IUCN Conservation Outlook Assessment 2017 **(archived)**
Finalised on 10 November 2017

Please note: this is an archived Conservation Outlook Assessment for Western Caucasus. To access the most up-to-date Conservation Outlook Assessment for this site, please visit https://www.worldheritageoutlook.iucn.org.

Western Caucasus

SITE INFORMATION

Country:
Russian Federation
Inscribed in: 1999
Criteria:
(ix) (x)

Site description:
The Western Caucasus, extending over 275,000 ha of the extreme western end of the Caucasus mountains and located 50 km north-east of the Black Sea, is one of the few large mountain areas of Europe that has not experienced significant human impact. Its subalpine and alpine pastures have only been grazed by wild animals, and its extensive tracts of undisturbed mountain forests, extending from the lowlands to the subalpine zone, are unique in Europe. The site has a great diversity of ecosystems, with important endemic plants and wildlife, and is the place of origin and reintroduction of the mountain subspecies of the European bison. © UNESCO

SUMMARY

2017 Conservation Outlook

Significant concern

While the values of the site have been relatively well-protected until now thanks to the site’s inaccessibility, plans for the large-scale development of tourism and skiing resorts and supporting infrastructure put the property’s Outstanding Universal Value at immediate and serious risk. These plans are accompanied by a significant weakening of the legal framework for the conservation of this and other sites in the Russian Federation. All planned projects, if implemented, would lead to a dramatic loss in biodiversity value of parts of the property in the short term. In combination with the inefficient conservation regime and the lack of a sustainable tourism strategy, this will likely trigger a long term degradation process of other values through threats like logging, poaching and uncontrolled visitation in the long term.

Current state and trend of VALUES

Low Concern
Trend: Deteriorating

As far as the current status of the ecosystem and biodiversity values are known, they still appear to be relatively intact, thanks to the relative inaccessibility of the area until recently. However, most of them show a deteriorating trend or are predicted to deteriorate in the near future, because of ongoing and planned infrastructure developments in the property. The biodiversity values associated with avifauna and mammalian fauna of the entire property require an assessment and monitoring of their conservation status.

Overall THREATS

Very High Threat

The values of the property are under serious and increasing threat from improved access, tourism infrastructure development and use, and also

potentially logging. The trend to improved accessibility and intensified use of the property, particularly for mountain skiing and other forms of tourism has been particularly worrying with plans for construction of touristic and mountain skiing facilities at Lagonaki Plateau, a highly sensitive and important part of the property, and more recently in other areas of the property.

Overall PROTECTION and MANAGEMENT

Serious Concern

The current protection and management regime of the property is ineffective in relation to the main current and emerging threats (development of tourism and mountain skiing infrastructure, unsustainable tourism use, and potentially unsustainable logging). This ineffectiveness is primarily caused by an apparent lack of political will to prioritize conservation, inadequate legal framework, and fragmented and overcomplicated institutional setup for management, as well as a number of secondary weaknesses.

FULL ASSESSMENT

Description of values

Values

World Heritage values

▶ Warm-temperate forest ecosystems

Criterion:(ix)

Key part of Colchic tertiary refuge of warm-temperate forest ecosystems. Rich vertical zonation of forest belts, subalpine, alpine and nival ecosystems from 250 to ca. 2,000 m a.s.l., with predominantly mixed oak woods, beech-fir woods, dark fir woods with Caucasian spruce, mountain birch and maple forests, subalpine and alpine grass and rhododendron communities, as well as alpine shrub and short-grass communities. These ecosystems, which also harbor a rich fauna and are part of the Caucasus global biodiversity hotspot, are among the least affected by humans in Europe, due to their inaccessibility (UNEP-WCMC, 2011).

▶ Subalpine, alpine and nival ecosystems

Criterion:(ix)

Rich vertical zonation of subalpine, alpine and nival ecosystems from ca. 2,000 to 3,360 m a.s.l., with predominantly subalpine and alpine grass and rhododendron communities, as well as alpine shrub and short-grass communities. Together with the above, these ecosystems are part of the Caucasus global biodiversity hotspot, and among the least affected by humans in Europe (UNEP-WCMC, 2011).

