

Ramsar Advisory Mission No. 54: Georgia (2005)

Mission Report

Wetlands of Central Kolkheti, Georgia

14-19 August 2005

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Summary

1. The Georgian Ministry of Environment asked the Ramsar Secretariat to provide advice to the experts who are preparing a compensation package (in accordance with Article 4.2 of the Convention) for the construction of Kulevi oil terminal inside the “Wetlands of Central Kolkheti” Ramsar Site. This mission report is part of the assistance provided by the Ramsar Convention to Georgia; it also includes comments on the report concerning ‘urgent national interests’ for the Kulevi oil terminal construction submitted by Georgia (in accordance with Resolution VIII.20) and lists a number of concrete proposals on specific aspects to be dealt with by the compensation study.

2. The most important need is to compensate for the wetland resources lost at Khobi river mouth due to the oil terminal construction, including its access areas from the sea (deep water navigation channel) and from inland (railway track). The area lost to the terminal construction was particularly important for migrating fish and waterbirds, and probably also for marine animals. Emergency excavations show that it hosted a rich cultural heritage, dating back 3500 years ago.

3. The compensation package needs to integrate a number of actions, including the restoration of degraded natural areas, the provision of improved legal protection to specific compensation areas (through their inclusion into the Ramsar Site and National Park), and a number of operational, monitoring and evaluation measures,

ideally to be carried out in cooperation between the oil terminal operator and the Kolkheti National Park authorities.

4. It is crucial to establish specific pollution prevention measures in order to prevent possible accidental oil pollution of the unique marine and coastal wetland ecosystems. Such measures have to focus on operating procedures at the terminal as well as on the transport corridors over land and at sea.

5. The report makes also some recommendations concerning the “Ispani II Marshes” Ramsar Site, the urgent need for update of information on the two existing Georgian Ramsar Sites, and concerning the possible designation of two additional Ramsar Sites (Chorokhi river mouth and Javakheti plateau lakes).

Introduction

6. The Ramsar Convention gives special attention to assisting Contracting Parties in the management and conservation of listed sites whose ecological character is changing or likely to change as a result of technological development, pollution or other human interference. This is carried out through the Ramsar Advisory Missions, a technical assistance mechanism formally adopted by Recommendation 4.7 of the 1990 Conference of the Parties (formerly known as the Monitoring Procedure and the Management Guidance Procedure). The main objective of this mechanism is to provide assistance to countries in solving the problems at particular Ramsar Sites related to the maintenance of their ecological character.

7. Georgia acceded to the Convention on Wetlands on 7 February 1997 and designated at this date two sites known as “Wetlands of Central Kolkheti” and “Ispani II Marshes” to be included in the Ramsar List of Wetlands of International Importance. This report essentially concerns the former site, but also covers aspects of the latter, plus a look at potential Ramsar Sites in Georgia.

8. Ramsar Site N°893 “Wetlands of Central Kolkheti” is composed of three distinct peat marsh complexes (Anaklia-Churia, Nabada and Pichora-Paliastomi), Paliastomi lake, the adjoining wet forests, the Black Sea coastal area, as well as the mouths and lowermost parts of Khobi (or Khobistskali) and Rioni rivers, covering a total of 33,710 ha (55,500 ha including the marine part) in the central part of the Black Sea coastal alluvial plain, in the administrative regions of Khobi and Lachkhuti and the territory of the city of Poti. The site supports a wealth of relict and endemic flora and fauna species. Vegetation consists of typical bog and peatland species, with freshwater marshes supporting reedbeds and brackish areas supporting halophytic plants. Various species of waterbirds use the site for wintering. Nesting species in internationally important numbers include white-tailed sea-eagle and osprey. Human activities include tourism, small scale fishing, agriculture, timber cutting, peat extraction and hunting. Bronze age artifacts are found at the site (cf. the Annotated Ramsar List at www.ramsar.org/profile/profiles_georgia.htm). Since 1999, the main part of the Ramsar Site is included in Kolkheti National Park (www.knp.ge) spreading north-south between the mouths of the rivers Tikori and Supsa, established as part of Georgia’s Integrated Coastal Management Programme (with World Bank GEF

support). The National Park includes Kolkheti State Nature Reserve (500 ha) established in 1947.

