

## Biodiversity Management: Towards Re-establishment of a Protected Areas System in Afghanistan

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Fuller at 7400 m Titch - Mir - Afghan Peaks Behind. Photo: www.fuller-inc.com

In Afghanistan a system of royal hunting reserves and culturally important sites for recreation existed in pre-colonial times. Although some of these became popularised during the post-WWII period as tourism became a significant component of the Afghanistan economy no system of protected areas was established. Beginning in 1972, however (with UNDP funding), an analysis of potential protected areas in Afghanistan was undertaken. The investigators undertook detailed studies of a variety of sites including flora and fauna, geology, soils, hydrology etc. Draft management plans for many of the sites (such as Bande Amir) and hunting reserves (Ajar Valley) were produced. More extensive species studies (Marco Polo Sheep) were also carried out in areas such as the Wakhan Corridor.

Unfortunately, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 quickly made it impossible for the project to continue. Although many of the site investigations had resulted in the areas

being identified, delineated and categorised as protected areas, most were never legally gazetted under any statute of the day. They were simply “paper parks”.

Original 1970s Protected Areas Proposals

Location	Description
Pamir-i-Buzurg	Although in relatively good condition due to its inaccessibility and remoteness, the “Big Pamir” Reserve is now being used for grazing large numbers of domestic stock.
Bande Amir	In recent years, two of the six lakes, Bande Qambar and Bande Pudina have experienced temporary dry periods; illegal hunting and fishing sometimes with explosives have persisted during intervening years; activities such as placing a flour mill and some dwellings around the lake threaten the beauty and integrity of the national park; and the area is heavily mined.
Ajar Valley	The lands in the reserve are now reported to be occupied by some 300 plus families; much of the flora in the valley has been depleted by overgrazing of domestic stock and many woody plants have been cut for fuel and building supplies; many hectares of reserve lands have been converted to dryland agriculture.
Ab-i-Estada	Originally a proposed waterfowl sanctuary this is a drought effected area and has been dry for several years; no reported flamingo breeding for several years and Siberian Cranes have not been seen there since the late 1970s.
Dashte Nawar	Some small springs dot the largely dry lake bed with pools of water; hunting is reportedly common; nomads occupying the area now presume the lake is their property; construction of mud houses in graveyards in the immediate vicinity of the former shoreline is a serious problem.
Kole Hashmat Khan	Some of the wetland had been reclaimed, which considerably reduced the overall area of the wetland; much of the wetland vegetation has disappeared.

In addition to the 1970s investigations, there have been a number of surveys since the original UNDP project was concluded. This included surveys of wetland areas (1995), important bird areas (1994), endemic bird areas (1998) as well as the results from the WWF Global 200 ecosystem program. There have also been partial reviews of sites important for plant diversity. However, much more detailed work is needed and in many cases this remains difficult due to security conditions.

Additional Proposed Protected Areas

Location	Description
Sistan Baluchistan/ Hamun-i-Puzak	This drought affected transboundary wetlands area has been dry for nearly a decade although substantial rainfall and snowmelt in the Hindu Kush mountains caused significant flooding along the Helmand River in early 2005.

Northwest Afghanistan	There is a longstanding proposal for a wildlife reserve in this area, including twinning with an existing “protected area” in Iran.
Tugitang Mountains	An existing UNDP/GEF project involving improved wildlife management and protected areas development between Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan is underway. This could potentially be expanded southwards into Afghanistan.
Kunduz Province Wildlife Reserve	Originally proposed as an Afghan wildlife management area; it has not been actively or effectively managed. With the active present day interest within Tajikistan for transboundary protected areas the potential of this area has re-emerged.
Takhar Province Wildlife Reserve	With the active interest within Tajikistan for transboundary protected areas the potential of this area has also emerged.
Nuristan Forest	These areas of Laghman and Kunar provinces have the richest remaining forests in Afghanistan. Wildlife populations are relatively undisturbed in the Hindu Kush Mountains.
Paktia Forest	Relic and endangered conifer and hardwood forests.
Registan Desert Wildlife Reserve	Site which would be representative of the desert ecosystem.
SE Badhakshan	Potential wildlife conservation areas.
Jalalabad Valley	Forests and lakes in the Jalalabad Valley have been identified to be crucial for migratory waterfowl and the conservation of relic conifer and hardwood tree species.