▶ Raptor migration bottleneck

Criterion:(x)

Mountain passes are an important migration bottleneck for various Eurasian raptor species, including globally threatened species (e.g. Imperial Eagle Aquila heliaca VU) (UNEP-WCMC, 2011).

► Plant species diversity and endemism

Criterion:(x)

1,580 species of vascular plants, one third of which are endemic to the Caucasus. Many additional ones are relict species, or globally/nationally threatened (WHC, 1999).

► Avifauna

Criterion:(x)

Property is part of Caucasus Endemic Bird Area (BirdLife International, 2012), with populations of Caucasian Black Grouse (Tetrao mlokosiewiczi NT) Caucasian Snowcock (Tetraogallus caucasicus LC) and at least one satellite population of Great Rosefinch (Carpodacus rubicilla), a species of which the next area of distribution is located in Central Asia, as well as a rich raptor fauna (both resident and on migration).

► Mammal fauna

Criterion:(x)

81 species of mammals, including carnivores (e.g. European Mink Mustela lutreola, Brown Bear Ursos arctos, Lynx Lynx lynx, Wolf Canis lupus), large herbivores (including Caucasian Red Deer Cervus elaphus maral, Western Tur Capra caucasica EN, and Caucasian Chamois Rubicapra rubicapra caucasica). Reintroduced population of European Bison Bison bonasus (WHC, 1999).

► Herpetofauna

Criterion:(x)

Two globally threatened viper species which are endemic to the Caucasus (Vipera kaznakovi EN and V. dinniki VU), one globally threatened sub-species of tortoise and seven additional species of herpetofauna (UNEP-WCMC, 2011).

Assessment information

Threats

Current Threats

High Threat

The property has been relatively well protected by its inaccessibility in the past but has become much more accessible recently, due to new roads and infrastructure development. This has already increased threats from habitat loss/degradation by infrastructure development, disturbance, littering and fires through uncontrolled visitation, and unsustainable logging.

► Roads/ Railroads

Low Threat
Inside site
Outside site

The continued existence, maintenance and use of the Lunnaya Polyana Road, including possible secondary effects of improved accessibility, represents a locally significant threat to the values of the property, which is only partly controlled by existing access restrictions (IUCN, 2012a).

► Logging/ Wood Harvesting

High Threat
Inside site

Logging (including illegal and nominally legal “sanitary” logging without clear justification) was reported to be a continuing if less serious problem in 2010, particularly in the Nature Monuments and Nature Park in the Adygean part of the property (Debonnet & Lethier, 2010). Considering the improved access to the property through road construction and the challenges to protection enforcement, this remains a high threat.

▶ Hunting (commercial/subsistence)

Data Deficient
Inside site

Reportedly a serious problem in the 1990s and reduced since (UNEP-WCMC, 2011), but no up-to-date information available.

▶ Fire/ Fire Suppression

Low Threat
Inside site
Outside site

Some evidence of localized forest fires reported in 2008 (Rao & Lethier, 2008), but apparently not a major threat.

▶ Tourism/ Recreation Areas

Very High Threat
Inside site

The continuing construction, maintenance and use of the “Biosphere Centre” as a recreational facility and other observed recreational facilities with their supporting infrastructure, and uncontrolled touristic uses, threaten the ecosystem and biodiversity values in those (rather limited) parts of the property in their vicinity (IUCN, 2012a). Various works have been carried out in 2013, including cable car construction at “Biosphere centre” and upgrade of Babuk Aul forest road (SOC, 2014).

Potential Threats

Very High Threat

The trend to improved accessibility and intensified use of the property, particularly for mountain skiing and other forms of tourism has been particularly worrying with plans for construction of touristic and mountain skiing facilities at Lagonaki Plateau, a highly sensitive and important part of the property, and more recently in other areas of the property.

▶ Tourism/ Recreation Areas

Very High Threat

Inside site, extent of threat not known

Lagonaki plateau has a high ecological value and hosts an outstanding flora biodiversity, thereby critically contributing to the OUV of the property under both World Heritage criteria (ix) and (x). The current plans to develop tourist and mountain skiing facilities on Lagonaki plateau are therefore putting the OUV of the property under threat (IUCN, 2012a). A proposal for boundary modifications which, among other boundary modifications, including some extensions, foresaw exclusion of part of the Lagonaki plateau from the site was submitted by the State Party in 2015, but was then withdrawn and was therefore was not considered by the World Heritage Committee.