Background

9. On 1-4 September 2000, the Georgian Centre for the Conservation of Wildlife (GCCW) and the Caucasus Environmental NGO Network (CENN) organized the first international workshop on “Wetland Conservation in the Caucasus” in Kobuleti. On this occasion, disturbing news was presented that the Georgian Government had authorized the construction works for Kulevi oil terminal at the Black Sea coast on the left bank of Khobi river mouth, between Churia and Nabada marshes, inside the “Central Wetlands of Kolkheti” Ramsar Site. Upon this, the Ramsar Secretariat wrote to the Georgian Ministry of Environment on 6 October 2000, indicating that “only exceptionally boundaries of a Ramsar Site have been modified to accommodate substantiated overriding national interests. According to internationally accepted terms, a prior environmental impact and risk assessment study should also have evaluated alternative locations for the construction of the Kulevi oil terminal along the coast of the Rioni river plain. Environmental impacts on the aquatic ecosystems need to be evaluated for both the periods of construction and of exploitation of the terminal, and also alongside its marine and terrestrial access ways (navigation, railway, etc.). No development should occur that would not be compatible with the ICZM recommendations.”

10. The Ministry of Environment subsequently invited the Ramsar Secretariat to participate in a seminar on “environmental aspects related to the construction of Kulevi terminal” on 19-22 December in Poti. This included a brief visit to the active construction site at the mouth of Khobi river and to a possible compensation area west of Anaklia village further north. On his return from the field visit, the author of this report met with Environment Minister Nino Chkobodze in Tbilisi on 22 December 2000 to discuss the issue. This was followed up with a letter from the Ramsar Secretary General, addressed to her on 10 January 2001, referring to Article 4.2 of the Convention and the need for compensation, stating *inter alia* that “without having the results of a full and formal environmental impact assessment, it is yet too early to assess the actual loss of wetland resources due to the current construction works at the mouth of Khobi river (notably for migrating fish and waterfowl) and due to the planned construction of a dam and rail track leading along the coast from Poti to Kulevi. Normally, environmental impact assessments should be finalized before construction works start. They should also specify both types of impacts: during the construction phase as well as during the operating phase.” The Secretariat furthermore offered support in the form of a Ramsar Advisory Mission.

11. On 29 May 2001, the Ministry of Environment asked the Ramsar Secretariat for support to prepare a comprehensive compensation package, as addressed in the letter by the Secretary General (cited above). During the 4th European regional meeting on the Ramsar Convention in October 2001, the Ministry provided draft “terms of reference for the preparation of the compensation package for possible restriction of the boundaries of the central Kolkheti Ramsar Site due to the construction of the oil products terminal at the Khobistskali river estuary”. On 31 October 2001 the Secretariat responded with extensive written comments.

12. In September 2002, the construction works, carried out since mid-2000 by Terminal 2000 Ltd (a partnership created in 1999 between the Austrian Argomar Oil company and Georgian Railways), came to a standstill due to a lack of funds. In late 2002, the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (CEFAS) and Ecoscope (two British consultancies) provided advice to the Government on the environmental impact assessment of Kulevi oil terminal and related studies carried out earlier by Zenith Gamma Consulting (registered offshore in Guernsey). Their reports on the “railway EIA review” and “marine access EIA review” show the important deficiencies of the earlier assessments produced by Zenith Gamma and provide a comprehensive list of mitigation and compensation measures to be identified, planned and implemented, both with regards to the terrestrial area (along the railway track, and concerning the Kulevi settlements) and coastal marine area (concerning Khobi river mouth and the access corridor to be used by oil tankers making use of the Kulevi terminal).

13. In October 2004, the construction works for the Kulevi terminal started again, under the responsibility of the newly-named company Black Sea Terminal Ltd, with new sources of financing (local Georgian investors lead by Mr Patarkatsishvili and western investors). On 9 March 2005, the Ministry of Environment informed the Ramsar Secretariat that Black Sea Terminal Ltd was contracting ACTA Consultants Ltd (in Tbilisi) to prepare a study for the Ramsar compensation package, according to the terms of reference prepared earlier by the Ministry, including the remarks by the Ramsar Secretariat (cf. paragraph 11 above), stating that “the Ministry is interested in conducting a qualified, competent investigation and in obtaining real and feasible compensation measures. We suggest that it would be reasonable to involve a representative of the Ramsar Convention Secretariat, as well as other qualified specialists, which you could recommend, in the process of selecting of the compensation territory and developing of compensation measures.”

