

Trail Planning and Interpretation as a Tool to Support Biodiversity Conservation in the Protected Areas of Lake Baikal

Transfer project in the framework of the Klaus Toepfer Fellowship Programme

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Executive Summary

Unmanaged tourism is one of the most important causes of biodiversity loss around Lake Baikal (Usov, 2016). There are many conservation tools available that would help reduce this loss of diversity, especially in the region's protected areas. The present transfer project concentrated on two of these, namely (a) the creation of trail systems that manage the flow of visitors (for example, a trail could be laid out to circumvent key habitats where unique, rare, or endangered plants or animals reside) and (b) the operation of interpretative programs in local parks and nature reserves that educate the public and engage park visitors. In the latter case, nature interpretation is shown to be an effective long-term instrument for environmental conservation, particularly when it is reliably offered by protected area staff (Ham, 1992).

Over the course of this project a number of essential principles for interpretation and trail-building were promoted. The main target was staff at Pribaikalsky and Zabaikalski National Parks, as well as at the Baikalsky, Baikal-Lena, and Barguzinsky State Nature Reserves. As part of our main goal, we emphasized the key role that trail corridors can play in conserving nature – particularly when each protected area chooses to adopt good standards in their trail-planning, and follows by encouraging ethical and responsible trail-use within their borders.

In addition, participants from other institutions, such as at the Great Baikal Trail and other eco-educational groups, were involved in this project. Through these partnerships we helped raise awareness about the importance of trails and interpretation as effective means for biodiversity conservation. We also helped disseminate a series of learning materials to a much broader audience, well beyond the staff of our local protected areas (PAs).

To meet our goals, we developed a set of valuable resources, providing the PAs with better access to essential data on trails. Relevant information was collected, organized, and refined, resulting in a special guideline on trails, as well as an online library for public use. These resources now provide direction to park administrations and other decision-makers, as they pursue efficient methods for trail-siting, trail-construction, and interpretation as part of their larger biodiversity conservation programs. Much of this information was passed on via e-mail or via personal consultations. In addition, we elicited responses to our program via a questionnaire and other means. These responses were analysed to give us a better notion of how to package our informational resources in the future.

One of the most important activities of this program took shape with special presentations on trail building and interpretation that were offered to Pribaikalsky National Park. In these

seminars we focused mostly on one example: namely the loss of biodiversity at Cape Khoboy and Olkhon Island, and how the creation of a trail system in the area could remedy the present situation. Our recommendations resulted in an amendment to the management plans at Pribaikalsky Park, with new efforts promised for expanding regional trails. In fact, the first stretch of trail under these plans will be laid down in the first half of 2017 – a testament to the effectiveness of this transfer project regarding our goal of affecting local developments.

This successful example should also influence other local protected areas who have accepted our ideas very positively. For now, it may be difficult to quantify the positive impacts on local biodiversity in these other PAs, but our hope is that international and our own experiences will show that these approaches can bring beneficial results.