

Feasibility assessment of Ulytau landscape as the UNESCO natural heritage site

Transfer project in the framework of the Klaus Toepfer Fellowship Programme

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Executive summary

Kazakhstan plays an important role in global biodiversity conservation. A significant portion of the world's natural steppes are found there. They belong to the temperate grasslands ecoregion, which is the most altered and least protected ecosystem on Earth. Temperate grasslands are also currently underrepresented on the World Heritage List of natural sites.

The project aimed at assessing the feasibility of nominating Ulytau area of Kazakhstan, which is part of the Pontian Steppe biogeographical province, as UNESCO World Heritage site (criteria (ix and x)). The site already is on the tentative list of Kazakhstan for UNESCO World Heritage.

The main focus was given to a preliminary assessment of the site's compliance with the World Heritage Convention's (WHC) criteria (ix) and (x). A preliminary comparative analysis for protected areas of Pontic temperate grasslands was conducted to understand the potential Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of Ulytau. The cultural values of the site have not been assessed in the framework of this project. Both state and non-state partners supported the assessment.

The assessment concluded that Ulytau may have OUV under criterion (ix) of WH if it is extended by two additional protected areas: Altyn Dala and possibly Irgiz Turgai Reservats. These are currently not sufficiently protected to meet the integrity and protection requirements of the WH Operational Guidelines, due to their low PA (IUCN Category VI) and poor management capacity. Together these sites could also be considered as an extension of the existing Saryarka – Steppes and Lakes of Northern Kazakhstan natural World Heritage Site.

An extended system of these protected areas could potentially become the world's largest Pontic steppe protected area and play an important role in the conservation of key steppe species. It would also be a serious step to conservation of the critically endangered saiga antelope, a flagship steppe species of which the largest population exists there, and thus support large scale ecological and biological processes of mass migration of this herbivore in the region.

The study also demonstrates that the Ulytau has significant biodiversity values, which are however are not sufficient to inscribe it under WH criterion (x).

The Transfer Project demonstrates the potential of the WH Convention to provide status incentives for PA system development and better conservation. There is a hope that an eventual nomination of this site as the serial WH property would

contribute to better protection measures through upgrading the conservation status of the reserves, and through the development of comprehensive management and business plans for the sites.