

The Purpose and Functions of Imereti Protected Areas

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Abstract

The article represented covers the information about the protected areas in Imereti region. In 1996, Georgian Parliament recognized the importance of the natural and cultural areas in Georgia by passing the law about the system of protected areas. The mentioned law created a legal basis for the establishment of protected areas - with the objective to protect outstanding natural areas and valuable cultural heritage. According to the law, the following categories were established and operated: strict nature reserve, national park, natural monument, managed nature reserve, protected landscape and multiple use area.

Except the categories of the protected areas listed in the law, Imereti region possesses other rich tourism potential resources which are not investigated. It would be advisable to popularize those protected areas, to provide population with more information about truly unique nature, which will foster the development of tourism that will have positive impact on both country and region's economic growth.

Keywords: managed nature reserves, nature conservancy, protected areas, sustainable development of tourism

One of the most important and effective means of nature conservancy is the protection of territories less influenced and damaged by human beings. The Protection practice of separate sections or objects of nature is known from ancient times. At that time (and partially even after) the conservation of natural formations mainly was connected to religious feasts, the ancient Greeks, Romans and Celts strictly guarded so-called: "sacred forests". "Protection of natural areas in Georgia has a long history. The first legislative record about forest and nature protection is dated for XII century, when the Queen Tamar has announced the Royal Decree for protecting certain territories. Five hundred years later the "Law Book" (1709) of the king Vakhtang VI (167501737) mentions Korughi nature reserve as "the place for hunting". The area was forbidden to cut trees and to walk and men were appointed to protect the land from disturbance. In mountainous regions, there was a strict protection under the so-called "Holy Forest", which was the subject to strict protection, and represented the typical nature reserve.

The first official Reserve - Lagodeki Nature Reserve was established in 1912 in Kakheti. In 1920-1930 the number of protected areas has increased. But in 1951, as one of the mobilization plans of natural resource from 28 Preserves, just one Lagodekhi Nature Reserve has remained, the rest were abolished. Since 1957 some of the old reserves were restored, after which there were 14 nature reserves, and 5 forests - hunting areas, covering 2.4% of the total territory of Georgia.

During the Soviet period, the issues related to protected areas were regulated by the law about Nature Protection (1958). However, the system of protected areas was also a part of the forestry sector, which led to arguments between nature reserve and forestry sectors at all levels (administrative, legal, management, planning and etc.). Any interference in nature reserves was prohibited by the law; however, the law in the most reserves was violated. There was not used a complex approach while establishing nature reserves, the emphasis has been done to the protection of one of the types and attention was not paid to other species or the total ecosystem. The aims of nature reserves were incorrectly identified, and there was no unified legal framework for protected areas. Therefore, the reserves were characterized by low ecological efficiency.

Except Nature Reserves and Forestry, another object of the protection was live nature sites included in the "Georgian Soviet Red Book". Live nature sites were huge separate plants (oak Chala - "Eristo oak" in Sagarejo, age - 600years; "Tree Patriarch" in Akhmeta, age - 1 800 years, and etc.), in total about 30sites. Rock pillars, caves, fossil vegetation, canyons and valleys, volcanic and other forms – approximately 77 objects were inorganic nature sites. Some of these sites located in the forest reserve. They were not managed, though in case of nature sites' destruction or encroachment legal liability was imposed on it. Protected areas are locations which receive protection because of their recognized natural, ecological and/or cultural values. There are several kinds of protected areas, which vary

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by level of protection depending on the enabling laws of each country or the regulations of the international organizations involved. The term “protected area” also includes Marine Protected Areas, the boundaries of which will include some area of ocean. There are over 161,000 protected areas in the world, representing over 13 percent of the world’s land surface area. Protected areas are essential for biodiversity conservation. They are the cornerstones of virtually all national and international conservation strategies. They are areas set aside to maintain functioning natural ecosystems, to act as refuges for species and to maintain ecological processes that cannot survive in most intensely managed landscapes and seascapes. Protected areas act as benchmarks against which we understand human interactions with the natural world. Today they are often the only hope we have of stopping many threatened or endangered species from becoming extinct. (Kikodze A. Gokhelašvili R., 2007)

Since 1990, the planning and establishment of protected areas has started with the support of international donor organizations. The first scheme of spatial structure development of protected areas was formed which later became the basis for further work/activities. In 1995 there were founded protected area planning regions: Eastern Caucasus, Colchis, Adjara – Imereti, Central Caucasus and Erusheti, Shavsheti and Abkhazia. In 1996 the Parliament of Georgia adopted the Law “About the system of Protected areas”, after which the categories of protected areas according to the international criteria was legalized:

- State Nature Reserve (strict protection);
- National Park (ecosystem conservation and recreation);
- Natural heritage sites (natural features of conservation);
- Managed Nature Reserve (Conservation through active management);
- Protected landscapes (seascapes Conservation and Recreation);
- Multiple use area – (sustainable use of natural ecosystems).

