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CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE
AND NATURAL HABITATS

Standing Committee

40th meeting
Strasbourg, 1-4 December 2020

REPORT
ON THE SPOT EXPERT APPRAISAL OF THE
VASHLOVANI PROTECTED AREAS
(GEORGIA)

2-5 June 2019

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1. Background

The European Diploma for Protected Areas was awarded to the Vashlovani Protected Areas (Georgia) in 2015 with 2 conditions and 7 recommendations, following an appraisal mission in October 2014. A mission with a view to the renewal of the diploma for the period 2020-2029 was organised in June 2019.

The mission aimed 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 visit took place from June 2nd to June 5th 2019 (programme in annex); according to the Council of Europe requirements, the appraisal was based on the Regulations of the European diploma of protected areas (CM/ResDip(2008)1).

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. The mission was very well organised and the expert would like to thank all the people from the park and the Agency who made it possible and who answered all questions in a very comprehensive way.

2. Introduction

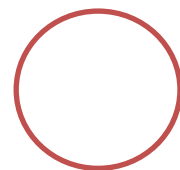
VPAS is located in the extreme South East of Georgia, 180 km from Tbilisi, at the border with Azerbaijan, nearby the small town of Dedoplistskaro. Its area includes five clusters, two of them separated from the main protected cluster (Takhti tepha and Eagle gorge).

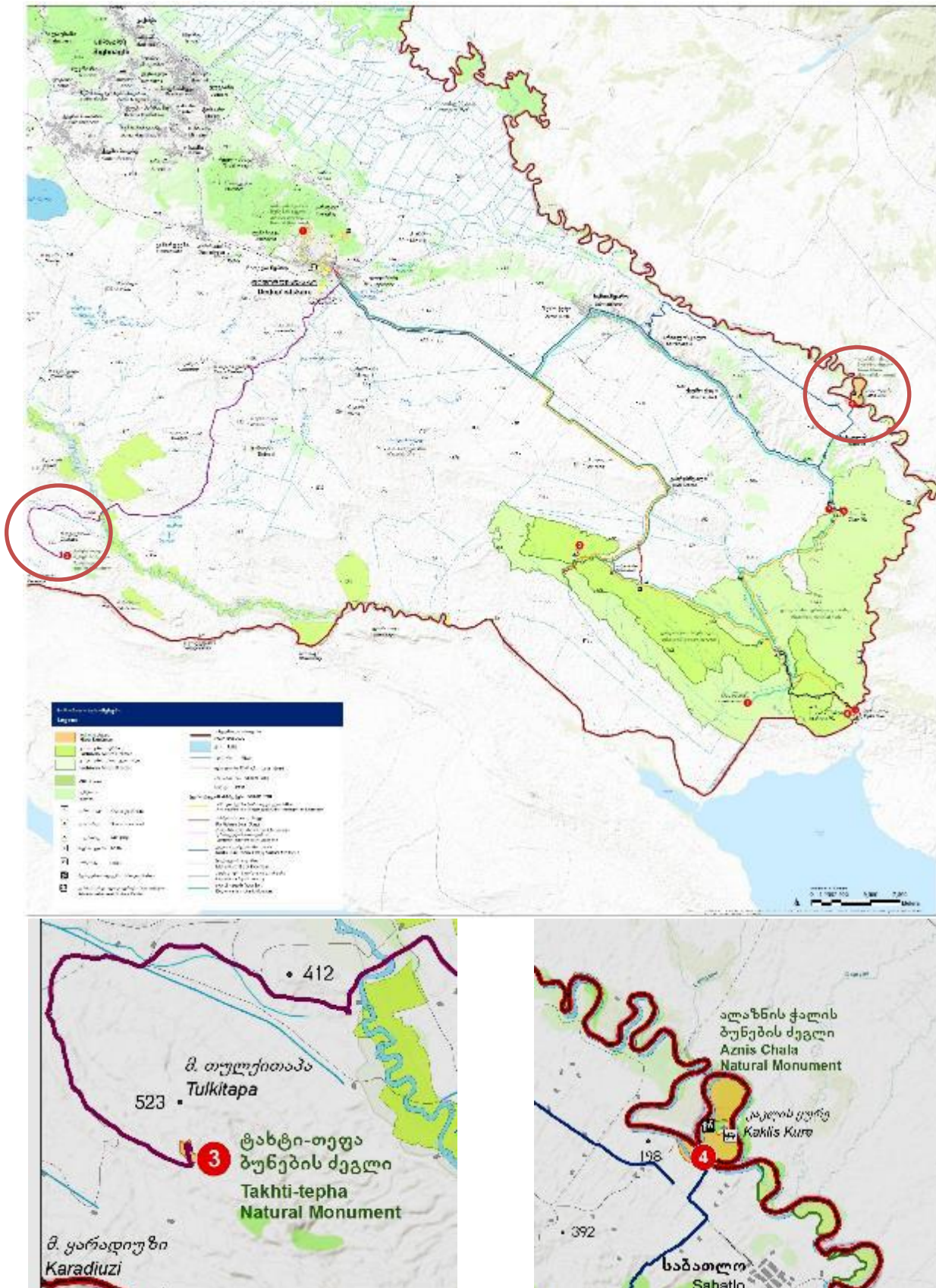
Vashlovani Protected Areas – (VPAS – 35 292 ha)

- 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)
- Takhti tepha (10 ha)





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.

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.

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

According to the State Agency, uniqueness of Vashlovani Protected Areas is represented by:

- The best example of the diversity of animal and plant species in 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

2.1 European interest

- Georgia is part of the global 200 eco-region set up by WWF
- Georgia is among the 35 hotspots of global biodiversity

VPAS comprise many elements that represent the biological and landscape European heritage, in accordance with the European Diploma regulation and meeting the criteria for the award of the Diploma. **The nominated area can be seen as a typical example of diverse floristic communities in Europe, representative from the European steppic eco-region.** Except for the Koshrov Strict Nature Reserve in Armenia, no other similar protected area representing this eco-zone has been awarded the European Diploma to date.

