Waterbirds around the world

A global overview of the conservation, management and research of the world's waterbird flyways

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This paper describes current initiatives to establish and co-ordinate multi-lateral planning for landuse and conservation management in the Kura-Arax river basin within the Caucasus Region.

Situated between the Black Sea and Caspian Lake, the Caucasus is among the planet’s 25 most diverse and endangered areas. It covers 580,000 km² including parts of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, the North Caucasus portion of the Russian Federation, north-eastern Turkey and part of north-western Iran. Landscapes in the Caucasus range from high mountains to semi-deserts and wetlands; vegetation types include snowfields and glaciers, steppe, broadleaf and coniferous forests, alpine and subalpine meadows, and alder and Caucasian wing-nut swamp forests. The 2002 IUCN Red List identifies one species of plant and 50 species of globally threatened animals in the Caucasus. Of 11 species of globally threatened birds, six are waterbirds: Lesser White-fronted Goose *Anser erythropus*, Red-breasted Goose *Branta ruficollis*, Marbled Teal *Marmaronetta angustirostris*, White-headed Duck *Oxyura leucocephala*, Corncrake *Crex crex* and Sociable Plover *Vanellus gregarious*. Large numbers of waterbirds from Eastern Europe and Western Siberia migrate across the Caucasus to the Middle East and East Africa: of those, 115 species are listed in Annex II of the AEW A. One waterbird species, the Armenian Gull *Larus armenicus*, is endemic to the region.

Important wetland ecosystems are found throughout the Caucasus, and wetland vegetation covers large areas along the coastal zones of the Black and Azov seas, Caspian Lake and Terek, Sulak, Kaban, Samur, Rioni and Kura rivers. The catchment of the Kura River is of exceptional international importance, and is shared between five countries - Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Iran and Turkey (Fig. 1). The Kura River is the largest hydrological watercourse in the South Caucasus, originating on the northeast slopes of Kizil-Giadik (Turkey) and flowing through Georgia and Azerbaijan into the Caspian Lake. The river is 1,515 km in length and the area of the basin is 205,037 km². Together with its major tributary the River Arax, the entire basin occupies the greater part of the South Caucasus, and supports a population of 6.8 million people. The waters of the river system are used for drinking, hydropower and irrigation, especially in Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan. Although wetlands make up only 0.9% of the river system, 21 wetland-dependent Important Bird Areas (IBA) have been identified, of which Lake Arpi (3,139 ha) and Lake Sevan (489,100 ha) in Armenia and Agh-Ghol (500 ha) in Azerbaijan are designated Ramsar sites.

Unfortunately, the waters of the Kura-Arax river system are extensively polluted, with the concentrations of impurities exceeding allowable limits by as much as 10 times for phenol, 14 times for phosphate and 20 times for oil. Pollution plus drastic political and economic upheaval, uncontrolled use of water resources and poaching have brought ecological instability and loss of biodiversity in general and of waterbirds in particular. The situation is aggravated because of the absence of a common approach between Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Iran and Turkey towards integrated management of water and wetland resources. Problems arise due to:

- limited capacity of the institutions responsible;
- underdeveloped environmental legislation at national and regional levels;
- inefficient control and lack of financial mechanisms to prevent pollution;
- weak system of water monitoring and lack of reliable data on pollution; and
- lack of mechanisms for co-operation and co-ordination of action plans.

There are several ongoing programs initiated by the European Commission and the UNDP to improve water management in Kura-Arax basin through the harmonization of legislation, monitoring and regional planning. The “Eco-regional Nature Protection Programme for the South Caucasus Region”, part of the Caucasus Initiative launched by the German Ministry of Cooperation and Development aims to promote cooperation on the development of a coherent strategy to ensure biodiversity conservation in the region. A number of wetlands will be given the status of protected areas on the both sites of Armenian-Georgian
border, while the following activities will be financed from the recently approved €2 200 000 programme “Establishment of Protected Areas in the Armenian Javakheti Region”:

- to establish a National Park in accordance with IUCN guidelines including Lake Arpi and its water catchment areas bordering Georgia and Turkey;
- to investigate the potential for possible establishment of wetland sanctuaries (such as Akhuryan and others);
- to integrate the National Park into the land use of the project area;
- to develop selected support programs to decrease the pressure on the National Park and sanctuaries and to foster acceptance by the population; and
- to promote transboundary cooperation in the biodiversity conservation in the Javakheti Region.

The Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF) is developing a strategy based on the results of stakeholder workshops and background reports coordinated by the WWF Caucasus Programme. The strategy is underpinned by targets against which the success of investments can be measured, namely species (extinctions avoided), sites (areas protected) and landscapes (corridors created). Four strategic directions guide CEPF’s approach in the Caucasus:

- support society efforts to promote transboundary cooperation and improve protected area systems;
- strengthen mechanisms to conserve biodiversity of the area with emphasis on species, site and corridor outcomes;
- implement models demonstrating sustainable resource use; and
- increase the awareness and commitment of decision-makers to biodiversity conservation.

The CEPF provides special attention to wetlands and international cooperation, and the Wetland Management Training Course for the Staff of Sevan National Park (Armenia) and Kolkheti National Park (Georgia) has recently been approved for funding. Prospective wetlands for transboundary conservation are Ararat Valley fish-ponds and floodplain marshes on Mount Ararat, shared with Armenia, Turkey and the Nakhichevan enclave of Azerbaijan and Iran.

There is no doubt that cooperation on transboundary conservation of the Caucasus and Kura Basin wetlands will positively influence not only waterbird diversity but will also mitigate the effects of the uneasy political situation in the South Caucasus Region.

FURTHER INFORMATION
http://earthtrends.wri.org/text/water-resources/map-324.html
http://ruzgar.aznet.org/ruzgar/1-7.htm
http://seu.iatp.ge/Kura-Araks.html
http://www.azeribirds.org/eng/e_ob_xarak.html
http://www.kura.iabg.de/inventarisierung_engl.htm
http://www.undp.org.ge/Projects/kura.html

The Ramsar site of Lake Sevan in Armenia is one of the largest waterbodies in the Caucasus and supports several endemic species. Photo: David Stroud.