Scope of this report

14. Thus, since April 2005 the Ramsar Secretariat is in regular contact with ACTA Consultants and the Ministry of Environment to assure the best possible result for the compensation study. In this context, it was suggested that an advisory mission by a Ramsar expert should take place before ACTA Consultants were to deliver a progress report in autumn 2005, to make sure that the Convention’s concerns will be duly taken into account.

15. The observations and recommendations in the remainder of this report are therefore highlighting a number of issues important for the wetlands wise use approach to be applied and implemented by Ramsar Contracting Parties at national and local level. These issues need to be adequately addressed in the compensation study. While it cannot be the role of this report to present detailed proposals, it lists the most important themes that should be elaborated further in the compensation study. Yet, probably still other issues, not addressed in this report, may come up during the progressing work.

Article 2.5: urgent national interests for the construction of Kulevi terminal

16. On 27 July 2005, the Ministry of Environment submitted a report to the Ramsar Secretariat on “oil and oil products handling sea terminal in Kulevi (Georgia): feasibility of urgent national interests” and asked for comments. The report makes reference to Article 2.5 of the Convention which states that “Any Contracting Party shall have the right ... because of its urgent national interests, to delete or restrict the boundaries of wetlands already included by it in the List and shall, at the earliest possible time, inform the organization or government responsible for the continuing bureau duties specified in Article 8 [i.e. the Ramsar Secretariat] of any such changes.”

17. The Government of Georgia has to be congratulated for providing this substantive report (albeit somewhat belatedly, five years after the start of the construction works), thus applying the “general guidance for interpreting ‘urgent national interests’ under Article 2.5 of the Convention and considering compensation under Article 4.2” provided in the Annex of Resolution VIII.20.

18. The report provides comprehensive socio-economic arguments for the construction of a sea port at Khobi river mouth, a location under human settlement since the Bronze age (as confirmed by the current archaeological emergency excavations in the area to be dredged for the harbour). The report also presents an optimistic picture of employment opportunities and planned improvements of living conditions and transport infrastructures for the time span of the terminal construction and operating - anticipated to cover about 50 years.

19. Earlier human settlements at Khobi river mouth, starting some 3500 years ago and continuing throughout the millennia, only occupied a much more restricted area (about 5 ha) than the terminal currently under construction, needing about 100 ha of space for oil product storage, loading and shipping facilities. To this surface, one has to add the coastal marine area to be dredged to provide deep water access to the harbour, plus the area to be modified for the dam construction to support the new rail track linking the terminal with the existing rail track east of Poti, at a distance of about 12.5 km.

20. The report contains an interesting chapter summarizing the results of a sociological enquiry among local inhabitants and communities on their opinions about the National Park and the (recently established) Supsa and (planned) Kulevi oil terminals. It reveals that the wetland ecosystems are important for the livelihoods of a large number of the villagers through the provision of farming, hunting, fishing, grazing and fuelwood resources. The use of these wetland resources has increased sharply during the last 10-15 years, including much unlawful and unsustainable uses owing to the political and economic instabilities in Georgia. A small percentage of the local population fears that the development of the oil industry, by destroying and negatively affecting these wetland resources, will have adverse impacts on their living conditions. They also fear that the Kulevi development may turn out to become a simple repeat of the Supsa case, i.e. not providing many opportunities for local employment and the local economy. The developers argue on the other hand that the employment opportunities and the availability of modern facilities (such as the improvement of the access road, the central provision of drinking water and heating

fuel) will eventually diminish the currently very high pressure on the wetland resources.

21. In conclusion, the report follows the guidance provided through Resolution VIII.20 to Contracting Parties for the application of the ‘urgent national interests’ clause of the Convention. It provides a concise picture of the arguments in favour of the construction of an oil terminal at the Khobi river mouth, though it does not provide details about alternative locations and projects. The general guidance provided through Resolution VIII.20 “does not prevent a Contracting Party from maintaining or introducing more stringent regulations”. However, this was not intended by Georgia so far. The future will tell if the optimistic socio-economic assumptions of the report will be realized or not.

22. In discussion with Deputy Environment Minister Akhobadze and Georgian experts, it became apparent that Georgia does not yet have a comprehensive integrated coastal zone master plan, i.e. a formal planning document that would delimit the major areas of the coastal zone and alluvial plain foreseen for urbanization, transport, tourism, agriculture, nature conservation, and other main land use categories. Currently planned and executed investments for the construction of transport, industrial and tourist infrastructures, without the regulatory framework of a land use master plan, easily create incoherencies and potential environmental disasters. The Ramsar Secretariat proposes therefore that Georgia urgently uses and applies guidance provided in Ramsar Handbooks 13 and 4 for “coastal management” and integrated “river basin management”.

