



This project is financed by
the European Union

FLERMONECA

Implemented by:

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für Internationale
Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

Forest and Biodiversity Governance Including Environmental Monitoring (FLERMONECA)

Wildlife management in Central Asia: practical experience and existing gaps

Dear Ladies & Gentlemen,

it is my honour to open the first session and as a form of introduction to give a short overview on the status of wildlife management in Central Asia, I will mainly present results from the recent GIZ/FLERMONECA publication on the current situation of wildlife management in Central Asian countries, focussing on a regional perspective of what has been done and also mention achievements and gaps.

Central Asia has a large diversity of ecosystems. Its vast mountains, deserts and steppes host important populations of ungulates like ibex, argali, markhor, saiga antelope, goitered gazelle and maral, as well as carnivores like snow leopard or brown bear. It is one of the few remaining regions in the world where ecologically important large mammals' migrations can be still observed.

Hunting has a long history in the region and is widely practiced. Some hunting traditions, like hunting with falcons, golden eagles and traditional dog breeds, are considered a cultural heritage. Previously existing customary rules and traditional hunting restrictions were largely abandoned during Soviet times with the state taking over formal ownership of wildlife and imposing its own rules and regulations on wildlife use. In the chaotic years following the breakup of the Soviet Union a sharp decline in most wildlife populations set in, as many people depended on wildlife for survival. In Tajikistan the civil war and its aftermath caused intensive poaching which led to a drastic reduction of the range area and population numbers of Argali, Ibex, Urial and Markhor. The saiga population numbers in Kazakhstan dropped by more than 95%. In Kyrgyzstan argali and ibex have been severely over-hunted.

Poaching is still widespread, and involves not only illegal subsistence hunting by the rural population, but also by military personnel and even protected area staff. Illegal trophy-hunting operations and illegal trade in horns and other animal parts used in Traditional Chinese Medicine are common and further lead to an unsustainable harvest. The wildlife conservation sector is under-resourced across the region with a lack of funding, trained personnel, transport and other equipment, severely limiting the effectiveness of anti-poaching efforts. Poor management, habitat degradation and fragmentation, forage competition with an increasing livestock population, and fences along new international borders have further caused significant decline and the extinction of wildlife. The rapid socio-economic development through extensive use of natural resources and building of infrastructure without taking into proper consideration the environmental aspects and needs of wildlife may lead to irreversible negative impacts on the ecosystems.

In all Central Asian countries wildlife is the property of the State, which awards rights to use it to individuals and other entities. Quotas for extractive wildlife use are generally issued once a year for the upcoming hunting season and are in most cases based on

recommendations by a scientific institution.

Permission systems, where state agencies issue hunting permits which are not bound to specific game management areas, can create open access situations and cause an overexploitation of wildlife. Sustainable management of game populations is more likely if hunting is permitted only in assigned areas, and permits are issued to the organization managing the area, which then would provide access and services to the hunters.

In the field of protection of rare or endangered species the **Red Book** is held in high esteem. In some countries (e.g. KAZ) species listed in the Red Book are legally protected from any extractive use although it remains questionable if such total protection coupled with an ineffective law enforcement system is really beneficial. For some species this might actually be counterproductive, and incentive based approaches with regulated and sustainable hunting might have higher chances of success.

The system of **National Parks and other Protected areas** is also seen as pivotal in wildlife conservation. Although covering large tracts of land - In Tajikistan for example protected areas of different status cover almost a quarter of the country - wildlife protection is generally not working effectively.

The enforcement of rules is weakened by the lack of financial and human resources and sometimes by insufficient political support. Habitat protection outside of protected areas receives much less attention. In general it is a misconception to restrict species conservation to protected areas. It cannot succeed if the unprotected areas are not included.

The same applies to the sustainable use of wildlife as compared to protection.

Existing hunting bans do not necessarily prevent serious decline or even extinction of local wildlife populations. Sustainable use of wildlife on the other hand can provide an important alternative or a complementary land-use option.

International hunting tourism in the region started in the late 1980s and is predominantly organized on a commercial basis. Significant International Trophy Hunting today occurs in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The official annual take-off creates significant financial means for state budgets and private businesses. The performance of hunting companies in these countries varies wildly. While many concessionaires lack specific technical knowledge in wildlife management and have used the resource opportunistically, often abandoning the areas assigned to them after a few years, sustainable wildlife management is effective in many other concessions where game populations were rehabilitated and conserved. Risks to the sustainability of hunting companies can be the short duration of their contracts and the lack of contract security as well as insufficient monitoring and wildlife management at population level and intense poaching in the areas surrounding the hunting concessions. In some areas trophy quality has deteriorated as a result of overhunting. Most hunting areas are also used as grazing areas for livestock, which creates a potential cause for conflict.