Many of the additional protected areas that have been identified for the Afghanistan system are in the mountainous border areas and are matched with transboundary sites in adjacent countries. This provides the opportunity for discussions for joint management and cooperation of natural resources. These areas are potential “peace parks”. The most significant international “peace park” opportunity includes the existing and proposed protected areas within the Wakhan Corridor in northeastern Afghanistan.

International co-operation on environmental conservation in this area has been discussed since the early 20th century. Expanding the concept of an international wildlife conservancy into one focused as much on human development needs has taken hold in recent years certainly since the regime change in Afghanistan in 2001-2002. This, in turn, has attracted the attention of the multi- and bilateral donor agencies that are working towards peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan. It is also true that any protected area in Afghanistan will need to involve local communities and be able to deliver pragmatic poverty alleviation and economic development opportunities, in addition to broader wildlife and ecosystem conservation initiatives. This additional aspect of protected areas planning in Afghanistan deserves continuing support.

At the present time UNEP has been the key international agency acting to re-establish the protected areas system and has been funded by the European Union to establish the new National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA). UNEP and NEPA have placed a high priority on programming related to environmental law and policy as key element of their institutional strengthening work. This culminated in December 2005 with the promulgation

## Feature

of a comprehensive Environment Act. Among its salient elements is a framework for biodiversity conservation and a new protected areas system for Afghanistan.

The framework legislation requires the protected areas system to:

- ▶ Conserve natural and cultural heritage;
- ▶ Preserve present and future sustainable development options by conserving, and where necessary restoring representative ecosystems, habitats, natural and cultural features and integrate their management into local and national land use plans;
- ▶ Ensure sustainable use of natural resources by involving local communities in all activities related to protected areas.



Progress towards the re-establishment of a Protected Areas System in the mountains of Afghanistan. Map: IWC

NEPA is now expected to develop an overall protected areas system plan, prioritise protected areas, cooperate with communities, develop site specific management plans and implement appropriate zoning systems for each site. Given the present security environment in the country, all the initial work is taking place in the safer areas in the Hindu Kush Mountains.

The Environment Act adopts the internationally recognised categories of protected areas that have been developed and tested world-wide by the IUCN. The Act prescribes a basic process for designating a protected area in consultation with provincial, district and village governments.

UNEP/NEPA have similarly been responsible for assisting the Government of Afghanistan in the accession to and implementation of various Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) that are important for general environmental conservation purposes. This includes the Convention on Biodiversity (CBD), the Convention on Combat Desertification (UNCCD) and the Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Work has also begun on the completion of the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP). Once developed and adopted this will provide the strategic policy framework for implementation of a protected areas system plan.

Another important component of the UNEP/NEPA program is the pilot work on Community Based Natural Resources Management (CBNRM). This work includes an explicit link between rural development and conservation objectives. UNEP/NEPA is combining a wide variety of alternative livelihoods projects with the nature conservation activities particularly with respect to the site-specific management planning and implementation activities for individual mountain parks and protected areas.

Currently there is a growing number of new donors for mountain protected areas in Afghanistan. This growing momentum for re-building the protected areas system within the country is very encouraging, because it is taking place in a post-conflict situation where it would not necessarily be identified as a conventional "development" priority. If properly designed the protected areas projects can contribute significantly to the sustainable human development objectives that are at the core of the Afghanistan National Development Strategy.

As a result there has been continuing progress on environmental management improvement in the Hindu Kush Mountains and the NE corner of the country up into the Wakhan Corridor and the Pamir Mountains.

This includes:

- ▶ field work underway by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) on management plans for new protected areas in the western Hindu Kush Mountains;
- ▶ USAID and Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) in a three-year program to re-survey and develop management plans for many of the pre-1979 and new sites in the Hindu Kush and Wakhan Corridor; including the Big Pamir Reserve;
- ▶ the European Union's integrated watershed development projects within the Amu Darya basin all of which include upland rehabilitation projects and new protected areas;
- ▶ ADB and WCS funding for work on the "peace park" concept that would link wildlife conservation and community development work among Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and Tajikistan.

Progress on all of these initiatives is very dependent on the security situation in the Hindu Kush remaining stable (and hopefully improving) and there are still many "no-go" areas. However, there is considerable momentum building with the new NEPA taking a leadership role.

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