► Roads/ Railroads

High Threat
Inside site
Outside site

Road construction and use in combination with any extension of touristic use inside the property enabled by such roads (e.g. at the “Biosphere Centre” recreational facility) would threaten the integrity of ecosystem and biodiversity values of the property. It might also increase access for illegal logging activities (IUCN, 2012a).

► Tourism/ visitors/ recreation

Low Threat
Inside site

In the absence of a functional tourism impact monitoring system or sustainable tourism strategy (IUCN, 2012a), the potential impact of tourism on the values of the property (disturbance, habitat destruction through facilities development, collection of biodiversity, potentially illegal hunting) are significant but will probably be rather localized.

► Commercial/ Industrial Areas

Very High Threat
Inside site, extent of threat not known

Plans exist for establishment of biosphere polygons within the property for the purpose of development of skiing facilities in those areas. The 2016 IUCN Advisory Mission noted that the proposed polygons included areas where two

companies, Gazprom and Rosa Khutor, expressed their interest in developing large-scale skiing infrastructure. Based on the available information, the mission concluded that it is likely that these plans may potentially threaten the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of the property and may have significant impact on its integrity (UNESCO, 2017). At its 41st Session the World Heritage Committee recalled that it had "repeatedly reiterated its position that the installation of capital construction on the Lagonaki Plateau, including Mount Fisht and Oshten, would constitute a case for inscription of the property on the List of World Heritage in Danger, in line with Paragraph 180 of the Operational Guidelines, and considered that this also applies to such constructions in any other part of the property" (World Heritage Committee, 2017).

Protection and management

Assessing Protection and Management

► Relationships with local people

Data Deficient

While local government authorities including the government of Adygea Autonomous Republic continue to cooperate with and influence decisions of the property, information about relationships with local people is missing.

► Legal framework

Serious Concern

The legal framework is ineffective as it allows the development of major tourism infrastructure inside the property, and with potentially catastrophic consequences for its OUV (IUCN, 2012a). The Russian Federation lacks a framework law to define the unified management of World Heritage sites, which often consist of several protected areas of various designations (Debonnet & Lethier 2010). The recently adopted Federal Law N°406-FZ (28 December 2013) adapts the Federal Law on Specially Protected Areas, further weakening the protection status of strict nature reserves, including parts of the property (SOC, 2014). Amendments related to the legislative changes are of concern for the protection of the OUV, especially the Federal

Law N°406-FZ, dated 28 December 2013, which made it possible to develop large scale tourism infrastructure in strict nature reserves, and the Order of the Government of the Russian Federation No 603-r, dated 23 April 2012, which permitted construction of tourism and skiing facilities with the necessary supporting infrastructure on the territory of Lagonaki Biosphere Polygon (IUCN Advisory Mission Report 2016)

► Enforcement

Some Concern

The legal framework is enforced by the staff of the different protected areas, but it is not effective for the protection of the OUV

► Integration into regional and national planning systems

Serious Concern

The recent Federal Law No. 365-FZ on “special economic zones in the Russian Federation” and the Order of the Government of the Russian Federation on development of infrastructure within the special economic zone at Lagonaki Plateau show that the objective “conservation and management of the OUV of the property” is not integrated and mainstreamed into regional and national planning systems (EWNC, 2012b, IUCN, 2012a). The Tourism planning strategy should take into account the long-term economic viability of ski resorts development in the region given the current and potential impacts of climate change in the Caucasus region and encourages elaboration of cost-benefits analyses of the financial outputs of the proposed development of tourism
and recreational activities in the region, compared to their socio-economic effects on public safety, environment and water resources (IUCN Advisory Mission Report, 2016).

► Management system

Serious Concern

A management plan for the entire property has been approved in 2009, but is lacking an integrated sustainable tourism strategy, is very general, and is not being fully implemented (Debonnet & Lethier, 2010). It has been recommended to complement this management plan by more specific operational plans. The management system of the property has to cope with

the challenge that it consists of several PAs of various designations and subordinations, which makes application of a unified management approach difficult. There is a range of administrative bodies / levels involved in management but there is no coordination between them for managing different aspects of the property. There are no management plan, management system or tourism strategy for the whole property(Periodic Reporting, 2014, IUCN Advisory Mission Report 2016).

