with relevant experts and environmental organizations, in which we presented the findings of the biogeographic seminar and the self-evaluation exercise.

When selecting new sites, the experts took into account the principles of formation of the Emerald Network and recommendations of the Bern Convention. The main focus was the selection of locations linking the sites that would lead to successful functioning of the Emerald Network. The research and discussions were based on maps of spreading of species and habitats as well as quantitative data. This enabled the experts to select potential territories to be included in the Emerald Network. As a result, 10 new potential sites have been identified (Appendix 1).

Additionally field surveys were conducted to some of the new sites to verify available data and/or obtain up-to-date information. Field trips were conducted to the Kotsakhura ridge in eastern Georgia, the Artsivis (Eagle) canyon, the Smashvilde canyon, the Saguramo area, the Tsalka canyon, and semi-deserts of David Gareji as well as Kobuleti and Rioni wetlands at the Black Sea coast.

2.2 Implement a self-evaluation exercise, using the 2014 national database of proposed Emerald sites and the country reference database, in order to detect gaps in the Emerald network proposed already and spot the needs for additional sites.

This activity is mainly focused on the verification, analysis and update of the data collected through 2014.

At the Biogeographic Seminar, held in Tbilisi during 27-29 May 2015, we discussed the findings of the Report on the Quality Assessment and Quality Check for the Emerald Sites database (QA/QC). With the help of international and local experts we identified gaps and worked out relevant recommendations for addressing those gaps

The Georgian Emerald Team conducted a self-evaluation of the data compiled by the end of 2014. The results of the self-evaluation exercise together with the recommendations of the biogeographic seminar formed the basis for the Emerald Team activities during the summer through the autumn of 2015. The main focus was on addressing the identified gaps. Therefore, meetings and discussions were held with the relevant experts that were involved in the data collection process.

As habitat protection is one of the cornerstones of the Bern Convention, a special emphasis was made on the finalisation of the list of the strictly protected habitats (Resolution No. 4) that are found in Georgia and on the compilation of their distribution maps. By 2013, a total of 15 habitats had been

identified in Georgia from Resolution No. 4. In 2014, we identified 13 new habitats. In addition, in the biogeographic seminar some of the experts expressed the possibility of the existence of yet another set of habitats. In order to help the mapping of the 13 new habitats and to confirm the occurrence of any additional new habitats we had meetings with experts of Ilia State University, Batumi State University and WWF Caucasus. As a result of these meetings, as many as 20 new habitats were identified in addition to the previously confirmed 13 new habitats. So, at present, we have a total of 33 new habitats for Georgia (see Appendix 2).

The National Emerald Team carried out additional desktop and field studies involving the satellite imagery. The studies took into account gaps and recommendations outlined in QA/QC. As a result, the following 20 habitat[1] maps were reviewed and edited:

A1.11	Mussel and/or barnacle communities
A2.2	Littoral sand and muddy sand
A2.5	Coastal saltmarshes and saline reedbeds
A3	Infralittoral rock and other hard substrata
B1.6	Coastal dune scrub
C1.1	Permanent oligotrophic lakes, ponds and pools
C1.224	Floating Utricularia australis and Utricularia vulgaris colonies
C1.225	Floating [Salvinia natans] mats
C1.5	Permanent inland saline and brackish lakes, ponds and pools
C1.66	Temporary inland saline and brackish waters
C3.4	Species-poor beds of low-growing waterfringing or amphibious vegetation
C3.55	Sparsely vegetated river gravel banks
C3.62	Unvegetated river gravel banks
D1	Raised and blanket bogs
E1.2	Perennial calcareous grassland and basic steppes
F9.1	Riverine scrub
E3.4	Moist or wet eutrophic and mesotrophic grassland
E3.5	Moist or wet oligotrophic grassland
E6.2	Continental inland salt steppes
G1.6	Fagus woodland

The relevant GIS maps and folders were uploaded to the Central Data Repository (CDR) and are available at http://cdr.eionet.europa.eu/

Collection of information on the remaining habitats to be mapped (Appendix 3) implied a more long-term research. Project experts noted that, prior to the completion of mapping, additional literature and GIS study should be implemented. Therefore, it was decided to complete the mapping of habitats in 2016.

2.3 Activities:

 # 2 Organise field surveys to potential Emerald sites to check the presence of species and habitats which are in the revised reference database, but no Emerald sites are yet proposed for them

 # 3 Revise and complete the Emerald site database according to the new SDF format (new and modified fields), using the new Emerald software;

The process of self-evaluation and the biogeographic seminar have resulted in a number of comments on species distribution and population assessment. These comments were communicated with the relevant Team expert(s). In order to deal with the comments each of the Team experts would first have to conduct additional desktop study. The aim of the above-mentioned research was to verify the information based on the comments and to eradicate the existing shortcomings.

Based on the experts' opinions and taking into account the fact that major portion of conservation activities under Bern Convention are focused on habitats conservation, it was decided that one of the project priorities was verification of information on habitats. Besides, the maps of habitats compiled

[1] Habitat names are presented according o the EUNIS classification.

during previous project stages were based on the analysis of literature. Some of the maps were compiled based on GIS analysis. This might have led to certain shortcomings.