2.2 History of protection

The first protected area was established in 1935; the purpose of establishment was to keep / protect arid forests and semi desert biodiversity

- Vashlovani reserve (5025 ha) was established in 1935
- In 1989, the reserve was expanded. The places Mijnskure and Usakhelo were attached (8034 ha).
- “Vashlovani Protected Areas” (VPAS) was created on the base of the reserve in 2003; it includes State reserve (9’962 ha), National Park (25’021 ha), Nature Monuments - Alazani Chala (204 ha), Eagle Gorge (100 ha), Tahrt-Tafa (9,7 ha).

It should be mentioned that in order to achieve the successful implementation of the gazelle

reintroduction project (see below), it is planned to grant the Samukhi Valley the status of a protected area of multiple usage. The Transboundary Secretariat (TJS) and WWF are planning to establish a protected area on the part of the Samukhi Valley to ensure the protection of Gazelles as well as large predators. Monitoring activities have confirmed that Samukhi Valley is the best habitat for Gazelles, as well as ideal migration area for other species.

3. Geological features

The relief of 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 flat sedimentary areas are mainly constituted of grassland with scattered trees or open woodlands (*Pistachia*); they cover the main part of the VNP and are used for sheep grazing in winter. The eroded ravines and valleys constitute the so-called “badlands” and form the main part of the VNR. They are dominated by Juniper and *Pistachia* woodlands and are largely inaccessible

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. The hillock area exceeds a hectare, the hillock itself, as well as the surroundings, formed from sandstone and clays. Here, on the bald surface, occur singletons of different halophytes plants and slopes round the volcano are covered with semi desert phytocenoses.

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; the curving gullies are interconnected; visibility is sometimes very short and the whole area resembles a large natural labyrinth. These features make it very difficult to find one’s direction. Areulebi includes so-called ‘Alesilebi’ – precipices that can be 70 m high. 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).

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. Furthermore, the relief forms built of marine sediments which sharply differ from those built of continental sediments. 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. These mollusks are the oldest inhabitants of Vashlovani, from the time when the area was covered by water.

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).

Eagle Canyon (Artsivis Kheoba)

Artsivi (Eagle) Gorge Natural Monument represents a unique complex consisting of two sites. The first one is a limestone rock canyon, while the other is 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.

4. Biological and landscape heritage

VPAS vegetation is a mosaic of steppes, meadows, arid and grove forests, hemi xerophytic communities and desert ecosystems; this combination of vegetation types is unique in Georgia. The following types of landscapes are represented in Vashlovani Protected Areas: semi desert, foothill desert, arid forests, steppe, hemi xerophilic bushes, sprawling forest, floodplain forest, rocky limestone and volcanic landscape.

With the help of the Czech Embassy, a website for the biodiversity database is created for the protected areas located in Kakheti region: www.Kakheti.krnep.cz. On this site, the administration of Vashlovani Protected Areas collects information obtained through the monitoring of the selected samples. Information about monitoring is reflected in administration reports.

4.1 Habitats of Vashlovani Protected Areas

The vegetation of Vashlovani protected areas (Vashlovani National park and Vashlovani Nature Reserve) is characterised by remarkable diversity of plant communities some of which are represented in a number of variants and formations. The most common plant communities include:

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

There are also patches of flood plain forest, hygrophilous vegetation, humid scrub (conditional term), meadow-steppe, tragacanth and tomillar vegetation. As part of the above vegetation classes, lowland deserts, arid light woodlands, steppe and foothills forest are the zonal vegetation of the region (Kiziki district of Kakheti, East Georgia). The others are largely intrazonal and their occurrence is accounted for by local terrain and soil conditions. The great variation in terrain and soil features results in a mosaic within the zonal vegetation. This is best expressed in the Kumuro and Bugha-Moedani areas as well as in the Lekistskali gorge in which areas desert, steppe and arid woodland communities are found in a complicated mosaic. The natural pattern of vegetation distribution has been greatly affected by human influence; as a result of which secondary vegetation is also common throughout the study area.

4.2 Floristic interest

Many plant species characterising 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:

1. *Juniperus foetidissima* Willd. ***
2. *Juniperus polycarpos* K.
3. *Acer ibericum* M. Bieb. ***
4. *Pistacia mutica* Fisch. & C.A.Mey. ***
5. *Celtis glabrata* Spreng. ***
6. *Eversmannia subspinoso* (DC.) B.Fedtsch. ***
7. *Quercus pedunculiflora* K. Koch ***
8. *Juglans regia* L. ***
9. *Nitraria schoberi* L. ***
10. *Pyrus demetrii* Kutath.
11. *Pyrus sachokiana* Kutath.
12. *Populus euphratica* Olivier ***
13. *Ulmus minor* Mill. ***

The wild pistachio (*Pistacia sp*) and the juniper 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.

Several specific plant associations must also be mentioned, like *Bothriochloetum* in the steppic areas, *Juniperetum* in the arid forests, *Astragaletum* and other shrubs associations widespread in the xeric areas. The “sakmlisxis light forest” characterised by the *Pistacieta semi desertosa* is certainly one of the most specific and spectacular vegetation types met in the nominated area. The core area hosts also ancient species of fruit trees of high genetic interest, as well as various more common forest widespread species communities. From agrobiodiversity point of view, ancestors of species of cultivated grape (*Vitis silvestris* G.G. Gmel) and quince (*Cydonia oblonga* Mill.) are found here.