23. Aspects of long-term sustainability should not be undervalued when evoking “urgent national interests”. Without implementing an integrated coastal zone development plan, Georgia might lose some of its unique natural and cultural heritage in the Kolkheti (or Colchis) plain, an area internationally acknowledged for its endemic species and the specific biodiversity assemblages that survived during the last glaciations in this unique refuge area, presently with a subtropical climate. Is it worthwhile losing these assets for short-term development gains?

Article 4.2: compensation for wetland loss and degradation

24. Article 4.2 of the Convention states that “Where a Contracting Party in its urgent national interest, deletes or restricts the boundaries of a wetland included in the List, it should as far as possible compensate for any loss of wetland resources, and in particular it should create additional nature reserves for waterfowl and for the protection, either in the same area or elsewhere, of an adequate portion of the original habitat.” Resolution VIII.20 adds to this requirement six points that Contracting Parties should take into account when considering such compensation. The governmental report mentioned above (paragraphs 16-21) does not provide information concerning these issues. They should therefore be addressed in the compensation package study by ACTA Consultants.

25. The first issue to be clarified is the identification and assessment of the **lost wetland resources** according to Article 4.2. As there were no specific inventories made before the clearance of the area at Khobi river mouth and the start of the

construction works in 2000, this needs now to be assembled *ex post*, not an ideal situation. However, it is assumed that available documents and the cumulated experience of the college of experts working with ACTA Consultants will allow clarifying this issue.

26. The ecological functions of Khobi river mouth and its adjoining natural habitats (now part of the construction and dredging site) need to be described and assessed, notably in relation to the needs of resident and migratory species (fish, waterbirds, marine species). During the mission, it was pointed out that **Khobi river is a migratory corridor** and contains important spawning areas for threatened or rare sturgeon and salmon species. Adequate measures to compensate for possible losses of migration and spawning areas need to be developed. Possibly, a bypass for fish migration needs to be constructed to circumvent the harbour basin to be dredged in the midst of the river mouth. The structure of such a bypass needs to take into account state-of-the-art information concerning the ecological requirements of the species for which it is intended and use the latest available know-how. The rehabilitation of existing, or the construction of new, fish hatcheries, to compensate for unavoidable losses, was also mentioned and should be investigated further.

27. The ongoing archaeological emergency excavations show the rich **cultural heritage** of human settlements at Khobi river mouth over the millennia. The compensation study should therefore outline adequate ways of preserving this heritage - necessarily *ex situ* - as the terminal construction is likely to destroy this heritage completely on site. The establishment of a museum and visitor centre, and/or the publication of a specific monograph, besides scientific articles in specialized journals, should be envisaged. Resolution VIII.19 of the Ramsar Convention provides “guiding principles for taking into account the cultural values of wetlands for the effective management of sites”, a theme further developed in Resolution IX.21 on “Recognizing Wetlands of International Importance for their traditional cultural values” adopted by the Conference of the Parties in November 2005.

28. Besides the terminal area at Khobi river mouth, the construction project will affect two additional areas: the **coastal marine deep water ship access area** and the **railroad track** providing the terrestrial link to the terminal. According to the documents available during the mission, these areas have not yet been sufficiently identified, delineated and assessed. Significant work still needs to be done in these fields.

29. On the marine side, impacts of dredging, of regular deep water navigation and of possible oil spills and other pollution accidents on the marine and marine coastal environment, including the beach area (taking marine currents into account), need to be assessed, and protective, mitigation, and accident response measures need to be proposed and prepared. The CEFAS report (mentioned in paragraph 12 above) provides useful further information concerning these issues.

30. On the terrestrial side, the planned rail track will profoundly alter an important coastal area. Compensation for the wet forest area to be cleared when constructing the railway dam needs to be provided. This can happen partly on site, by planting tree shelter strips alongside the railway track, partly elsewhere, by planting trees in appropriate floodplain areas. The CEFAS study lists the most important

environmental impacts, including the need for a hydrological assessment of groundwater flows (both fresh inland and brackish coastal) possibly disrupted or altered by the dam, the need for animal migration tunnels underneath the dam, the protection against wetland and groundwater pollution in the event of an oil spill accident, etc.