Eventually it was decided to carry out field study to verify habitat maps. It should also be noted that the study was based on QA/QC process, as well as conclusions of the bio-geographic workshop, self-evaluation and experts' comments.

As a result, the following field trips were carried out to Kolkheti GE0000006, Gombori GE0000027 and Borjomi-Kharagauli (GE0000010), Goderdzi (GE0000026), Surami (GE0000034), Alazani GE0000022, Ratcha GE0000011 ASCI's. More than 20 field trips were carried out (Appendix 5) and the obtained results were incorporated in the habitat and species maps. The Emerald Team used new field techniques during these field trips. For instance, in order to map the habitats and assess potential sites, we used drone cameras. The obtained photo and video material was processed by means of special software. We also used photo traps that yielded information on certain species. The Emerald Team closely cooperated with other research projects aimed at the monitoring of biodiversity. For example, in cooperation with the project *Establishment of Participatory Monitoring System for Endangered Species in Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park* (GEF/UNDP) we estimated the number of bears in western Georgia and Borjomi-Kharagauli site (GE0000010) using non-invasive genetic methods. The Emerald Team also cooperated with the project "Sustainable Management of Pastures in Georgia to Demonstrate Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation Benefits and Dividends for Local Communities" (financed within the framework of EU Climate Program (UNDP/EU) to obtain additional information on a new potential site - Kotsakhura (GE0000051) and its habitats. Finally, the obtained data were used to identify habitats and the spreading of species, as well as select new sites.

It should also be mentioned that the study conducted with regard to Svaneti, Racha and Surami sites revealed new circumstances, due to which it became evident that these sites required certain modifications. Namely, as a result of field survey significant differences were revealed regarding the real state of affairs and the literature data based on which the sites were planned several yaers ago. This primarily concerned the distributions of species and habitats listed in Resolutions 4 and 6. In certain areas corresponding habitats were disrupted. It was found that some parts of the sites that were previously outlined in no longer met the requirements defined for the establishment of Emerald Site.

The Emerald Team members and experts had joint consultations, as a result of which it was decided to modify the boundaries of the Svaneti, Racha and Surami sites. These sites were broken up into smaller sites (the Racha site was broken up into 4 sites, the Svaneti site into 2 and the Surami site into 5) that fully meet the requirements of the Standing Committee recommendation 151. The new boundaries of the sites were discussed with the Ministry of Environmental Protection. Eventually, corresponding modifications were introduced into the database and the relevant maps were updated.

Based on the results of the self-evaluation exercise, biogeographical seminar and other meetings of the national Emerald Team as well as new data obtained through field surveys, the Emerald Team verified the current data (new distribution GIS maps) and updated the existing database (exportSitesToXML-GE-2015). The updated data bases were uploaded to the Central Data Repository (CDR) and are available at http://cdr.eionet.europa.eu/

GIS maps of new sites also (Appendix 4), "All sites in one layer" with attribute "sitecode" as in the sites data base) have been uploaded to CDR and are available at http://cdr.eionet.europa.eu/

2.4 Prepare a visibility material (paper or electronic), to be used for communicating and disseminating information on the Emerald Network to local communities/young public.

The Emerald Team prepared a publication and a web page (www.nacres.org/emerald) with the aim to inform key stakeholders as well as the general public about the Emerald Network and its role in nature conservation of Georgia. The publication and webpage are meant for the decision-makers, academic circles, students, and other interested parties. It provides information on the Bern Convention, Emerald Network, Natura 2000, and the relevant acquis communautaire.

Members of the Emerald Team organized meetings and workshops in order to increase the awareness of all interested parties as well as students regarding Bern Convention, Emerald Network

and Euro-Directives. Participants of the workshops received copies of the publication prepared within project framework.

Cooperation with other relevant projects was another key element of the promotional and awareness building activities. As it was mentioned NACRES members held series of productive meetings with the Agency of Forestry in light of the on-going forest sector reform. The members of the Emerald Team were active participants in the Committee on the reform to ensure that the new forest policies effectively address the need to protect species and habitats of the Bern Convention.

The team cooperated and coordinated its activities with other projects dealing with impacts of climate change such as "Sustainable Management of Pastures in Georgia to Demonstrate Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation Benefits and Dividends for Local Communities" (UNDP/EU – ClimaEste), "Institutionalization of Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation in Georgia" (USAID/NALA) and "Climate change action in developing countries with fragile mountainous ecosystems from a sub-regional perspective" (UNEP).

Additionally, with the assistance of the Emerald Team a new project was initiated "Supporting the Implementation of Biodiversity-related EU Directives in Georgia". The main goal of this project is to build the capacity of the Georgian Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources Protection to develop the Emerald Network. The Team secured the support of the the German Society for International Cooperation (Deutsche Gesellschaftfür Internationale Zusammenarbeit GIZ) to implement the initiative in 2015.