In the application form, ten distinct plant communities were described in the nominated area, which is an unusual high number in an area spreading only from 100 to less than 1000 m of elevation. However, new information is available, and it is highly suggested to revised in a more systematic way the full description of the plan communities. This could be done within the upcoming revision of the management plan. The application form mentions around 600 species of vascular plants belonging to 363 genera and 88 families, 5 of them being endemic to Georgia and 34 to Caucasus; 19 plant species are listed in the Red data book of Georgia (2003) and 5 others will be listed in the future¹. A comprehensive and systematic revision of the list of endemic, rare and endangered species should be undertaken in order to allow comparison with other areas.

To conclude on its floristic interest, the nominated area can be seen as a typical example of diverse floristic communities in Europe, representative from the European steppic eco-region. The nominated area has also been pre-selected to be listed on the Emerald Network.

4.3 Faunistic interest

According to the information and data available, the nominated area hosts very rare and important fauna species for Europe. Among them we can mention 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.

Biodiversity Monitoring and Database constitution are ongoing; presently they include:

- 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 Chiropteras: *Myotis emarginatus*, *Rhinolopus hipposideros*, *Rhinolophus mehelyi*.
- 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. A breeding natural population of the rare common pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus*) must also be mentioned, as well as rather abundant populations of chukar partridge (*Alectoris chukar*), quail (*Coturnix coturnix*) and little bustard (*Tetrax tetrax*). Most of the semiarid zone lies within the Iori Region IBA (Important Bird Area GE011; BirdLife International 2012). The IBA is important for breeding and wintering birds of prey (25 species recorded) and the steppe bird assemblage.
- 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
- Fish - 20 species; 16 species of fish are reported to date in the Alazani river that limits the nominated area on the East; among them, *Silurus glanis* and *Lucioperca lucioperca*. Although most fish taxa were not assessed yet for the IUCN Red List, they are of European interest, and several of them are listed on Annex III to the Bern Convention

¹ Numbers regarding Red List species vary depending upon the consulted documents (original nomination file, PPT presented for the mission, annual reports).

- Amphibians - 4 species, including *Bufo viridis*, *Bufo bufo*, *Hyla arborea*, *Rana ridibunda*; in the Caucasus region *Ablephorus pannonicus* is found only in Vashlovani National Park.

A reintroduction project of the goitered gazelle in the nominated area is on-going. This species disappeared from the area in the 20th century, due to hunting and poaching. Ten specimens were kept in Turkey and released in 2009, then 18 others from Azerbaijan, in 2013. Several specimens were predated - probably by wolves and new reintroduction from Azerbaijan are planned. While those results are positive, it is however too early to conclude on the full success of the project that aims to rehabilitate a minimum viable population of 30-50 gazelles; the release of additional specimens is planned. The compatibility between the long-term conservation of the gazelle and farming activities in general is a key issue; the pasture management is addressed by an on-going programme, supported by UNDP. A pasture management plan was developed and finalised in 2017, aiming to introduce and implement sustainable pasture management practices among farmers and sheep-breeders, while the gazelle reintroduction programme itself is being implemented by the TJS Programme (transboundary joint secretariat).

The WWF Caucasian Office, together with the Ministry of Agriculture and Environment of Georgia, the Agency of Protected Areas and the relevant agencies of the Republic of Azerbaijan, is implementing a project called Biodiversity Recovery in Priority Transboundary Protected Areas of the Iori-Mingechauri Region. The project will support ecosystem recovery in the South Caucasus ecoregion.

4.4 Landscape and historical interest

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

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

VPAS are also situated in an historical area; the Kiziki region is well known as an ancient settlement and hosts many historical monuments; signs of ancient human presence can be seen within the nominated area which is also crossed by a branch of the silk road.