► Management effectiveness

Some Concern

No systematic management effectiveness assessment for the property has been published recently. The management of the Caucasus Biosphere Reserve appears to be generally effective, while the management of the nature monuments and nature park inside Adygea Autonomous Republic and the relatively new Sochi National Park is considered less effective (Debonnet & Lethier, 2010). It appears that the management authorities of the property lack the necessary power to tackle the most serious threats to the property’s OUV.

► Implementation of Committee decisions and recommendations

Serious Concern

In 2016, at its 40th Session (Istanbul, Decision 40 COM 7B.101), the Committee welcomed the information provided by the State Party concerning the reintroduction of the Persian leopard, and encouraged the State Party to continue its efforts in that regard, in consultation with the IUCN Species Survival Commission Reintroduction Specialist Group; the Committee noted that amendments to a number of federal legal provisions concerning protected areas have been proposed and were being considered by the Russian parliament ; the Committee requested the State Party to provide further details on the proposed amendments, including on how they are related to past legislative changes over which concerns were raised in previous Committee decisions, namely the Federal Law N°406-FZ and the Order of the Government of the Russian Federation No 603-r. The Committee also noted with concern further legislative changes, specifically the amendments adopted by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Ecology (MNRE) in 2015 to the Decrees on the SNP and the Sochi Federal Wildlife

Refuge, providing for expansion of recreational zones and construction of large scale tourism infrastructure in these protected areas, which adjoin the property, and considered that such amendments could have negative impacts on the property, including on the efforts to reintroduce the Persian leopard in the property by disrupting the connectivity of its natural habitat. Finally, the Committee further reiterated its request to the State Party to implement all other recommendations of the 2012 joint World Heritage Centre/IUCN reactive monitoring mission. These recommendations and requests have not been addressed. The State Party did not respond to the letters of the World Heritage Center seeking clarification regarding legislative changes, which might potentially affect the property and the plans for pursuing ski resort developments within the property. The plans for establishing biosphere polygons within the property were presented to the 2016 IUCN Advisory mission, which reviewed them. These proposed polygons included areas where two companies, Gazprom and Rosa Khutor, expressed their interest in developing large-scale skiing infrastructure. Based on the available information, the mission concluded that it is likely that these plans may potentially threaten the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of the property and may have significant impact on its integrity. In this respect, it should also be recalled that the Committee has repeatedly reiterated its position that the installation of capital construction on the Lagonaki Plateau, including Mount Fisht and Oshten (all within the property), would also constitute a case for its inscription of the property on the List of World Heritage in Danger (IUCN Advisory Mission Report, SOC Report 2017)

► Boundaries

Serious Concern

A proposal for boundary modifications which, among other boundary modifications, including some extensions, foresaw exclusion of part of the Lagonaki plateau from the site was submitted by the State Party in 2015, but was then withdrawn and was therefore was not considered by the World Heritage Committee. The 2016 IUCN Advisory Mission recommended that the State Party submits a new proposal for extension of the property to include the core zone of the Sochi National Park and, as a priority, the Sochi State Wildlife Sanctuary. The Sanctuary (which would also be affected by the plans to develop tourism infrastructure) was considered a priority area because it (1) offers key habitats for endemic, rare and endangered fauna species,

migrating seasonally from the property in that protected area, for wintering and breeding, and (2) hosts key natural habitats for those species as well as an outstanding flora biodiversity, and therefore the extension of the property to include this area would strengthen the OUV of the existing property (Advisory mission Report 2016).

▶ Sustainable finance

Data Deficient

No information available.

▶ Staff training and development

Data Deficient

The only component PA with significant staff is the Caucasus Biosphere Reserve, which had 199 staff including 45 scientific staff in 1997 (UNEP-WCMC, 2011). It is unclear if there are staff development or training programmes at the property.

