

Project proposal for Dutch – Georgian collaboration in bird research and fieldwork

Version 1.1

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Summary:

This document is a proposal for Dutch support to the Republic of Georgia in the field of bird study and bird conservation. The general instrument proposed is the transfer of Dutch expertise to the Georgian organization (for bird conservation) Sabuko. For that reason a new organization, the *Dutch-Georgian Ornithological Foundation (DuGOF)*, will be founded and registered in the Netherlands. Specific aims are continuous fundraising and a 5-year project to publish an overview of information on the status of bird species in the different habitats of Georgia. See the appendix showing the different objectives of the plan and effects to be monitored. We feel this helps as a basis for the planning of actions.

By:

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- Sabuko (Society for Nature Conservation), Batumi, Georgia (partner of Birdlife International since 2017,

With support from:

- Caucasus Development Officer at Birdlife International, Brussels, Belgium;
- Georgian Embassy in The Hague, the Netherlands;
The embassy is willing to facilitate meetings with the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources Protection;
- Stichting Batumi Roofvogel Club, Wageningen, the Netherlands;
- Vogelbescherming Nederland¹, Zeist, the Netherlands/ Netherlands Ornithologists Union, Amsterdam, the Netherlands.
- Naturalis Biodiversity Centre², Leiden, the Netherlands.

¹ To be discussed.

² To be discussed

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A. Introduction:

Georgia belongs to one of the world's 25 most diverse and endangered biologically rich hotspots³ due to its geological history and to its diversity in climatic zones and ecological regions. Together with the geographical position relative to the vast Eurasian landmass, this explains species richness and the flyway for large numbers of Asiatic migrant birds, including a yearly number of one million birds of prey.

The abundance of bird-life in Georgia is a natural heritage. However, establishing a Georgian organization for bird conservation is only of recent date: 2013 Bird Conservation Georgia⁴, operating since 2014 under the local name Sabuko. Fortunately, in a short time Sabuko⁵ has been able to initiate a variety of activities:

- 1) Increasing the awareness about the importance of Georgia for migrating birds of prey, by means of *publications* in leading ornithological journals like *Ardea* and *Bird Conservation International*, and by means of *education* to young people at several schools;
- 2) Co-ordinating *ringing* activities for more insight in bird migration patterns and (through achievement of biometric data) in the broader perspective of migration ecology;
- 3) Promoting eco-tourism, as a sustainable way of contribution to the rise of income in several regions, and partly as an alternative source of income to trappers/ hunters/ falconers.

We are aware that these activities greatly benefit from the past contributions of the Georgian Center for the Conservation of Wildlife in Tbilisi and of Ilia State University's research group to bird research and conservation in Georgia.

B. Context

The Caucasus is a hotspot of plant and animal species diversity, important for the conservation of biodiversity on a global scale⁶. In the region there are unusually high levels of species diversity for the Temperate Zone.

³ Critical Ecosystem partnership fund (2004): Caucasus biodiversity hotspot, internal report, p. 4.

⁴ Bird Conservation Georgia (Batumi) is a junction of the former Georgian Centre for the Conservation of Wildlife (Tbilisi) and the Batumi Raptor Counts (Batumi).

⁵ Inclusive BCG/ BRC

⁶ Critical Ecosystem Partnership fund (2004): Caucasus Biodiversity Hotspot, internal report.

Zoölogists in Georgia, including those responsible for decision making in the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources Protection, are aware of this (personal comm. Peter Lina) but lack of financial public means prevent acting accordingly⁷.

Dutch - Georgian cooperation in general is not new. The Georgian embassy in The Hague plays an active role in giving access to Georgian cultural and economic events. And in reverse so does the Netherlands Embassy in Tbilisi. We also mention the study by Erwin van Maanen, Irakli Goradze and others in Birdlife International (2001).

However, today's Dutch – Georgian collaboration in the field of bird (and nature) conservation is not really organized, but is based on the involvement of individuals. The University of Amsterdam has some history of fundamental bird research in Eurasian regions⁸. We also mention the recently founded Stchting Batumi Roofvogel Club, and that one of its founders, Wouter Vansteelant, is now working on a Ph.D. thesis for the University of Amsterdam, about the role of weather in the migration of soaring birds of prey, mainly European Honey Buzzards. The first chapter in this thesis deals with spatial dynamics of raptor migration in the Batumi bottleneck. And the organization Dutch Birding Association was attracting attention to the Caucasus in an early stage of growing European interest in the region⁹. In all, there is a basis for organized collaboration.