5. Protection measures

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

The VSNR

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

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

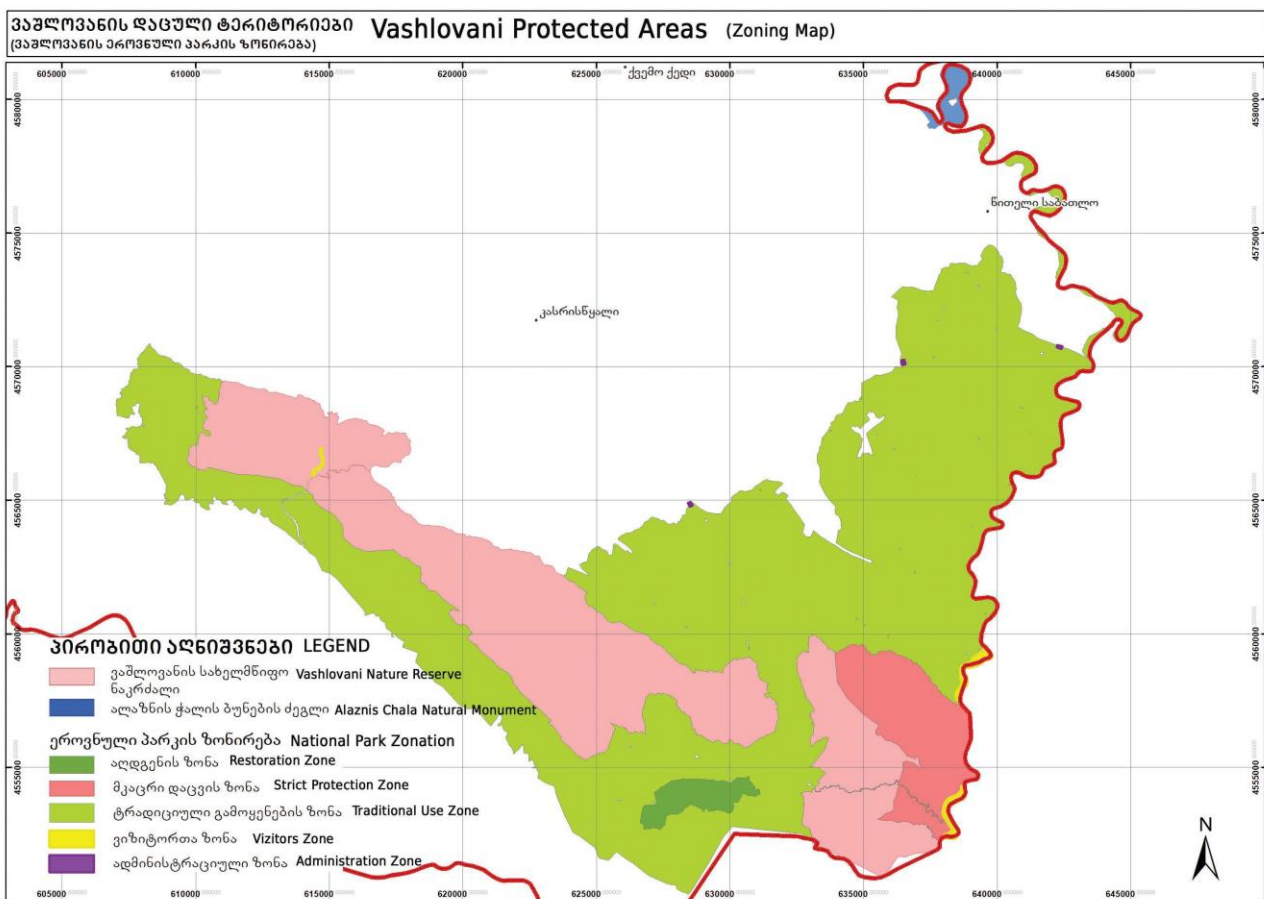
The VNP

VNP comprises five “*zones*” where uses and activities are more or less strictly regulated, depending on their specific management goals; here are the current surfaces (figures provided by the State Agency - in brackets the area at nomination time):

- the **nature strict protection zone** – 1 930 ha (1936 ha): dedicated to research and limited recreational and ecotourism uses and activities only; it benefits from the same regulation as the VSNR; most uses and activities are totally forbidden and some are strictly regulated;
- the **restoration zone** – 448 ha (467 ha): assigned to restoration works; its main management objective is to stop further degradation and engage a restoration process of the ecosystems. Extractions, damages, farming activities, hunting, logging, recreation, and any other uses or activities that could alter the ecosystems, as well as their components, are forbidden; in addition to the uses and activities allowed in the previous zone, management measures are allowed, under the control of the park administration;
- the **traditional use zone** – 22 539 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, in addition to the ones mentioned here above. Grazing by “*toushuri*”, a local and traditional sheep, is the most important activity; any use of non-renewable resources is forbidden, as well as pollutions, introduction of exotic species and ploughing and sowing activities. Visitors can also be limited, if excessive;
- 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. Visitors are welcome, but they must respect the park regulation;
- the **administration zone** - 3 ha (22 ha): it includes VPAS Administration infrastructures and facilities.

The above-mentioned changes, which are not really significant, have been implemented within the frame of the Decree of Georgian Government July 5, 2019.

Demarcation to exclude farms has been implemented recently; accordingly, the boundaries of each zone have been revised in order to fully become in compliance with the national law and technical regulations of Vashlovani Protected Areas. Hence, adjustments of selected areas have been implemented in a full accordance with the existing legislation of Georgia.

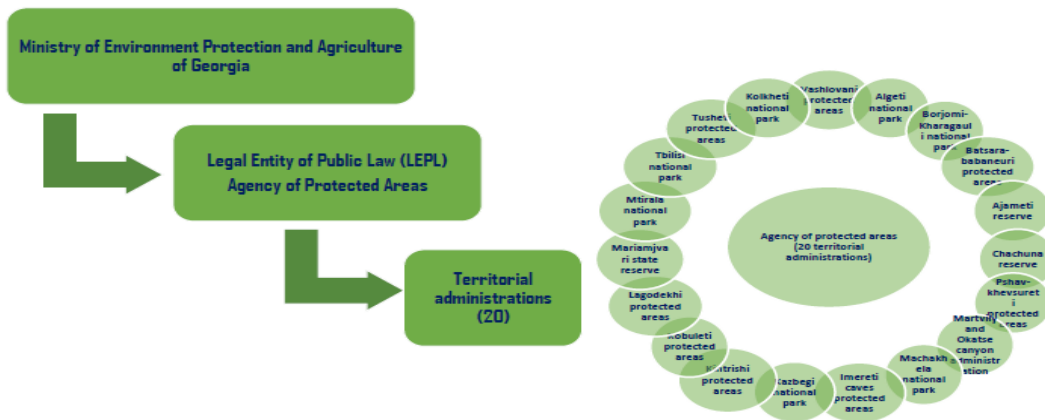


The VNP administration also manages the **three natural monuments** that are parts of the nominated area; the regulation of those monuments is less restrictive, while collection of materials for scientific purposes is controlled and requires special authorisations from the park administration.

It should be noted the feasibility study for the establishment of Kakheti Biosphere Reserve has been undertaken. One of the important spots for biosphere reserve is selected in Dedoplistskaro and second in Akhmeta district. The Dedoplistskaro Municipality has the hope that with the help of the administration of the Vashlovani Protected Areas a Biosphere Reserve will be established.

