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**Committee for the activities of the Council of Europe  
in the field of biological and landscape diversity**

**(CO-DBP)**

**Group of specialists – European Diploma for Protected Areas**

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**THE OKA NATIONAL BIOSPHERE RESERVE  
(Russian Federation)**

**RENEWAL**

Expert report by  
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*Document established by  
the Directorate of Culture  
and Cultural and Natural Heritage*

The European Diploma for Protected Areas was first awarded to the Oka National Biosphere Reserve in 1994 and has been renewed once.

The Secretariat did not accompany the expert on his visit to the reserve.

Appendix I reproduces Resolution (99) 14 which was adopted when the Diploma was last renewed. In Appendix II the Secretariat presents a draft resolution for possible renewal.

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## **I. Introduction**

The European Diploma, Category A, was awarded to the Oka National Biosphere Reserve in 1994 and renewed in 1999, until 5 September 2004. The expert visited the reserve from 23 to 25 June 2003 with a view to the renewal of this diploma, scheduled for 2004.

The visit was organised by Mr Yuri Markin, director of the reserve.

The three-day visit covered the following locations: the Pra and Oka rivers (by motor launch); water meadows and ponds, desman habitats both inside and outside the reserve; the natural scots pine and birch forest; the captivity-breeding station for European bison and cranes. The deputy directors of the reserve, V.P. Ivanchev, A.V. Makarov and A.S. Onufrenya, together with Mrs M.V. Onufrenya, scientific officer responsible for the conservation of the desman, accompanied the expert on these visits.

An extraordinary session of the reserve's scientific committee, devoted to the problems of conserving the priority biodiversity elements with a view to renewal of the diploma, was held on 24 June.

The expert also attended a meeting of students from the environmental protection group, led by Mrs T.A. Markina, scientific officer of the reserve.

During his brief stay in Moscow the expert shared his impressions of the reserve's problems with Mrs Maria Moskvina, head of international relations at the Ministry of Natural Resources.

The organisation of the visit was perfect. We thank all the aforementioned individuals for their highly cooperative contribution to the visit's success and their warm welcome. We also thank the Director of the reserve and his staff for their devotion to nature protection.

## **II. Situation and value of the reserve**

The Oka reserve lies in the Meshchera lowlands, 250 km south-east of Moscow and 75 km east of Ryazan, the principal town of the region of that name. The altitude is approximately 100 m; the climate on the plain is continental; precipitation is around 500 mm per year and can be in excess of 900 mm some years.

The core reserve was established in 1935 and the biosphere reserve in 1989. The core reserve covers a surface area of 22.916 ha, the zone added in 1989 – 32.806 ha and the buffer zone 21.449 ha.

The plain is covered in fluvio-glacial sediments and recent alluvia. The river Pra, with several meanders, crosses the reserve as far as the Oka river bank. In spring, both rivers overflow, covering a very wide flood plain and something like one third of the reserve. The marshlands around numerous ponds and lakes represent 15% of the territory. The forests, pine woods, oak woods, river channels etc extend across the remainder of the territory.

Vascular plants, abundant for this latitude, number 840 species, of which 69 are rare species. The vertebrates breeding in the reserve, numbering some 265 species, make it one of the most important protected areas in Europe. The species threatened at international level include the desman, otter, wolf, black stork, white-tailed eagle, black kite and greater spotted eagle (9 couples). The reserve lies on a migration route for birds, providing very important roosting sites and feeding grounds. There can be up to 500 000 geese in the Oka flood plain in the migration season.

The European interest of the Oka reserve is clearly justified.

### **III. Quality and system of protection**

#### **1. Administration**

The reserve is under the direct control of the Ministry of Natural Resources of the Russian Federation.

A scientific committee has been set up for the reserve. The committee brings together representatives of the reserve, the ministry, the Ryazan region, universities and the WWF.

The reserve has 165 posts for staff, of which 30 are vacant. The reserve's budget was increased in 2002. At present, it covers two thirds of the needs, but funding for the reserve's activities remains its main problem. The running costs are virtually covered by local sponsors.