APPENDIXES

Appendix I New potential sites

1. Artsivis kheoba
2. Dashbashi canyon
3. Davit Gareja
4. Ktsia-Tabatskuri
5. Prometheus cave
6. Gliana cave
7. Kotsakhura
8. Samshvilde canyon
9. Saguramo
10. Tetrobi

Appendix 2 Habitats identified during 2014-2015

1.	A1.11	Mussel and/or barnacle communities
2.	A2.2	Littoral sand and muddy sand
3.	A2.5	Coastal saltmarshes and saline reedbeds
4.	A3	Infralittoral rock and other hard substrata
5.	B1.6	Coastal dune scrub
6.	C1.1	Permanent oligotrophic lakes, ponds and pools
7.	C1.224	Floating Utricularia australis and Utricularia vulgaris colonies
8.	C1.225	Floating [Salvinia natans] mats
9.	C1.5	Permanent inland saline and brackish lakes, ponds and pools
10.	C1.66	Temporary inland saline and brackish waters
11.	C3.4	Species-poor beds of low-growing waterfringing or amphibious vegetation
12.	C3.55	Sparsely vegetated river gravel banks
13.	C3.62	Unvegetated river gravel banks
14.	D1	Raised and blanket bogs
15.	E1.2	Perennial calcareous grassland and basic steppes
16.	F9.1	Riverine scrub
17.	E3.4	Moist or wet eutrophic and mesotrophic grassland
18.	E3.5	Moist or wet oligotrophic grassland
19.	E5.4	Moist or wet tall-herb and fern fringes and meadows
20.	E6.2	Continental inland salt steppes

21. G1.11 Riverine Salix woodland
22. G1.12 Boreo-alpine riparian galleries
23. G1.21 Riverine Fraxinus - Alnus woodland, wet at high but not at low water
24. G1.3 Mediterranean riparian woodland
25. G1.44 Wet-ground woodland of the Black and Caspian Seas
26. G1.6 Fagus woodland
27. G1.A1 Quercus - Fraxinus - Carpinus betulus woodland on eutrophic and mesotrophic soils
28. G1.A4 Ravine and slope woodland
29. G1.A7 Mixed deciduous woodland of the Black and Caspian Seas
30. G3.17 Balkano-Pontic Abies forests
31. G3.1H Picea orientalis forests
32. G3.4E Ponto-Caucasian Pinus sylvestris forests
33. G3.9 Coniferous woodland dominated by Cupressaceae or Taxaceae

Appendix 3 Habitats in the process of mapping

1. G1.11 Riverine Salix woodland
2. G1.12 Boreo-alpine riparian galleries
3. G1.21 Riverine Fraxinus - Alnus woodland, wet at high but not at low water
4. G1.3 Mediterranean riparian woodland
5. G1.44 Wet-ground woodland of the Black and Caspian Seas
6. G1.A1 Quercus - Fraxinus - Carpinus betulus woodland on eutrophic and mesotrophic soils
7. G1.A4 Ravine and slope woodland
8. G1.A7 Mixed deciduous woodland of the Black and Caspian Seas
9. G3.17 Balkano-Pontic Abies forests
10. G3.1H Picea orientalis forests
11. G3.4E Ponto-Caucasian Pinus sylvestris forests
12. G3.9 Coniferous woodland dominated by Cupressaceae or Taxaceae

Appendix 4 Emerald Network candidate sites - Areas of Special Conservation Interest (ASCI)

1. Lagodekhi GE0000001
2. Arkhoti GE0000002
3. Chachuna GE0000003
4. Madatapha GE0000004
5. Bugdasheni GE0000005
6. Kolkheti GE0000006
7. Vashlovani GE0000007
8. Tusheti GE0000008
9. Kazbegi GE0000009
10. Borjomi-Kharagauli GE0000010
11. Racha 1 GE0000011
12. Svaneti 1 GE0000012
13. Algeti GE0000013
14. Kintrishi GE0000014
15. Batsara GE0000015
16. Mtirala GE0000016
17. Khanchali GE0000017
18. Ajameti GE0000018
19. Gardabani GE0000019
20. Mariamjvari GE0000020
21. Askhi GE0000021
22. Alasani GE0000022
23. Amtkeli GE0000023
24. Ilto GE0000024

25. Bichvinta-miusera GE0000025
26. Goderdzi GE0000026
27. Gombori GE0000027
28. Gumista GE0000028
29. Kvareli-Shilda GE0000029
30. Liakhvi GE0000030
31. Machakhela GE0000031
32. Pskhu GE0000032
33. Ritsa GE0000033
34. Surami 1 GE0000034
35. Artsivis kheoba GE0000035
36. Dashbashi canion GE0000036
37. Davit Gareja GE0000037
38. Ktsia-Tabatskuri GE0000038
39. Prometheus cave GE0000039
40. Racha 2 GE0000040
41. Racha 3 GE0000041
42. Racha 4 GE0000042
43. Gliana cave GE0000043
44. Saguramo GE0000044
45. Svaneti 2 GE0000045
46. Tetrobi GE0000048
47. Surami 2 GE0000049
48. Surami 3 GE0000050
49. Kotsakhura GE0000051
50. Surami 4 GE0000052
51. Surami 5 GE0000053