▶ Sustainable use

Some Concern

The Caucasus Biosphere Reserve as the core protected area of the property excludes resource use, following the Soviet “Zapovednik” (Strict Nature Reserve) approach (MNRE of RF, 2012). It has been effectively managed. Logging has been reported from some of the Nature Monuments and the Nature Park in the Adygean part of the property (Rao & Lethier, 2008), but it is unlikely that this was planned as a sustainable use. There appears to be no sustainable use (or tourism) strategy for the property.

▶ Education and interpretation programs

Data Deficient

An education/interpretation unit was formed in 1997 and some programmes (such as an annual March of the Parks) are being carried out (MNRE of RF, 2012), but no details about such activities are available.

▶ Tourism and visitation management

Serious Concern

The development of large scale tourism and skiing facilities is currently the main threat to the OUV of the property (IUCN, 2012a). An integrated sustainable tourism development strategy is urgently needed, and interpretation efforts lag behind tourism development activities.

► Monitoring

Serious Concern

Recommendations related to the Caucasus Nature Reserve and environmental components of the Sochi Olympic Games in 2014, resulted in the approval by the Ministy of Natural Resources, of a “Plan of measures for the restoration of Mzymta river, comprehensive environmental monitoring and preparation of compensatory measures as part of environmental component of preparation for the XXII Winter Olympic and XI Paralympic Games in Sochi in 2014”.
The 2016 IUCN Advisory Mission recommended that the monitoring system of the property and the whole area should be strengthened, in line with this “Plan of measures for the restoration of Mzymta river".

► Research

Data Deficient

Inventorying, mapping and some research on biodiversity have been going on since the formation of the Caucasus Biosphere Reserve, the main component protected area of the property, in 1924. Between 1981 and 1996, 15 volumes on ecosystem dynamics in the Biosphere Reserve were collated (UNEP-WCMC, 2011). No information about the current procedure and activities in the research field are available.

Overall assessment of protection and management

Serious Concern

The current protection and management regime of the property is ineffective in relation to the main current and emerging threats (development of tourism and mountain skiing infrastructure, unsustainable tourism use, and potentially unsustainable logging). This ineffectiveness is primarily caused by an apparent lack of political will to prioritize conservation, inadequate legal framework, and

fragmented and overcomplicated institutional setup for management, as well as a number of secondary weaknesses.

► Assessment of the effectiveness of protection and management in addressing threats outside the site

Serious Concern

The property has been relatively well-protected against outside threats, because of its inaccessibility. This is now changing with large-scale infrastructure proposals and the ongoing opening to tourism. The various changes of the legal framework now allow for large-scale tourism infrastructure projects to be developed within the boundaries and in its vicinity.

► Best practice examples

In 2010, a decree was signed by the Prime Minister to establish an ecological polygon, creating a strictly protected corridor linking the property with Teberdinsky Strict Nature Reserve (TSNR), thus creating a continuous strict protected area over a length of 200 km in the Caucasus mountains. The creation of large continuous protected areas is important for the long-term success of conservation measures aimed at the integrity of ecosystem and biodiversity values (particularly large mammals) of the property, also in the face of imminent climate change impacts. However, corridors will only be effective if the core PAs that they link are managed effectively. This is currently not the case in this property.

State and trend of values

Assessing the current state and trend of values

World Heritage values

► Warm-temperate forest ecosystems

Low Concern
Trend:Deteriorating

The inaccessibility of the area has ensured a high integrity of its forest

ecosystems until recently, but these are now (since the turn of the century) at increasing risk of being degraded following new infrastructure development. A limited but significant degree of logging has also been observed (Debonnet & Lethier, 2010).

► Subalpine, alpine and nival ecosystems

Low Concern
Trend:Deteriorating

The inaccessibility of the area has ensured a high integrity of its subalpine, alpine and nival ecosystems until recently, but these are now at increasing risk of being degraded following new infrastructure development, particularly for tourism and mountain skiing such as on Lagonaki Plateau (IUCN, 2012a).

► Raptor migration bottleneck

Data Deficient
Trend:Data Deficient

No status or trend information about the integrity of the functioning of the property as a raptor migration bottleneck is available.

► Plant species diversity and endemism

Low Concern
Trend:Deteriorating

Plant species diversity including that of globally threatened, endemic and relict species is still relatively intact, but likely to become increasingly threatened if construction projects in key local centres of plant diversity such as Lagonaki Plateau, Mt Fisht and Mt Oshten areas go ahead.