Total territory of protected areas in Georgia is 511 123 ha that is approximately 7% of country’s territory. Approximately 75% of protected areas are covered by forests, total number of state nature reserves is 14, covering 141, 5ha, 9 National Parks cover 270, 7ha, 17 Managed nature Reserves cover 64, 1ha, 14 natural monuments cover 314 ha and 2 protected landscapes about 34, 5 ha. (<http://apa.gov.ge/>, 2009).

As for Imereti region, it is represented by the following categories: managed nature reserves, national park, natural heritage sites, but it should be noted that in 2007 according to the Georgian Law, “About Establishment and Management of Protected Territories of Imereti Caves”, on the basis of Sataplia Nature Reserve administration, Protected Areas of Imereti Caves were created. They are complex in nature and include geological, paleontology, speleological and botanical rarities. In the table below (1) there is given Imereti region protected areas according to the list of administrative units.

Table 1: Protected Areas of Imereti Region

#	Name	Administrative Units	Distance from City Kutaisi
1	Ajameti managed nature reserve	Bagdati district	12 km
2	Borjom-Kharagauli National Park	Kharagauli district	65km
3	Sataflia Strict nature reserve	Tskaltubo	7km
4	Kumistavi cave natural monument (Promete Cave)	Tskaltubo	25km
5	Tetra cave natural monument	Tskaltubo	26km
6	Khomuli cave natural monument	Tskaltubo	20km
7	Tsutskhvati cave natural monument	Tkibuli and Terjola districts	12km
8	Navenakhevi cave natural monument	Terjola, village Navenakhevi	20km
9	Nagarevi cave natural monument	Terjola, village Godogani	18km
10	Iazoni cave natural monument	Terjola, village Godogani	4km
11	Sakazhia cave natural monument	Terjola, village Godogani	12km
12	Tskaltsitela gorge	Terjola, village Godogani	5km
13	Okatse gorge natural monument	Khoni, village Kinchkha	58km
14	Okatse waterfall natural monument	Khoni, village Kinchkha	58km (200-300)

Table 2: Survey Results about Imereti Protected Areas' Awareness

#	Name	2010 Year			2011 Year		
		Visits	Heard about this	Has never heard	Visits	Heard about this	Has never heard
1	Ajemeti managed nature reserve		X			X	
2	Borjom-Kharagauli National Park	X	X		X	X	
3	Sataflia Strict nature reserve	X	X		X	X	
4	Kumistavi cave natural monument (Promete Cave)	X	X		X	X	
5	Tetra cave natural monument			X			X
6	Khomuli cave natural monument			X			X
7	Tsutskhvati cave natural monument		X			X	
8	Navenakhevi cave natural monument	X	X		X	X	
9	Nagarevi cave natural monument			X			X
10	Iazoni cave natural monument			X			X
11	Sakazhia cave natural monument			X			X
12	Tskaltsitela gorge			X			X
13	Okatse gorge natural monument			X		X	
14	Okatse waterfall natural monument		X		X	X	

In 2010/2011 in the survey held by tourism faculty students of Georgian State Subtropical University if the society is aware of Imereti protected areas or whether they visit them or not, we got such results. (See the Table 2). About 500 respondents were asked. (Devidze E. Tsagareishvili S., 2010)

The survey showed that majority of citizens does not have information about Imereti Caves Protected Areas. It also should be noted that the list of protected areas given in the Georgian Law is not complete. Even more, Imereti region covers more realistic potential resources of protected areas which unfortunately is not assimilated up to now: such as: Solkota cave, Sarkumali cave, Gumbri cave Satsurbliava cave, Satevzia cave (Khoni), Deviskhvreli (village Lashe), Sagvarjile (Terjola), Shvalieti cave (Kvirila Valley), Darkvetis Ekhi, Mgvimevi cave, Samgle cave, Samertskhle cave, Satobavi cave, Sadzrokhia cave, Sachinke Cave. Coordinated efforts and joint action plans must be formed for the establishment of protected areas, comprehensive data base must be prepared, public awareness raised and promotion increased. The local authority representatives should search additional resources for funding and increase PR and interest of investors. It is clear that the underground world of Imereti region is not completely explored. According to eminent scholar, professor Maruashvili calculations' there are about 1000 caves near Kutaisi, stripped lime stones are set in the north of the city, we meet karst in every step. Imereti region has complex geological structure, factually it is a natural geological museum, writes Professor Otar Chkhaidze in his fundamental research Physical Geography of Imereti. (Devidze E. Tsagareishvili S., 2010)

Protected areas system should serve to the maintenance of the unique natural - cultural environment and

its individual components for future generations. A large contribution must be done from state, Environment and Natural Resources' Department of Protected Areas, and at the same time we should not forget that the pure/fresh nature and ancient culture, the wonderful world of Protected Areas is the form of a very big resource for the successful development of tourism in the region, which in turn, positively affects not only the region but the wholly to the economic growth of the country.