In the current situation there are also threats to the effectiveness of conservation measures:

- In general there is a lack of data accessible to decision makers in town and country planning. Also, there is no or insufficient mutual contact between decision makers and Sabuko as a rather small organization. Sabuko has a strong focus on the executive part of conservation policy. It does whatever is possible within the limited financial budgets;
- Because large parts of marshlands along the Black Sea, of the inner lowlands and of the hill sides (up to 1200 m) in Georgia have an agricultural destination, here is an example of needed communication between conservationists and decision makers in country planning. And this is an urgent matter. In the coming years agricultural development in Georgia has top priority¹⁰. Increased production is the main target. This in itself is perfectly understandable and if successful, will lead to a higher level of prosperity. Recent analysis shows that higher prosperity in general gives chances for conservation of species diversity¹¹. But the threat in Georgia comes from the low level of farm management, illustrated by facts on uncontrolled livestock grazing and pollution of rivers and wetlands. Furthermore, agricultural reformation will probably lead to more unemployment in this labor-intensive sector which will complicate decision making on bird conservation matters;

⁷ In 2014 the Institute of Paleobiology has been closed due to financial problems (pers comm. Frank de Miranda). In Guria illegal Quail catching is still widespread because of insufficient maintenance of rules.

⁸ See for instance the thesis "Systematics and biogeography of Palearctic avifauna: evolution, hybridization and secondary contact zones", Mansour Aliabadian, 2007.

⁹ Van den Berg, A.B. (2005) High birding at Kazbegi, Georgia. *Dutch Birding* 27 (4): 241 – 247.

¹⁰ See Strategy for agricultural development in Georgia 2015-2020, Min. of Agriculture.

¹¹ University of Utrecht, the Netherlands, project Athena, 2015.

- The problem of illegal killing of (migrant) birds is manifest. The hunting issue is characterized by similar challenges as the issue of sustainable land development, involving links with the broader public and decision-makers. Georgia will need to improve hunting regulations to strengthen its partnership with the EU;
- Many Georgians are proud of the cultural and natural heritage in their country. But in general there is a lack of environmental awareness. This is one of the reasons why Sabuko started educational activities and why Sabuko stimulates eco-tourism;
- In Georgia there is a lack or just a recent start of transboundary cooperation, which is needed for the effective implementation and management of new reserves. This 'threat' is especially manifest in the Greater Caucasus, West Lesser Caucasus and Javakheti .

The context of bird conservation in Georgia is such that the effectiveness of the underlying activities is not self-evident. One of the conclusions in this respect is that Sabuko needs external help to develop into a healthy organization. Sabuko is still in its starting-up phase with lack of sufficient financial means. But as already said, Sabuko does exceptionally well within the limits of the financial budgets. And we know there are many interesting data available which have never been published or never been focused on.

The small staff of Sabuko does have insufficient power to develop a long term strategy and vision for bird conservation and to put bird (and nature) conservation on the political agenda. This is by no means criticism on its functioning. The statement is meant as an understanding how complementary Dutch – Georgian expertise can make the Georgian activities more effective.

C. *The gap between needed results and current perspective*

To investigate the gap between needed results and the current perspective, we use the reference model in fig. 1, which is appropriate bearing in mind the Georgian context.

The figure shows the main elements in effective conservation activities. Bottom-up we need an organization (like Sabuko) and funding of field-research. This leads to results which should be communicated to the public domain and to the broader research domain. The public domain consists of communication to decision makers and of activities aiming at education and awareness. The broader research domain comprises researchers in other countries who deal with similar research topics. The value of a broader international research domain is the opportunity to better recognize 'lessons learned' in a broader scope, which helps to be convincing and clear to decision makers in the public domain.

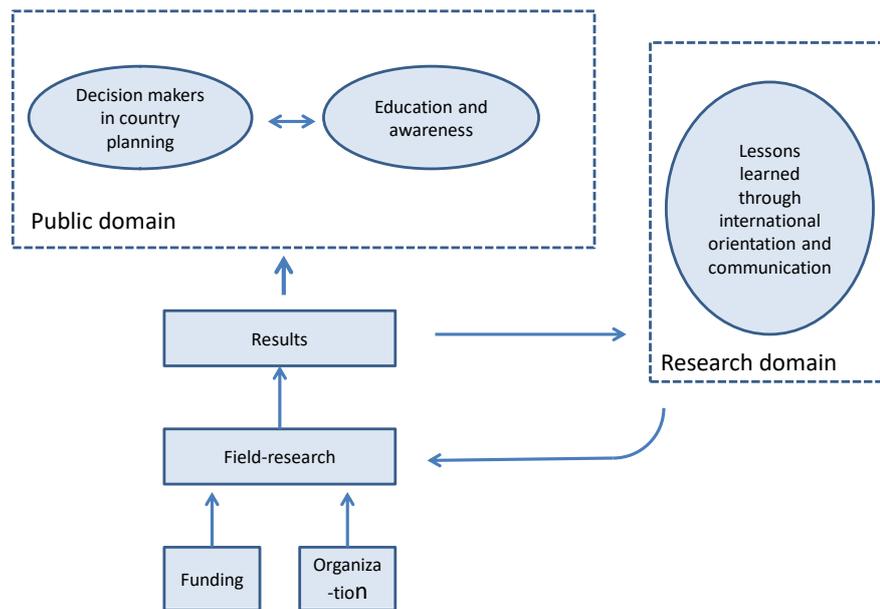


Figure 1: Reference model for effective conservation measures

In the Georgian situation we feel that the gap between needed results and the current perspective is of two kinds:

1. An insufficient link to decision makers in the public domain;
 In the current situation many data and results are not ready for use by decision makers in the public sector. More attention is needed for generating information to decision makers, and organizing the communication process. That is part of the gap because Sabuko does not have capacity and funds to cope with this.
2. An insufficient link to a broader research domain;
 In the current situation Sabuko only has part of the capacity and funds needed for generating 'lessons learned' in the international research domain and lacks the capacity for a broad focus on passage migrants as well as breeding birds¹². However, a positive development is that Sabuko is in a process to become full partner in Birdlife International within the coming two years. As soon as that is established, there is a solid basis for broader access in the international research domain. To achieve a successful position, we feel that there is some urgency in generating basic information:

¹² We are aware that there is reason for some optimism, as Georgia participates since 2014 in the EBCC Atlas project on European Breeding Birds.

- a. Basic historical information on bird populations and habitats;
In this respect the closing of the Institute of Palaeobiology (part of the National Museum of Georgia) is an illustration of financial short term threats.
- b. Access to historical publications
An investigation was made of ornithological publications on Georgia, available through access at Naturalis Biodiversity Center, Leiden (C.S. Roselaar, 2013). The result is 90 titles, of which 75% is in Russian or Ukrainian language and as such insufficiently contributing to the broader research domain.

D. Closing the gap

We feel that intensified Dutch – Georgian collaboration can be a significant contribution to closing the gap. The following elements are crucial and coherent:

- 1) Establishing a new organization, the *Dutch-Georgian Ornithological Foundation (DuGOF)*, to be registered in the Netherlands. The *general aim* of this foundation is the transfer of Dutch expertise to Georgia to develop SABUKO into an effective conservation organization and increase its impact on environmental decision-making . Part of this is to improve the link to the public domain in Georgia and putting bird conservation on the political agenda. When activities are at hand concerning birds of prey, DuGOF will collaborate with the Stichting Batumi Roofvogel Club, based in Wageningen, the Netherlands;
- 2) Specific aims are:
 - to establish a continuous process of fundraising;
 - supporting Sabuko in a 5-year process to publish an overview of information on the status of bird species in the different habitats in Georgia. For practical reasons we will focus mainly on Important Bird Area's (IBA's) but not entirely. For instance Chorokhi Delta is within our scope but does not have the status of IBA.
The outcome of this process is important as a basis for land-use decisions and decisions on hunting regulation, and to improve awareness on the conservation of wildlife.
 - to contribute to the existing Georgian plan for development of a Georgian ringing scheme. Foundation BRC has solicited Zosthera B.V. to develop a bilingual ringing database for Georgia, with support from Sabuko, researchers from Ilia Chavchavadze University and volunteering ringers from Belgium and the Netherlands. The database will probably be hosted in Georgia, and will be maintained by Georgian ringers with support from Dutch and Belgian experts during the first years of the project. Some funding is still needed. The database will be a great research tool for Georgian ornithology, enabling efficient data-sharing and compatibility with Euring-scheme;
 - to find a solution for fieldwork in the conflict regions of Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia). This is a rather sensitive issue.

- 3) Indicative for the definite paper after 5 years (or different papers in the course of coming 5 years) are the following topics:
 - a. Climate & environmental change since last ice-age (incl. influence of land-management and watermanagement);
 - b. Different habitats in Georgia, and habitats for migrating birds in Georgia and surrounding area's;
 - c. History of ornithology in Georgia
 - a. Ornithological literature;
 - b. Ornithological archivalia / musea;
 - d. Annotated checklist;
 - e. Quantitative data from recent fieldwork (selection of species/ selection of area's and habitats); (interpretation: diversity of (sub-)species per square half degree);
 - f. Conservation priorities;
 - g. Suggestions for future research.

The current proposal is to start a 'project' which comprises the elements 1) – 3) as described.

A starting budget of € 25.000,- is needed

(Founding of DuGOF; website; orientation visits to Georgia; starting the first year of fieldwork).

Additional fundraising is a task of DuGOF itself. We expect that the total amount of additional financing needed in the first five years, is at least € 175.000,-

(Fieldwork; Geographic Information modeling; translating Russian and Ukrainian ornithological literature; meetings; editorial activities).

E. Epilogue

This document will be used in discussions with all those involved, to generate mutual understanding. If necessary, this will result in a more definite version 1.1 .