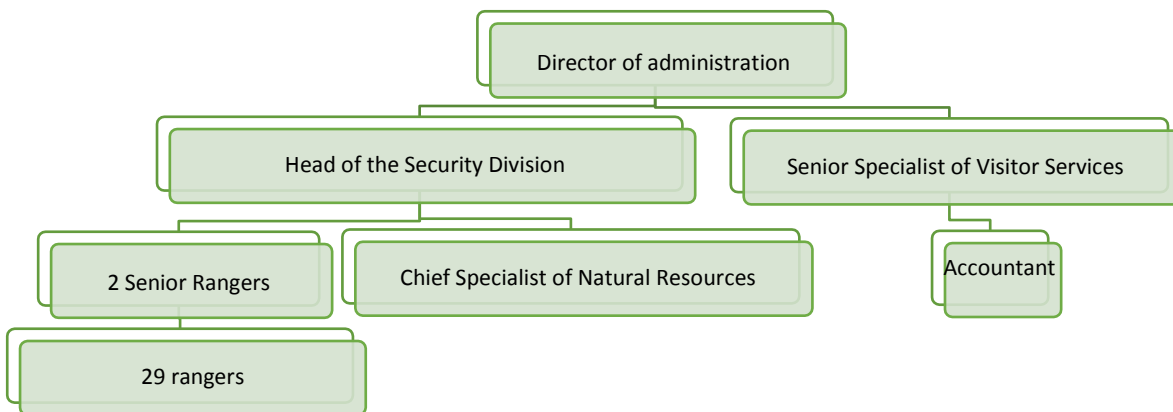
In 2017, three protected areas - Vashlovani, Batsara-Babaneuri and Lagodekhi Protected Areas were granted the status of the Emerald Site. As from 2019, there are 59 Emerald Network sites in Vashlovani Protected Areas already.

Management of Protected Areas in Georgia



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



Management priorities

The administration has set the following priorities:

- Law enforcement, protection system / patrolling
- Biodiversity research and monitoring
- Eco-education and public relations
- Ecotourism development
- Maintenance / Restoration / Development of Infrastructure
- Staff trainings
- Sustainable management of renewable natural resources

6. 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.

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 is already decided and agreed with the donor that at the end of 2019 works for management plan preparation will started. The plan is complemented by the eco-tourism development strategy and the pasture management plans.

The operational plan for Vashlovani Protected Areas has been developed after the elaboration of the Management Plan and thus, represents one of the important guidelines for defining the further action steps of the Administration. Besides, A comprehensive Monitoring Programme is also in place and the administration actively uses the above-mentioned software to conduct monitoring on the “Red Listed” species spread on the given area. The database is being updated permanently and at the stage of information of the last two years is already available on the web-site.

Different types of tracking methods are used for animal monitoring:

- Direct and indirect methods;
- The method of identification of individuals on the trail; Remote tracking method;
- With the usage of photo-traps;

For the evaluation of plant species, the following methods are used: Plant calculation method on randomly squares, geobotanic route method, method of using transects.

For habitat monitoring: Pre-selected model plots, constant monitoring plots. The Monitoring is implemented annually on: Eichler Tulip, Georgian Iris, Paeonia tenuifolia development cycles. Information about monitoring is reflected in the reports of the administration.

Furthermore, determination/identification of the places with anthropogenic influences of Vashlovani Protected Areas have been implemented, based on which new patrolling routes were defined. At this stage eight daily standing ranger protection stations are in place. Based on the existing needs, for better protecting biodiversity, two new ranger shelters will be built in the year 2019.

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; they are responsible for patrolling on their defined areas. Additional salary is given to the rangers for food while being in the valley.
- Patrolling in the area by patrol groups - groups of 2 people are regularly patrolling by car.
- The rangers are patrolling according to the protection stations – the 32 rangers are patrolling during 24 hours, according to 8 protection stations.
- Implementation of planned and control revisions – twice a year patrol groups control areas covered by forests. They control illegal cutting of forests; the groups are created by the administration director.
- Carry out anti-fire measures – Annually the Agency of Protected Areas supplies the firefighting equipment for all the administrations of protected areas, including Vashlovani. Before the high season of fires in Georgia, the equipment is tested, controlled is distributed to the existing 8 ranger stations. The first actions against fires are carried out by rangers, afterwards they call the emergency situation service who is responsible for emergency cases in whole country (112). On the other hand, the administration works hard for awareness raising, so that the unit spreads information relating to the fire prevention and first-response activities to the shepherds and farms.
- 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, and the pasture users have close communication with the park administration as well as with the municipality since they are the only users of the traditional use zone of national park in terms of natural resources.
- Control the existing infrastructure condition (care, development, accomplishment). At the beginning of each year a certain amount of money is dedicated for the refurbishment of existing infrastructure within the park.

- Restoration and renovation of roads in the area. since there are no concrete roads within the protected areas, the ground creates problems for vehicles to move. 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. The existing phototraps make interesting photos of biodiversity which are gathered by the natural resources' specialists. The information is analysed and kept in the database afterwards.
- Visitor assistance and ensure their safety. There is one visitor service specialist in the administration. The specialist provides information to the visitors and assists them to fill in necessary documentation for border protection police. The rangers assist the visitors in the protected areas, in case of necessity.
- Staff training is carried out on a case-by-case basis, the main training topics are law enforcement, pasture management, visitor service, safety regulations, primary activities in fire-fighting, etc.