Tourism development strategy in Georgia is based on the principles of sustainable development of tourism and gives a clear priority to the stimulation of a market demand. Regions of Georgia has a high potential for tourism development and there may be fixed the following criteria of tourism priorities, namely:

- High level of exportability and accordingly its great potential in the growth of country's income/revenue
- The large-scale employment opportunities for populations
- The equalization reserves of regional economic development level are available (natural- geographic placement of tourism potential throughout the country)
- Stimulation of the development of other economic sectors (tourism and related industries).

The number of visitors in the Protected Areas increased for 100% in comparison with 2010. 300 000 visitors visited Protected Areas of Georgia in 2011. 53 000 of them were foreign citizens (Israel, Poland, Germany) and 247 000 ones were local visitors. Most of the tourists visited Imereti Caves Protected Areas - 152 000 visitors. Increased number of tourists in Protected Areas was caused by the international tourist infrastructure in the National Parks,

among them is new infrastructure of Imereti Caves and new tourism services, such as Sataplia complex, Borjomi-Kharagauli Visitor Center, Speleo- Palaeontology tours (in Imereti Protected Areas), mountain biking, etc. (Areas)

Infrastructure rehabilitation and proper promotion foresaw the gain of interest of foreign and local tourists in Imereti region in 2012. Protected areas are locations which receive protection because of their recognized natural, ecological and/or cultural values, they are essential for biodiversity conservation. They are the cornerstones of virtually all national and international conservation strategies. They are areas set aside to maintain functioning natural ecosystems, to act as refuges for species and to maintain ecological processes that cannot survive in most intensely managed landscapes and seascapes. Protected areas act as benchmarks against which we understand human interactions with the natural world. Today they are often the only hope we have of stopping many threatened or endangered species from becoming extinct.

Unfortunately, we still do not understand how great and good things can bring or have a variety of protected areas for public, so we offer below, in our opinion, some of the key benefits;

- **Water-regulatory significance**
- **Soil protection**
- **Climate Stabilization** - violating ecosystems, except for water regulation and soil features, appear in a climate stabilizer role. Mild climate is maintained in protected areas, which is not characterized by sharp daily and seasonal contrasts, and quite often it is vital for well-marked medical properties. Consequently, such region has a high recreational potential.
- **Conservation of biological resources:** natural biological resources while their rational use, maintain productivity.
- **Protection of genetic resources:** protected areas are homogeneous reservoirs of genetic resources.
- **Tourism development** - Tourism brings significant income for the country and for the local level it promotes the benefits of small businesses (guest houses, cafes - restaurants, transportation services, souvenirs and handicrafts production, etc.);
- **Recreational development** - recreational potential is able to bring great benefit for local communities.
- **Job creation** - except of the HR(guards, ranger, guides) of protected areas, also more employment places will be created by infrastructure development (roads and other communications, tourist or holiday homes, construction - reconstruction and other);
- **Educational Functions:** Protected Areas represent perfect place for high school students in the field of practice/internship in biology, ecology, and geology, geography or socio - economic aspects.

- **Maintaining a healthy and safe living environment,** fresh air and water, food without chemical fertilizers or pesticides.

- **Traditional values maintenance:** The development of traditional agriculture, crafts, and so on;

- **Natural balance maintenance:** birds or insects help plant pollen transfer and thus the diversity species is maintained. (Sergo, 2009)

In conclusion, we may say that, a protected area is a clearly defined geographical space, recognized, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values. The purpose of protected areas is to protect all natural resources and the ecosystem processes and places they depend on. Protected areas are key tools in management and policy strategies on national and international scales to combat the degradation of biodiversity and natural habitats.

Although protected areas are primarily concerned with conservation, they can also preserve places of cultural importance, mitigate climate change, maintain water supplies and provide socio-economic benefits among others.

Protected areas tend to be the main locations where viable populations of species are maintained and, if necessary, recovered in their natural habitat. They can also provide income and employment opportunities in rural regions through such processes as ecotourism, and form the basis for conservation education programmes.

Protected areas provide invaluable locations for scientific research and monitoring to take place as well as for recreational and touristic use as leisure time growth in importance.

In addition, protected areas provide immeasurable benefits by preserving and maintaining global ecosystem services that regulate the planet, and preserve natural resources for generations to come. Protected areas may be used for deferent functions, such as: scientific research, wilderness protection preservation of species and genetic diversity, maintenance of environmental services, such as water supplies, protection of specific natural and cultural features, tourism and recreation, education, sustainable use of natural resources, maintenance of cultural and traditional sites, including sacred areas.

Protected areas will only be able to significantly contribute to biodiversity conservation if they are managed effectively. Standardized repeat assessments of management effectiveness have become a powerful tool to support adaptive and effective management of protected areas over time. They help to ensure that protected areas meet their conservation objectives and deliver the desired conservation outcomes.

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