31. The rail track will cross an extremely sensitive area between the coastal zone and the unique Nabada mire complex. An oil spill accident could have disastrous and lasting consequences. Although this area has already in the past been influenced by human alterations when the suspended bridge across Rioni river was still providing a direct link between Poti town and Kulevi village, the planned construction of a heavy duty rail track will provoke ecological impacts of a much greater order and destroy an important surface of valuable (sometimes secondary) natural habitats (notably specific Colchic swamp forests) and lands used by local people for grazing and fuelwood collection. The compensation study will have to assess these impacts and their need for compensation and make concrete proposals on where to plant new swamp forests.

Compensation areas

32. According to the ecological principles addressed above, it follows that the spatial compensation of the area lost to the construction of the terminal facilities and its access corridors cannot simply be accounted for in terms of compensating only a given surface by a similar amount of space. The creation, restoration or rehabilitation of ecosystems takes time and may not necessarily provide all the anticipated results in terms of the (re-)occurrence of species and habitats. Thus, the precautionary principle needs to be applied, i.e., by compensating with larger surface areas than those lost. Also, a regular monitoring scheme after the compensation measures will have to be planned for and implemented. This is to provide means for evaluating whether the compensation measures were successful (e.g. in terms of the renewed presence of viable populations of indicator species), or if corrective measures and improvements still need to be undertaken.

33. A plan to compensate natural habitats destroyed through construction works focusing only on already existing natural habitats in the wider area will not result in compensation, but rather in a net loss of natural habitats. Thus, the destruction of natural habitats at Khobi river mouth needs to be compensated for by the **creation** of new or the **restoration** of formerly degraded natural habitats. The compensation study will have to make concrete proposals in this sense.

34. The highest priority should be to **compensate for the loss of a natural river mouth**, ideally with the restoration of another natural river mouth. So far, no such site has been identified. Fulfilling this point to the letter might be impossible. Thus, likely a combination of different measures would have to respond to this requirement. The feasibility for restoration and protection measures at Tikori river mouth, at the border with Abkhazia, should be investigated. On-site restoration measures through the construction of a near-natural bypass at Khobi river mouth can be a (partial) solution. Inclusion of the existing natural Rioni river mouth (already part of the Ramsar Site) in the core zone of the National Park should also be part of the solution.

35. A second priority is the compensation of lost coastal wetlands. The beach, coastal dunes, marshes and former peat excavation ponds near **Anaklia** provide an ecosystem to be taken into account. This area should be included into the National Park core zone and Ramsar Site. Restoration, rehabilitation and protection measures need to be proposed by the compensation study, notably addressing the removing of ruins along the coast, re-wetting of drained inland areas, and the regulation of human uses (leisure and tourism, hunting, fishing, grazing).

36. The water body south of (and linked with) Paliastomi lake near **Maltakva** should also be taken into account as a compensation area and be included in the National Park core zone and Ramsar Site. Rehabilitation measures may concern the improvement of breeding and wintering conditions for waterbirds, management prescriptions and the regulation of human uses (hunting, fishing, leisure and tourism).

37. Two wetland areas further inland should also be included in the compensation package through their inclusion in the National Park and Ramsar Site boundaries: the inundated alder forests near **Dikhagudzuba** and the, partly seasonal, Rioni river oxbow wetlands near **Narionali**, already providing important habitat for waterbirds. In the former case, rehabilitation measures, notably concerning the hydrology (needed water quantities and quality) should be identified for the inundated forests. At the Narionali marshes, management proposals should regulate grazing and hunting pressure, but need not necessarily differ much from the *status quo*.

Compensation package

38. Deliberately, the study to be conducted is about a compensation ‘package’, as often limited and isolated compensation measures are not directly feasible (as illustrated with the case in paragraph 32 above). Thus, a **combination of measures**, direct and indirect, is most likely to provide for full compensation of the wetland values and functions lost. Such a compensation package would ideally provide a net improvement for the wetland situation compared to the situation before the construction project started. In this case, such an improved situation could indirectly also compensate for temporary losses during the time between the original destructions and the final implementation of all compensation measures.

39. The Kulevi terminal construction should therefore create beneficial side-effects not only for the local population in socio-economic terms, through the provision of better infrastructures (housing, drinking water, centrally provided heating fuel, community services, road improvements, etc.) and related to cultural aspects (archaeological museum, etc.), but also for environmental aspects and those related to nature and biodiversity conservation. This also provides an opportunity to evaluate the management and the operational needs for the protected areas in the vicinity of Kulevi terminal, and notably **Kolkheti National Park**.

