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Building National Capacity of Turkmenistan for Effective Management of Protected Areas System



*Waterfall near Gochdemir village
in Makhtumkuli district*

Ashgabat, 4 June 2013 - Residents of Makhtumkuli district of Balkan province of Turkmenistan are increasingly gaining from living in a natural habitat in the Sumbar River Valley, as more and more people from other regions come to this beautiful corner of the country for tourism. Some local families offer the visiting guests overnight dwelling for a small fee, others sell the tourists, home-made honey and local pomegranates as well as hand-made carpets and textile crafts that this region is famous for.

It is not just local craftsmanship, fruits and hospitality that people from other regions of Turkmenistan come for. It is rather the unique biodiversity of the Syunt-Hasardag State Nature Reserve, the territory of which falls within Makhtumkuli district, that makes this place so much popular for ecotourism and recreation. This area is well-known for an extensive range of well-preserved archaeological, cultural and historical settlements, dating back to the New Stone Age. Potential tourist attractions also include Pomegranate gardens in Shihbedire and Tutlykala settlements, waterfalls in Gochdemir and healing Parkhay springs.

Mindful of the importance of ensuring the overall environmental sustainability of the Protected Area System in the country, the Government of Turkmenistan aims to establish an effective management regime in the Syunt-Hasardag State Nature Reserve that will not only help proper conservation of rare flora and fauna but also integrate this work in the local socio-economic development plans, including development of tourism and recreation services in the region.

In this process, the Government partners with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in a joint project (started in 2009) for development of an adaptive Management Plan to set priorities and steps for creation of the country's first Sumbar National Park on the basis of the Syunt-Hasardag State Nature Reserve. A group of experts is now finalizing a feasibility study of the proposed National Park whose effective functioning will depend on development and implementation of a 5-year management plan. For that matter, UNDP is working with relevant national stakeholders, including staff of natural reserves, to build their capacity for better management planning of protected areas.

It was just recently, in mid May 2013, that a group of 25 national stakeholders gathered at the Syunt-Hasardag State Nature Reserve for three-day training to develop a model management plan by example of the proposed Sumbar National Park. They were representatives of the Ministry of Nature Protection, the National Institute of Deserts, Flora and Fauna, the Department of Forestry of Makhtumkuli district as well as other stakeholders from local administrations, the State Committee for Sports and Tourism and heads of scientific department of all nature reserves of Turkmenistan. Training was facilitated by international consultant Michael Appleton.



Presentation of principles of Protected Areas management planning

This exercise helped all training participants, especially representatives of the subordinate structures of the Ministry of Nature Protection, to better understand the core principles of planning at the initial stage of development of the Management Plan for Sumbar National Park and learn from the experience of the international consultant the best practices in this sphere.

Along the practical work, all training participants received manuals and guidelines for planning and management of protected areas, maps showing the areas and zones of Sumbar National Park.

The concept of the first National Park Sumbar and its feasibility study have been developed with UNDP support on the basis of the best international practices and substantiated with scientific and socio-economic data. This park is projected as the first its kind facility serving as a model for creation of other similar parks in Turkmenistan. This type of protected area is considered an appropriate international practice for promotion of sustainable environmental and socio-economic development in Turkmenistan.

Establishment of national parks, as a progressive form of protected areas in the country, is envisaged in the National Strategy on Climate Change approved by the Presidential Decree on 15 June 2012 and international obligations of Turkmenistan to the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (1992). The planning process is organized in strict accordance with the Law of Turkmenistan “On Protected Areas” (2012) which was also drafted with UNDP support.

The Government’s efforts in creating an enabling environment for establishment of a functional, effective and ecologically coherent system of protected areas in Turkmenistan are complemented by UNDP technical and expert support and funding from the Global Environment Facility. UNDP specifically helps improve representation and coverage of the Protected Area System and build adequate institutional and individual capacity for the management of the PAS. As part of this partnership, UNDP works with public institutions and agencies at the national level as well as target groups and local communities at the local level.

The proposed Sumbar National Park lies in the Sumbar river valley of the South-West Kopetdagh. It includes an area of some 150,000 ha with a number of existing, but spatially fragmented, protected areas. Approximately half of all species of plants known in Turkmenistan grow in the region, 38% of which are considered ‘narrow endemics’. Of the 138 animal species documented in the Red Data Book of Turkmenistan (1999), 62 (46%) occur in the region.