#### **2. Management**

##### **2.1. General**

The Russian reserves known as *zapovedniki* are governed by a strict protection regime. The conservation of ecosystems in their natural state and ongoing research are the prime objectives of this category of protected areas.

##### **2.2. Zoning**

There are three zones under distinctly different protection regimes. Exceptions to the zapovednik's strict protection regime have been made for motorless boat traffic on the Pra, grazing of livestock (restricted to wardens living in houses scattered around the zapovednik), haymaking on certain meadows, angling in the oxbows of the Pra and the gathering of wild mushrooms and berries by amateurs. Less strict protection measures apply to less than 10% of the territory and are similar to the regime governing the biosphere reserve's peripheral area.

In the areas close to the Oka 200 ha of desman habitat have been created.

In the biosphere reserve's peripheral area recreational activities and the exploitation of natural resources (hunting, wood-cutting, agriculture) are considerably limited.

The buffer zone, where activities that might adversely affect the nature of the biosphere reserve are prohibited, provides additional protection for the core reserve. The lack of a buffer zone to the northern sector of the core reserve has not posed a problem so far.

##### **2.3. Land ownership**

The core reserve and the peripheral area of the biosphere reserve are the property of the State (Ministry of Natural Resources).

## 2.4. Fauna, flora and habitats

Desman habitats are improving. Under an international project, nine lakes have been dug out. The drainage canal that caused the loss of habitats in the flood zone for 30 years no longer functions, having been blocked by dams built by the beavers. The desman population has expanded. In autumn, it was estimated at some 2 000 individuals. At the same time, some 9 000 ha of the flood plain in the buffer zone which are vitally important for the long-term conservation of the species are at risk from agricultural activities.

Where fishing is concerned, poaching is still a problem. In the period 2000-2002 30 offences in the biosphere reserve were punished by fines. In the buffer zone, over the same period, prosecutions were brought in 67 cases.

Over 160 vertebrate species and 140 vascular plant species are monitored on a regular basis.

The programmes for rearing European bison and incubating 6 species of Russian crane remain highly active. Thanks to the reserve's breeding station, 300 bison and 108 Siberian cranes (*Grus leucogeranus*) have been released into the wild to date, to name but two species.

## 2.5. Tourism

The number of visitors has risen from 6-7.000 in 2000 and 2001 to 9.000 in 2002. Guided school tours continue to be very popular. The tourism infrastructure in the region adjacent to the biosphere reserve is somewhat meagre to become the starting point for a concentration of undesirable tourists.

## 2.6. Information and education

The museum has been rebuilt and the exhibitions should be ready for the end of 2003. A project to build a visitors centre is being prepared. The reserve is a real centre of ecology education: seminars, initiation of students in field work, exhibitions, public information work, various publications etc.

## 2.7. Research

Three generations have worked in the reserve, from when it was set up to the present day, and they have left us a remarkable scientific output. The Nature annals publication is a record of everything that has happened in the reserve since it was set up.

## 2.8. Management plans

The biosphere reserve management plan should be prepared by the end of 2003. The forestry plan dates from 1993 and was updated in 2000. The scientific plan for the reserve covers the period 2001-2005. The hunting plan is being prepared.

## 2.9. International networks

The reserve has been part of the Ramsar Convention network since 1993.

## **IV. Conclusions and recommendations**

### **1. Action taken on recommendations**

#### Condition

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

This condition has been met. The reserve belongs to the State and is under the direct control of the Ministry of Natural Resources. The privatisation process has been completed in the area around the reserve including the buffer zone where extensive farming appears to be an aid to conservation. All activity in the buffer zone has to be authorised by the management of the reserve.

#### Recommendations

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

The situation is not satisfactory despite the budget increase in the last two years.

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

This recommendation is proving to be the most important. The incorporation of 9 000 ha of water meadows and marshes into the core reserve or the peripheral area of the biosphere reserve is the key condition for improving the habitats of desman and migratory birds. The purchase of this land by the State will require a considerable amount of funding.

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

These are priority activities for the managers of the reserve, who carry them out very thoroughly and enthusiastically. This recommendation is an opportunity to reiterate the great need for funding.