7. Finances

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

Here are the data about the budgets allocated in 2018 and in 2019 for the above-mentioned purposes:

Actual expenditures from Budget in 2018:

State Budget	218 962 GEL
CNF	119 935 GEL
Other sources	352 020 GEL
TOTAL:	690 917 GEL

Planned budget for 2019: [1 € = 2.3 GEL]

State Budget	260 563 GEL
CNF	403 268 GEL
Other sources	290 193 GEL
TOTAL:	954 024 GEL

Regular budgetary and Non-Budgetary activities

- Ranger salaries have been doubled since 2017; in 2017 the salary of ranger was 450 GEL, now it is 900 GEL (State budget)
- 100 GEL salary supplement is provided to all the administration personnel (CNF).
- Health and life insurance is provided for all the administration personnel (CNF).
- Salary Supplement for food is provided for rangers (CNF)
- Important sources of financing are CNF and TJS²

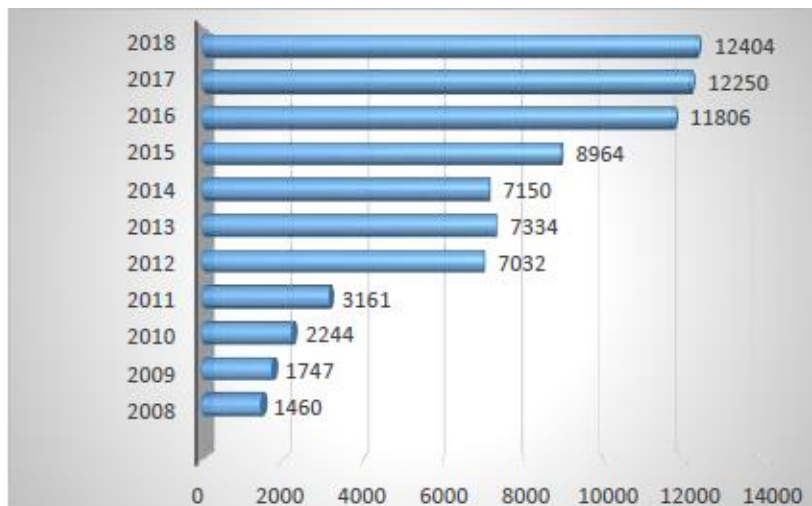
8. Tourism and infrastructures

The existence of 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

² The Ecoregional Nature Protection Programme (ENPP) in the South Caucasus, financed by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) through KfW, has four components:

- 1) Support Programme for the Protected Areas (SPPA)
- 2) Caucasus Nature Fund (CNF)
- 3) Transboundary Joint Secretariat (TJS), and
- 4) Eco-Corridor Programme in the Southern Caucasus (ECF)

becoming one attractive destination among local and international visitors.



8.1 Infrastructures and field equipment

The VPAs Administration manages a large building situated at Dedoplistskaro; this building hosts the office of the VPAs, a visitor center, a small museum and basic accommodations for visitors. (4 rooms, 7 places).

It manages also a series of infrastructures that include:

- 4 entrances equipped with ranger stations or shelters;
- 1 parking next to Dedoplistskaro visitors center.
- 7 picnic areas with small recreational equipment;
- 5 two-person bungalows, in Central Vashlovani (place-Visitors Village);
- 6 three-person bungalows in Mijnskure,
- 3 double rooms in Vashlovani rangers' station,
- 2 double rooms in Gazelle Vollier rangers' station.
- 4 campsites with adapted facilities. (the number of people on campsite is not limited)
- 3 scenic roads where visitors are allowed to circulate;
- 3 view points;
- 7 riding trails, (combined with pedestrian)
- 5 signalized hiking trails;

Finances from the state budget as well as from the support of different donor organisations 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 and with the support of WWF within the frame of TJS programme, the construction and arrangement of new eco-tourist infrastructure is implemented in Vashlovani Protected Areas.

During the reporting period, the administrative building and visitor center in Dedoplistskaro was renovated; 6 Protection Stations (Vashlovani central entrance, Shavi mta, Kaklis kure, Heretis phoni, Bugha moedani), and two bungalows were adapted to protection (Mijnskure, Central bungalows). The construction of new protection stations started in the Pantyashara and Eagle Gorge. 15 tourist shelters, 7 picnic areas, 2 view points, 4 camping areas with fireplaces, toilettes and recycle bins have been arranged. The reconstruction and repair work of the infrastructure are carried out regularly.

8.2 Specific activities

- Design of Eagle Canyon hiking trail has been made and now construction works are carried out (TJS and state budget)

- Eagle Canyon eco-tourism infrastructure has been arranged through the funding of ENPARD, TJS, Vashlovani Friends association
- Gazelle reintroduction programme is carried out and monitoring is regularly implemented (TJS) Eco-tourism development Strategy has been elaborated (TJS)
- Ranger station is being now built in Pantishara Area (TJS) Visitor center has been rehabilitated (CNF)
- Solar panels have been installed (CNF). Toilets have been installed in the fields (CNF) Information materials have been printed (CNF)
- Technical monitoring has been undertaken (CNF)

The local municipality actively cooperates with the administration of the Vashlovani Protected Areas. The result is the development of Dedoplistskaro and the increase of environmental awareness among the population. Different eco-educational and awareness raising activities are offered to students. Local population actively participates in meetings organised by the administration of the Vashlovani Protected Areas, the Agency of Protected Areas and the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture.

9. Training and capacity building

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. Activities include trainings and seminars in the following directions:

- Monitoring on large size mammal animals
- Effective management of protected areas
- Planning and managing of sustainable resources
- Protected Areas and climate change processes
- Visitor management and Eco-educational activities
- Training in Gazelle monitoring
- Trainings in UNESCO Biosphere Reserve
- Phytopathological researches and monitoring
- "Strengthening Capacity for Monitoring of Selected Species in Emerald Network sites".

The above-mentioned list of conducted trainings is not full since there are also other trainings which were implemented by the Agency of Protected Areas together with the financial and technical support of donor organisations.