► Avifauna

Good
Trend:Stable

None of the restricted-range avifauna of the Caucasus Endemic Bird Area, to which the property belongs, is considered globally threatened. Other key components of the property’s avifauna also appear to be generally intact (BirdLife International, 2012).

► Mammal fauna

Data Deficient
Trend:Data Deficient

The mammal fauna was reduced drastically by poaching before the inscription of the property – between 1990 and 1997 the populations of Red Deer, Chamois and Bison decreased by 62% and that of Western Tur by 46% (UNEP-WCMC, 2011). No comparably steep decline has been reported since inscription, but results of a 1999-2008 comparative wildlife study have not been submitted to the World Heritage Committee (Decision 33 COM 7B.29). Therefore, the status and trend of mammals is assessed as data deficient.

► Herpetofauna

High Concern
Trend:Deteriorating

Among key species of the property's herpetofauna, the Caucasian Viper Vipera kaznakovi EN overlaps with the lower parts of the property, where its population appears to be small and only marginally viable (MNRE of RF, 2012). Since this species (and to a lesser degree other herpetofauna such as Dinnik's Viper V. dinniki VU) are threatened by habitat loss and persecution (IUCN, 2012b), and since several amphibian species may be threatened by water pollution (Cartwright, 2010), the overall trend of this biodiversity value of the property is inferred to be deteriorating.

Summary of the Values

► Assessment of the current state and trend of World Heritage values

Low Concern

Trend: Deteriorating

As far as the current status of the ecosystem and biodiversity values are known, they still appear to be relatively intact, thanks to the relative inaccessibility of the area until recently. However, most of them show a deteriorating trend or are predicted to deteriorate in the near future, because of ongoing and planned infrastructure developments in the property. The biodiversity values associated with avifauna and mammalian fauna of the

entire property require an assessment and monitoring of their conservation status.

Additional information

Benefits

Understanding Benefits

▶ **Collection of wild plants and mushrooms**

Wild plant collection is currently not permitted, at least in the Caucasus Biosphere Reserve. However, sustainable wild plant collection schemes could contribute to creating income for local businesses and indirectly (through fees) to the protected areas constituting the property themselves.

▶ **Sacred natural sites or landscapes**

Because of its inaccessibility, the property has retained considerable wilderness values until the present. This also significantly contributes to its OUV.

▶ **Outdoor recreation and tourism**

Mountain tourism is practiced at a moderate intensity already on site. If developed in a responsible way, the site may offer a unique opportunity to experience an undisturbed high-mountain landscape including its wildlife. This opportunity may be lost if large-scale infrastructure developments are carried out as planned.

▶ **Importance for research**

The site has already contributed significantly to the overall scientific understanding of the Western Caucasus (UNEP-WCMC, 2011). If conserved effectively, it may also provide one of a few case studies of an undisturbed temperate forest/mountain ecosystem, which might also function as a

reference for ecosystem restoration efforts elsewhere.

▶ Collection of genetic material

The exceptional diversity of endemic, relict and globally threatened plants in parts of the property (e.g. Lagonaki Plateau) may offer the possibility for collecting genetic material for a wide range of uses.

Summary of benefits

Although the property already offers multiple benefits to the adjacent population, the citizens of the Russian Federation and the global scientific and conservation community, the potential for a systematic and sustainable exploration and use of its various ecosystem services is by far not fully exploited currently. A sustainable management regime aimed at maximizing these uses (nature-based tourism, knowledge building) may well have the potential to generate economic benefits far exceeding those of large scale tourism facilities driven by short-term economic interest.

Projects

Compilation of active conservation projects

№	Organization/ individuals	Project duration	Brief description of Active Projects
1	WWF Russia		Leopard reintroduction project Northern Caucasus

Compilation of potential site needs

№	Site need title	Brief description of potential site needs	Support needed for following years
1	N.A.	Training programme for PA staff of the property in general PA management	
2	N.A.	Scoping study on potential economic values of ecosystem services and ways for their optimization	

№	Site need title	Brief description of potential site needs	Support needed for following years
3	N.A.	Establishment of a comprehensive monitoring system for key biodiversity values across the entire property	
4	N.A.	Development of a sustainable tourism strategy	

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