Limited legal hunting by foreign tourists, with very careful take-off in no way threatens any species. Such trophy hunting even gives wildlife a value and consequently helps to stabilize and increase populations. Wildlife in carefully managed hunting grounds has much better chances of survival than in underfinanced and poorly run Government protected areas.

Many areas have been assigned to companies, owned by outsiders. Local people get only involved as temporary service staff, in particular as hunting guides. Where local villagers

have been involved in managing and protecting the game, the results were generally far better.

Such Community- based hunting initiatives have been successfully founded in recent years in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan but still face some legal and institutional obstacles. Five community- based NGOs in Tajikistan are managing wildlife in legally assigned areas and three of them have already hosted hunting clients. In Kyrgyzstan two community-based hunting organizations have been assigned wildlife management areas in 2013 and three more such initiatives are currently in the process of registration. The approach has potential of being replicated in other countries of Central Asia.

The **Legislative frameworks** covering wildlife management and hunting in the region are generally extensive and contain many positive elements including an attention to international conventions. Frequently they consist however of different legal instruments that are not always harmonized and sometimes overlap. Recently legal reforms have been brought under way. Last year new laws “On Hunting and Wildlife Management” have been adopted in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, replacing a whole set of regulations in other laws, that were in parts contradictory to each other. These new laws provide for clearer regulation and incentives for sustainable hunting and wildlife management.

Important innovations of the new laws include the introduction of an area based management approach, promoting the allocation of hunting management areas to private enterprises or community-based organizations. Thereby local hunters and communities are encouraged to request that rights and responsibilities over hunting management areas are assigned to them.

New applicants for hunting territories must now submit detailed management plans outlining their wildlife management strategy. Also new is the introduction of minimum size requirements for hunting areas and extended leases for hunting concessions. In Kyrgyzstan the new law also allows for setting land-use restrictions for protection of key habitats for argali and other species, especially during migration. A further positive innovation is the introduction of a system of **benefit sharing**, allocating a percentage of the permit fees to the budget of the local administration on whose territory the hunt has taken place.

With regard to the **Institutional Framework** there exists in some cases a lack of clarity, with overlapping jurisdictions among different government agencies responsible for wildlife management. In Kazakhstan the responsibility for the management of natural resources and biodiversity has been changed several times at short intervals with the consequence that officials, who are responsible for hunting issues, often lack specialized wildlife management knowledge and experience. Ongoing processes like law revisions are often stalled due to such frequent changes. In Kyrgyzstan the “Department for the Sustainable Use of Natural Resources”, which is subordinate to the “State Agency on Environmental Protection and Forestry” is now shifting from the immediate area management function to a predominantly supervision and control-function. In Tajikistan the “State Agency of Forestry” has recently received the responsibility for supervision of hunting and game management in the whole country. A hunting department was established in the agency which is however presently largely restricted to administrative work, as there are no representatives in the field. The “Committee on Environmental Protection” is generally responsible for nature protection and for issuing licences for game species listed in the Red Book.

Besides the Government agencies, the involvement of **Scientific Institutions** is crucial to

wildlife management. These Institutes, often part of the National Academies of Sciences are not only conducting scientific research on taxonomy, biology and ecology of wild animals but are generally responsible for monitoring wildlife numbers, recording data on wildlife use and preparing new editions of the Red Book. They also propose the annual quota for game animals to the respective decision making bodies. While the recommendations made by scientific institutions probably carry significant weight, they are legally only recommendations and can be changed by the final decision makers, thus often resulting in decision making that at least partially diverges from a purely science-based approach.

The **National Associations of hunters** that stem from Soviet times and were mostly founded during the 1950s mainly organize hunting for domestic hunters. Membership is mandatory in some countries. These associations are generally in charge of taking hunter's examinations and issuing hunters' licenses. They usually manage a number of hunting areas and are financed mostly through member fees. Here in Turkmenistan the "Union of Hunters and Fishermen", although a private sector organization, has been vested with functions that are governmental in most countries. In Kazakhstan the "Union of Hunters and Fishermen" together with other regional hunting organizations in 2012 created the organization "Kansonar" as a single representation and lobby-organization of hunters and hunting enterprises in the country, taking over a wide range of responsibilities.