4. Efforts should be made to encourage the handover to Oka National Biosphere Reserve of the hay meadows located on the left bank of the Pra, to the south of grid squares 169 to 171 in the central forest section.

The managers of the reserve believe that the handing over of these hay meadows is a real possibility. They are currently negotiating with the owner, the TOO "Lakash" organisation. The meadows are abandoned and the forest is rapidly taking over.

5. The measures to regenerate desman habitat in the Oka plain should be continued and ways of mitigating the adverse effect of the drainage canal explored.

The drainage channel no longer functions. Therefore, the part of the recommendation referring to the channel should be dropped.

### **4. Conclusions and recommendations**

In conclusion, we recommend that the award of the European Diploma, category A, to the Oka State Reserve be renewed. The value of the site and its excellent state of protection justify its European interest.

In order to improve protection of the reserve in the long term, the renewal of the award should be subject to the condition that any regionalisation or privatisation measures are in no way to adversely affect the reserve's present protected status. Renewal should also carry the following recommendations:

1. Sufficient resources should be made available to ensure proper operation of the reserve and continued scientific research;
2. In the Lopata zone, the reserve should be extended south-eastward as far as the river Pra in order to include some typical water meadow not yet represented in the reserve, a number of oxbows and a portion of the Oka river bank;
3. Adequate resources should be provided for the purpose of raising the level of public education and information, making full use of the reserve's assets and the large stock of scientific data available;
4. Efforts should be made to encourage the handover to the Oka National Reserve of the hay meadows located on the left bank of the Pra, to the south of grid squares 169 to 171 in the central forest section;
5. The measures to regenerate desman habitat in the Oka plain should be continued.

## APPENDIX I

### COUNCIL OF EUROPE COMMITTEE OF MINISTERS

#### **Resolution (99) 14 on the renewal of the European Diploma awarded to the Oka National Biosphere Reserve (Russian Federation)**

*(Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 9 September 1999  
at the 678<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Ministers' Deputies)*

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

Having regard to Resolution (65) 6 instituting the European Diploma, as amended by Resolution (98) 29 on the regulations for the European Diploma for protected areas;

Having regard to Resolution (94) 24 awarding the European Diploma to the Oka National Biosphere Reserve in category A;

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

Taking into consideration the expert's report as presented at the meeting of the Group of Specialists for the European Diploma of Protected Areas on 29 and 30 March 1999;

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

Attaches the following condition to the renewal:

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

Attaches the following recommendations to the renewal:

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

## APPENDIX II

### **Draft resolution on the renewal of the European Diploma of Protected Areas to the Oka National Biosphere Reserve (Russian Federation)**

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

Having regard to Resolution (65) 6 instituting the European Diploma, as amended by Resolution (98) 29 on the Regulations for the European Diploma of Protected Areas;

Having regard to Resolution (94) 24 awarding the European Diploma to the Oka National Biosphere Reserve in category A;

Having regard to the proposals of the Committee for the Activities of the Council of Europe in the Field of Biological and Landscape Diversity (CO-DBP);

Taking into consideration the expert's report presented at the meeting of the Group of Specialists - European Diploma of Protected Areas on 12 and 13 January 2004;

Renews until the 5 September 2009 the European Diploma awarded to the Oka National Biosphere Reserve,

Attaches the following condition to the renewal:

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

Attaches the following recommendations to the renewal:

1. Sufficient resources should be made available to ensure proper operation of the reserve and continued scientific research;
2. In the Lopata zone, the reserve should be extended south-eastward as far as the river Pra in order to include some typical water meadow not yet represented in the reserve, a number of oxbows and a portion of the Oka river bank;
3. Adequate resources should be provided for the purpose of raising the level of public education and information, making full use of the reserve's assets and the large stock of scientific data available;
4. Efforts should be made to encourage the handover to the Oka National Reserve of the hay meadows located on the left bank of the Pra, to the south of grid squares 169 to 171 in the central forest section;
5. The measures to regenerate desman habitat in the Oka plain should be continued.