

# Impact of Tourism on Biodiversity along the Atsunta Pass Trail (Pshav-Khevsureti & Tusheti PAs) and Mitigation Measures

Transfer project in the framework of the Klaus Toepfer Fellowship Programme

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## Executive Summary

The number of tourists visiting Tusheti and Pshav-Khevsureti PAs in Georgia, Caucasus, is increasing from year to year<sup>1</sup>. About half of these tourists utilize the popular Atsunta Pass Trail (highest point 3,486 m a.s.l.) linking the two mentioned PAs. The need to evaluate tourism's influence on the biodiversity of the site was apparent: Some important fauna species such as Eastern Caucasian Tur, Chamois, and some endemic plants are present in the area of Atsunta Pass Trail and may be affected by the negative factors that tourism brings to the place.

Among some of the challenges for the administrations of the two target PAs is the lack of capacity and resources to carry out the necessary study and to identify impacts from tourism. Because of this, one of the most overloaded tourist trails is left aside in terms of trail management and visitors rules. Special restrictions that should regulate tourist behaviour in order to avoid negative impact on the biodiversity are not comprehensively developed yet.

The project provides description of actions, resources, means, timing and approach that was used to analyze and evaluate the impact of tourism on biodiversity of Atsunta Pass Trail crossing, which links Tusheti PA and Pshav-Khevsureti PA, in order to develop nature based responsible tourism guidelines for the Administrations of the mentioned PAs.

The goal of the TP is to support the establishment of a sustainable model of tourism development in the PAs of Georgia based on the example of Atsunta Pass Trail. In particular, the document will possibly serve as a part of the tourism management plan for the newly designated Pshav-Khevsureti PA. The latter represents the working area of the Support Programme's project in the region. Thus the employer will also benefit from the outcome of the TP. Suggestions and guidelines given in the document will also be considered by the Administration of the already long-time functioning Tusheti PAs, which are also lacking a trail management system for the Atsunta Pass Trail. Therefore, biodiversity in the vicinity of the trail is neglected and in some ways might be irreversibly destructed in the future.

The project was conducted in 2016 in three stages: 1. Collection of required data and consultations with stakeholders; 2. Field trip to observe and document the current situation at

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<sup>1</sup> This information is based on the annual statistical data collected by the administration of Tusheti PA, as well as data obtained from the Border Police of Georgia and own observations.

the project site and identify the main threats; 3. Development of tourist behavior rules and guidelines.

An assessment was made based on the gathered data about number of tourists using the trail, number/type of flora and fauna species, as well as red list and endemic species inhabiting the area, and their trends. One field trip was conducted to evaluate the current situation, pictures were taken and main threats were identified. Discussions with several stakeholders (PA administrations, tourists, biodiversity experts, local people, site experts) were conducted. Partners (scientific institutions, governmental agencies, rangers) ensured accuracy of information and support during the field trip.

Based on the information collected during the first and second stages, tourist behavior guidelines for Atsunta Pass Trail were produced. The document will be transferred to the administrations of relevant protected areas for their use. Besides, it will be included in the Management Plans of the two target PAs, particularly attached to the part related to tourism development in the PAs.