All five Central Asian countries are parties to the **Convention on Biological Diversity** and have adopted National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plans that define national priorities on ecosystems, habitats and species conservation. These plans are unfortunately often rather generic and do not provide a detailed description of proposed actions.

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan are parties to **CITES** and for Tajikistan the process of accession is underway. CITES activities in the region seek to strengthen capacities to implement the convention, to prevent overexploitation, and to ensure that legal trade in wildlife does not exceed sustainable levels.

With the exception of Turkmenistan, the Central Asian countries are parties to the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species. The recent accession of Kyrgyzstan in 2014 is seen as an important step strengthening CMS presence in the region. CMS instruments for Central Asia include single species and threat based instruments as well as the recently adopted 'Central Asian Mammals Initiative'. (on which we will hear more tomorrow)

Memoranda of Understanding concerning the Conservation and Restoration of the Bukhara Deer and the Saiga Antelope have managed to bring together key range states, NGOs and the research community to work in close collaboration, consolidate available resources and raise awareness on the threats and conservation needs of the respective species at the national and regional levels. The International Single Species Action Plan for the Conservation of Argali that covers the period of 2014 – 2024 suggests activities related to research and monitoring, habitat and migration routes protection, sustainable use, policy and governance.

The importance of knowledge and experience sharing among countries cannot be overestimated. The updates on legal and policy measures, population statuses, monitoring results and actual threats are the key for the adoption of sound and timely conservation and sustainable use measures.

Central Asian governments with support of development cooperations, NGOs and the private sector have taken a range of steps to stop the further decline of wildlife populations. Legislation is being modernized, more efficient conservation agencies are being created and hunting is being reorganized. Some countries such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have started to devolve power and pass more responsibility to the private sector, including the protection and use of game on public lands. In this respect minimum size requirements for hunting grounds and long-term leases are important to guarantee conservation, good trophy sizes and thus viable business opportunities

Between 2009 and 2014 essential support was provided in the region by German Development Cooperation. Activities were carried out under the Wildlife Management Component of the GIZ Regional Programme for Sustainable Use of Natural Resources in Central Asia.

In Kyrgyzstan project activities were carried out in close cooperation with the “Department for the Sustainable Use of Natural Resources” and focused on legal framework development, capacity development for wildlife monitoring and improvement of hunting area management, in particular introduction of community-based approaches. Two pilot community-based wildlife conservation organizations have been established, equipped and trained in wildlife management, monitoring and conservation. Also Capacity building for facilitators for a countrywide allocation of hunting areas to groups of local hunters has been conducted.

In Tajikistan the main focus was also the development of community-based groups of hunting managers taking over wildlife use and protection in designated areas, as well as the improvement of management in family-based conservancies. Further activities were the analysis of the existing legal framework, support in the drafting of the new hunting law, facilitation of multi-stakeholder dialogue through round tables and seminars, and the development of a monitoring system for mountain ungulates. A Tajik and Russian language monitoring handbook and a manual on the use of GPS have been developed and comprehensive surveys were carried out for argali and markhor.

Here in Turkmenistan GIZ on behalf of the European Union within the framework of FLERMONECA has been supporting the Union of Fishers and Hunters in conducting an inventory of all their hunting areas as a first step towards a more rational, sustainable and conservation oriented hunting management. The results of this study will be presented later today.

Regional stakeholders begin to acknowledge improved communication and cooperation between national and international stakeholders that indicate positive results of the efforts undertaken. Further continuous financing is needed to strengthen governance, staff capacity and law enforcement at the national and regional levels, as well as **empowering local communities**. There is also a clear need for young professionals in wildlife management and for conservation scientists that could take a lead on the national or regional level. The continuous communication and the exchange of knowledge and best practices on science, policy, management and coordination at the regional level continue to be a challenge and need to be further strengthened.

Wildlife is not only an integral part of functioning and resilient ecosystems, it is also a valuable renewable resource in Central Asia. Strict protection needs to be complemented with sustainable use that can be extractive like trophy hunting or non-extractive in the form of nature tourism. Such activities can create commercial opportunities and provide further

economic, social and environmental benefits. Financial resources thus obtained can contribute to reducing rural poverty, improving local livelihoods and supporting biodiversity conservation.

This was my short introduction, I am sure all participants here know far more about the subject matter than I do and I am looking forward to very interesting and enlightening presentations and discussions in the course of the next two days.

Thank you for your attention!