Conducted Trainings in Vashlovani Protected Areas			
Capacity building trainings	Donor Organization	Number of employees	Year
Monitoring on Large sized carnivores	NACRES	24	2009
Planning and management of sustainable resources	USAID	3	2010
Effective management of Protected Areas		5	2012
Protected Areas and climate change	IUCN, BMU, GIZ	14	2013
Visitor management, Nature Conservation, Environmental education	Environmental Protection Council of Estonia	15	2014
Forest diseases, inventory of forest diseases	Environmental Protection Council of Estonia	19	2015

Installing remote servers for the conservation of birds	Representative of Protected Areas of Estonia	9	2015
Training in UNESCO Biosphere Reserve	NACRES/ Michael Succow Foundation	15	2016
Training in Gazelle monitoring held in Baku		6	2015
Phytopathological researches and monitoring	UNDP	18	2017
Implementing sustainable management of Landscape and soil	UN, GEF	3	2018
Integration of eco-system services in the development of planning	ISET/GIZ	0	2018
Monitoring on selected species in Emerald Network Sites	GIZ/ Ministry	11	2018
Strengthening capacity to ensure monitoring on selected species in Emerald Network Sites	GIZ/ Ministry	26	2018

10. Research and scientific studies needed

For historical reasons, Georgia has excellent scientists working in the field of biodiversity research, and the state of knowledge on environment in Georgia is rather good; however, it needs to be updated and complemented. Some of the data provided in the application file (2014) are incomplete, outdated or presented in a non-systematic way. For example, the list of habitats is not presented in a systematic and coherent way; the lists of endemic species is not complete, and not properly separated in Caucasian, Georgian and local endemics.

As mentioned in the previous report, the list of the recommendations of a study carried out by NACRES (environmental NGO, major partner of the Park), concluding on a series of priorities, is probably still very accurate. It includes:

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

More efforts should be made by the State Party and by the VPAS Administration, with support from NACRES and other scientific institutions, to build a reliable baseline of information on the VPAS natural heritage, giving the VPAS Administration the possibility to monitor the European importance of the awarded area, in the mid and long terms. The ongoing setup of the database and the preparation of the new management plan offer an excellent opportunity to update the data and to make a synthetic presentation of the different components of the local biodiversity.

11. 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). Thanks to an interesting scheme with CNF, it is possible to give to the park employees an additional contribution to their salary and equipment, which allows to keep qualified and dedicated people attached to the Park.

The renewal of the management plan, including the pasture management plan and a tourism strategy, is a key issue for the coming years. Its adoption by the State authority, its full implementation and the allocation of the necessary human and financial resources are essential for ensuring the long-term successful management of the area.

Scientific inventories and data collection deserve more attention; a lot of high-quality information exist and research is still ongoing. However, systematic data management and presentation are essential to capitalize on the large existing set of data.

Tourism is also an issue. The number of visitors has increased significantly in the recent years, but it is still quite far from reaching the carrying capacity. However, care should be taken of the infrastructures and the motorised traffic on the road should be kept under strict control. On the other hand, the tourism development is essential to ensure the collaboration with local authorities and interest groups and to keep good relations with the local population. The Park is doing an excellent job to keep friendly local relations so far.

The transboundary cooperation with Azerbaijan appears to be very good; in particular the re-introduction of the gazelle, jointly operated by both countries, is functioning very well. Adjacent protected areas established on both sides of the border are a supplementary guarantee for the integrity of the ecosystems and their natural functioning.

Winter grazing is of course 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 probably many centuries and has largely contributed the shaping of the landscape. It must continue, but with measures to guarantee the integrity of the strict protection zones and their plant and animal populations.

The State of Georgia is exploring different possibilities of international recognition for their PAs (IUCN Green List, Emerald Network, Ramsar, Biosphere reserve, etc.) at country level as well as as transboundary sites. 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.

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

Note: here is presented only a short summary of the State Agency comprehensive 2019 report.

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 the areas near to the Usakhelo Viewpoint of Vashlovani some territories owned by the shepherds were integrated into the Strict Nature Reserve. The Agency of Protected Areas has discussed this issue and decided to change the status of the concerned areas. Hence, 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 have clear objectives, a time frame for implementation and indicators of progress, and 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, with alternative grazing areas located at a reasonable distance from the borders of the zones where these activities are forbidden; the State Party is also urged to enforce the existing regulation on grazing in the whole Diploma area, without delay, and to limit grazing activities to the carrying capacity for the Vashlovani Protected Areas (to be determined);***

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. Within the project, evaluation of pasture productivity has been conducted. The map for the core plant species of Vashlovani Protected Areas has been prepared with the GIS database, as well as an adjusted map of pastures. On the other hand, within the project the provision of water has been implemented, so that the sheep did not have to pass through about 300 ha of migratory route. This activity contributes to start regeneration process in the concerned areas.

Another component of the project was trainings, in order to introduce sustainable pasture management and sheep-breeding practices among farmers.

The most important component of the project was preparation of Pasture Management Plan of Vashlovani Protected Areas which was elaborated in 2017. The management plan comprises the activities with the objective to ensure rehabilitation of grazing areas in Vashlovani Protected Areas and introduce sustainable grazing practices. One of the main achievements of the pasture management plan was that it collected the information about the previously granted pasture leases to the farmers that were issued by the municipality before the establishment of the national park. The next step for the Agency of protected Areas is to ensure the coordination with the municipality to renew these agreements and to give the pastures on lease. Communication with the municipality is underway, , so leasing of pasture areas should be effective in 2020. Due to administrative problems, the plan was not communicated to the Secretariat 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;***

During the reporting period, the management of Vashlovani Protected Areas was implemented according to the Management Plan 2014 – 2020. The operational plan developed after the elaboration of the Management Plan represents important guidelines for defining the further action of the Administration. Besides, a comprehensive Monitoring Programme is also 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 updated permanently and at this stage information of the last two years is already available on the web-site.

Monitoring of biodiversity (including phototraps) - Rangers are permanently collecting information in the field. On the other hand, the existing phototraps take interesting photos of biodiversity which is gathered by the natural resource specialists. The information is analyzed and kept in the database afterwards.

- 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 in the frames of the support of 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. Similarly, with the support of WWF within the frames of TJS programme, the construction and arrangement of new eco-tourist infrastructure is implemented in Vashlovani Protected Areas.