40. On this occasion, the **boundaries** of both Kolkheti National Park and Ramsar Site N°893 should be improved, first through the inclusion of the compensation areas listed above (paragraphs 35-37). While it is understood that the actual boundaries of the National Park are the result of detailed negotiations with the local authorities and village populations, the boundaries of the Ramsar Site should be seen as serving also

wider land use planning purposes, ideally by taking into account the water catchment of the central Kolkheti wetlands. To this end, the Ramsar Site would incorporate a buffer zone around the National Park, with continued traditional human uses at sustainable levels. This is already the case in its northern part, inland of the Churia marshes, where the Ramsar Site includes the wetter parts of the forest, but would ideally include the entire lowland forest area.

41. The Khobi river valley upstream of Kulevi terminal should remain inside the Ramsar Site. However, where the Ramsar Site currently only covers a substantially smaller area than the National Park, such as in the forests east of Imnati and Paliastomi marshes, the Ramsar Site should be expanded to cover at least the area of the National Park, but hopefully also an external buffer zone. As the operational manager of the Ramsar Site is the National Park management authority, it does not make sense in operational terms that the Ramsar Site covers a smaller area than the National Park.

42. Specific long-term support for the operation of the management of the National Park could be made available through the establishment of a specific Heritage Fund, financed by Black Sea Terminal Ltd, and managed by a college of wetland and marine experts and representatives of the Government (Ministry of Environment), of Black Sea Terminal Ltd, and of environmental NGOs. This Heritage Fund would provide an independent framework and the means for necessary actions to be undertaken. Such actions may concern, among others, the construction of a visitor and information centre on the National Park and its heritage, probably combined with an archaeological museum, to be established next to the terminal or at another appropriate place, campaigns for site rehabilitation and cleaning up, awareness and education, etc. Support could also be in the form of cooperation for surveillance and monitoring between the Terminal's Health, Environment and Safety unit and National Park staff. Support could be in the form of donations of equipment (vehicles, surveillance, monitoring equipment, fuel) or other in-kind or financial support to the National Park management authority. Such long-term support to the National Park would reflect beneficially on the terminal company and become an asset for public relations and publicity purposes, by clearly portraying the enterprise as an environmentally-minded one which cares about its immediate environment. This could be complemented by a specific environmental distinction of the company, according to ISO standards. It is suggested that the compensation study makes proposals covering such issues.

Ramsar Sites in Georgia

43. As indicated in Resolution VIII.20, when preparing compensation measures, Contracting Parties may take into account "the maintenance of the overall value of the Contracting Party's wetland area included in the Ramsar List at the national and global level". This provides an occasion to refer to the Strategic Framework and Vision for the List of Wetlands of International Importance in Georgia, as outlined in Ramsar Handbook 7 on "designating Ramsar sites".

44. The boundaries of Ramsar Site N°893 should be improved according to the proposal outlined above (in paragraphs 40-41). According to the requirements

reiterated through Resolution VIII.13, the “**Information Sheet on Ramsar Wetlands (RIS)**” should be updated at least every six years. As the RISs for the two existing Ramsar Sites N°893 “Wetlands of Central Kolkheti” and N°894 “Ispani II Marshes” date from the time of accession (30 May 1996), they should urgently be updated now and adapted to conform with the currently valid format. Also, the receipt at the Secretariat of updated maps, elaborated according to the guidance provided in Handbook 7, would be appreciated. Given the documentation and knowledge available, and the modern GIS capacities of the National Park, the ICZM project implementation unit and ACTA Consultants, updating the RISs and maps should easily be possible.

45. Ramsar Site N°894 only covers **Ispani II Marshes**, the most important core area of the Kobuleti Nature Reserve. Using the argument outlined above (in paragraph 41), it would make operational sense that the Ramsar Site encompasses the entire protected area and thus includes also Ispani I marshes and their buffer zone. During the mission visit, a drainage ditch at the edge of the protected area was receiving much untreated sewage. With the important water level fluctuations at the site, significant parts of the protected area are apparently temporarily inundated with (potentially) polluted and seriously eutrophicated waters. The effects of such unwanted inundations were clearly visible on the vegetation surrounding Ispani II marshes during the visit. Deputy Minister Akhobadze assured the mission that the Kobuleti municipality will soon install a water sewage treatment system which would substantially improve the situation.