The administrative building and Visitor Center In Dedoplistskaro were renovated as well as 6 Protection Stations (Vashlovani central entrance, Shavi mta, Kaklis kure, Heretis phoni, Bugha moedani), Two bungalows were adapted to protection (Mijniskure, Central bungalows). The construction of new protection stations has started in the Pantyashara and Eagle Gorge. 15 tourist shelters, 7 picnic areas, 2 view points, 4 camping areas with fireplaces, toilettes and recycle bins have been arranged. The reconstruction and repair work of the infrastructure is carried out regularly.

- 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 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.

Different types of tracking methods are used for animal monitoring:

- Direct and indirect methods;
- The method of identification of individuals on the trail; Remote tracking method;
- With the usage of photo-traps;

For the evaluation of plant species, the following methods are used: Plant calculation method on randomly squares, geobotanic route method, method of using transects.

For habitat monitoring: Pre-selected model plots, constant monitoring plots. The Monitoring is implemented annually on: Eichler Tulip, Georgian Iris, Paeonia tenuifolia development cycles. Information about monitoring is reflected in the reports of administration.

Monitoring of habitats

The vegetation of Vashlovani protected areas (Vashlovani National park and Vashlovani Nature Reserve) is characterised by remarkable diversity of plant communities. An annual monitoring is conducted in a sample area of each habitat:

- Monitoring of Emerald Network sites has been launched since last year by using a special method.
- There are two samples in the pastures and are constantly being monitored.
- The monitoring of reintroduced gazelles is held continuously, which is also considered for transboundary relationships. This year we have the 5th generation of gazelles, in total more than 100 individuals.
- Project "Restoration of Colchian Pheasant in Natural Habitats" - project was funded by the Global Environment Fund (GEF) and UNDP in 2014-2015.
- Monitoring results are reflected in quarterly, 6 months, 9 months and annual reports.
- Collection of statistical data of main species is carried out. The results are reflected in each quarterly and annual reports prepared by the administration.

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.

Planned budget for 2019 (1 € = 3.2 GEL)

State Budget	260 563 GEL
CNF	403 268 GEL
Other sources	290 193 GEL
<u>TOTAL:</u>	<u>954 024 GEL</u>

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. The preparation of the plan is ensured within the GEF/UNDP project "Enhancing the Financial Sustainability of Protected Areas System in Georgia". It is already decided and agreed with the donor that at the end of 2019 works for management plan preparation will start. The plan is complemented by the eco-tourism development strategy and the pasture management plans.

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. Activities include trainings and seminars in the following directions:

- Monitoring on large size mammal animals
- Effective management of protected areas
- Planning and managing of sustainable resources
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- Training in Gazelle monitoring
- Trainings in UNESCO Biosphere Reserve
- Phytopathological researches and monitoring
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The above-mentioned list of conducted trainings is not full since there are also other trainings which had been implemented by the Agency of Protected Areas together with the financial and technical support of donor organisations.

(see in previous chapters - Full list available in the 2019 annual report)

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 project supports the development of ecosystems in the South Caucasus ecoregion.

One of the most important components of the project is the reintroduction of gazelles. The transfer of gazelles from Shirvan National Park of the Republic of Azerbaijan to Vashlovani Protected Area has been made and their equipment with satellites has been undertaken. The gazelle reintroduction has been introduced on Samukhi Valley. The number of gazelles has increased and reached up to 100 individuals in 2019.

The active transboundary cooperation between Vashlovani protected Areas and Akharbakhar Protected Areas of the Republic of Azerbaijan facilitates sufficient and safety conditions for biodiversity representatives (such as migratory birds).

13. 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. In particular the Pasture management plan has been adopted and implemented, and it will be an integral part of the new management plan whose preparation has started.

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.

Final note:

After the mission in Vashlovani, the expert had the opportunity to briefly visit the Lagodekhi National Park, located some 60 km north of Dedoplistskaro, on the southern slope of the Great Caucasus mountains. The Park is very well managed, with a good infrastructure and is also very well preserved.

➔ *It could be an excellent candidate for European Diploma! Despite the short distance, it is very different from Vashlovani, with high mountains and much higher level of precipitation.*

14. Programme of the Mission

June 2	
	Flight Zürich - Istanbul - Tbilisi Drive to Dedoplistskaro
June 3	
Arrival in Dedoplistskaro, Vashlovani Visitor Center	
10:00 - 12:00	Presentation - "Vashlovani Protected Areas - Implementation of Eurodiploma Recommendations"
	Meeting with the administration staff, representatives of local government, local community and other stakeholders
12:00 - 12:30	Coffee break
12:30 - 14:00	Meeting with stakeholders -II part
14:00 - 15:00	Lunch
15:00 - 18:00	visiting Eagle Gorge campsite, local tourist service objects (guest-houses, cafes) and Khornabuji Castle
18:30	Dinner and Wine Degustation in Nasrashvili Wine Cellar
	Overnight in Dedoplistskaro
June 4	
09:00 - 11:00	Departure to Vashlovani National Park
11:00 - 11:30	Vashlovani Governous
12:30 - 13:30	Lunch
13:30 - 14:00	Central Vashlovani visitors village - newly built infrastructure
14:00 - 15:00	Visiting Usakhelo View Point
15:00 - 17:00	Visiting Mijnskure
17:00 - 19:30	Return to Dedoplistskaro and debriefing
20:00	Dinner
June 5	
09:00 - 10:00	Final discussions
10:00 - 12:00	Travel to Lagodekhi NP
	Visit of the Parc center and presentation by the Director
June 6	
	Excursion in Lagodekhi National park - Machi Fortress
June 7	
00:30	Departure to Tbilisi Airport; Return flight to Switzerland