46. The mission also visited the delta of **Chorokhi** river south of Batumi. The regional environment authority is in favour of providing this dynamic and near natural part of the river delta and the associated wetlands and former fish ponds legal protection and Ramsar Site status. This was supported by other mission experts, based on the important function which this site performs as a stop-over area for migratory birds along the Eastern Black Sea migration route from Siberia to eastern Turkey, the eastern Mediterranean and Africa. Minor management interventions could improve the ecological value of the site, such as reopening the connection between the sea and the coastal lagoons and the regulation of hunting and gravel exploitation. Due to its location at the southern end of the Georgian Black Sea coast, this site would indeed ideally complement the two existing Ramsar Sites further north. It is therefore suggested that the compensation study prepares the documentation needed by the Ministry of Environment to designate the site for the Ramsar List.

47. During the years 1998-2000 the Ramsar Convention supported a project on the “conservation of **Javakheti plateau wetlands** in southern Georgia” through its Small Grants Fund. The project was executed by Noah’s Ark Centre for the Recovery of Endangered Species (NACRES) which elaborated a draft management plan for lakes Khanchali, Madatapa and Bugdasheni and made proposals for their designation as a Ramsar Site. Given their specific values and the continued international interest in the area (i.e., through Swiss- and German-funded bilateral projects with Armenia), it is highly desirable that the Ministry of Environment designates these shallow mountain steppe lakes for the Ramsar List (in accordance with Resolution VIII.12 on “enhancing the wise use and conservation of mountain wetlands”).

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Itinerary and people met

- 14-15 August overnight flight to Tbilisi, arrival of *Erwin van Maanen* (ecological consultant) from the Netherlands and *Tobias Salathé* (Ramsar consultant) in the early morning
- 15 August teaming up in **Tbilisi** with *Katya Nakashidze*, *Nana Janashia* and *Laurent Nicole* (of ACTA Consultants, in charge of the compensation study), meetings with *Mamuka Gvilava* (leader of the Integrated Coastal Management Programme), with Deputy Minister *Dato Tsiklauri* (responsible for transport) at the Ministry of Economics, with Deputy Minister *Sophiko Akhobadze*, *Ana Rukhadze* (Ramsar focal point) and *Maka Tsereteli* (CBD focal point) at the Ministry of Environment, and with the Georgian experts participating in the compensation study at the offices of ACTA Consultants
- 16 August drive from Tbilisi to the proposed compensation area of the river Rioni oxbow wetlands near **Narionali**, the team consists of *K. Nakashidze*, *N. Janashia*, *L. Nicole*, *E. van Maanen*, *Chichiko Janelidze* (leader of the Georgian expert team for the compensation study), *Andrey Kandaurov* (head of zoology experts), *Alexander Abuladze* (ornithologist) and *T. Salathé*, from there drive to Batumi and visit of the proposed Ramsar Site area at **Chorokhi** river mouth, *Ana Rukhadze* (Ramsar focal point at the Ministry of Environment), *Irakli Goradze* (environment authority of Ajaria) and *Izolda Matchutadze* (Chaobi NGO) join the team, meeting in **Batumi** at the Black Sea Fisheries Scientific Institute with representatives of the environment authority of Ajaria, the Fisheries Institute, and the NGOs Chaobi and Black Sea Eco-Academy, overnight in Batumi
- 17 August drive to Kobuleti and visit of the Ramsar Site **Ispani II Marshes** and the **Kobuleti Nature Reserve** (including also the Ispani I marshes) and the newly established information trail from the eco-beach in Kobuleti to the peatlands of Ispani I, drive to the southern end of Paliastomi lake, *Jochem Jantzen* (economics consultant from the Netherlands) and *Kakha Bakhtadze* (GIS expert) join the team, visit by boat of the **Maltakva** water body compensation area, drive to the **Kulevi** construction site and visit of the archaeological emergency excavations on the right bank of Khobi river mouth (guided by *Revaz Papuashvili*,

archaeological expert), drive along the forest track to be transformed into the railroad access dam, return to the coastal area south of Paliastomi lake for overnight stay

18 August drive to **Anaklia** village and its beach for a visit to the former military area along the coast proposed for compensation north of the Ramsar Site border, on site picnic, drive back with a short stop at the edge of the flooded forests NE of Poti near **Dikhagudzuba** compensation area, in the evening drive back to Tbilisi

19 August early morning departure of *T. Salathé*