

Birdwatching and Protected Areas of Georgia

Ramaz Gokhelashvili & Lela Azniashvili

Georgian Center for the Conservation of Wildlife, Georgia

ramaz@gccw.org

lela@gccw.org

Keywords: Georgia, birdwatching, protected areas, assessment, nature resources management.

Introduction

Birdwatching is a new type of nature based tourism for Georgia and little is done yet at national level for its development. The major reasons that are supportive for birdwatching development in Georgia are – diversity, rarity, endemism and important congregations of birds, globally recognized wetlands and Important Bird Areas, several wintering sites, existence of major bird migratory corridors and stopover or “refueling” areas, and all these in combination of unique cultural-historical attractions. Potential benefit of birdwatching

development to the national economy is estimated at about 40 million USD per year (Gavashelishvili et al. 2005).

One of the major strategic objectives for Georgia Protected Areas development is to promote nature tourism in these areas. This objective is declared by the government of Georgia and the Protected Areas authorities. Birdwatching, as part of nature based tourism, may significantly benefit Protected Areas of Georgia by increasing their incomes, and at the same time, by positively changing the public’s perceptions about nature resources. This pa-

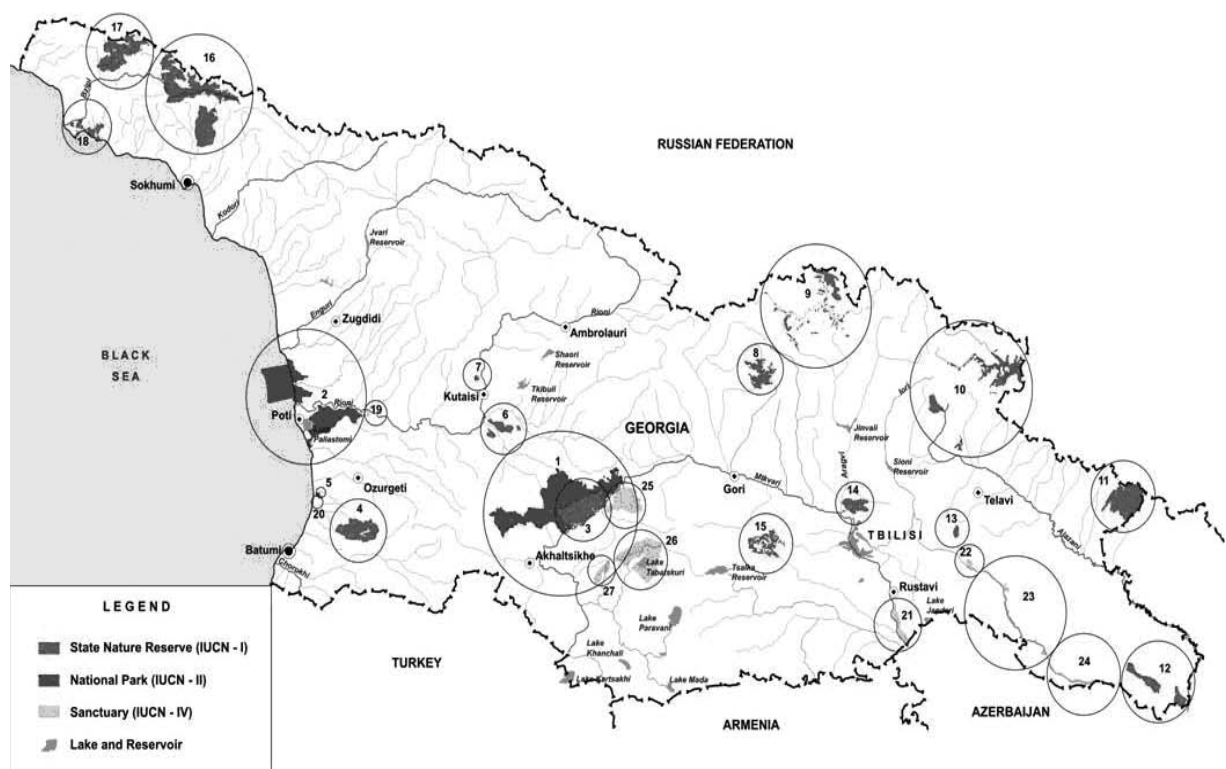


Figure 1: Protected Areas of Georgia.

per analyses the current situation of management of protected areas in Georgia to compare it with the declared objectives.

Methods

The geographical distribution of Important Bird Areas and the range of the Caucasian Black Grouse (*Tetrao mlokosiewiczii*) were compared to the existing protected areas in Georgia using a GIS to examine system level planning results in contrast to the tourism development objectives. In addition, the current situation in existing protected areas was assessed by collecting and analyzing the following information for twenty randomly selected protected areas: biological importance (species richness, endemism, number of globally threatened species, etc.), socio-economic importance (provision of resources or services to surrounding settlements), vulnerability (existing and potential threats), management effectiveness (existence, quality and implementation status of management plans) and available funding (provided by both the national government and international donors).

Results

The Protected Areas system of Georgia (figure 1) is comprised by 21 Nature Reserves (IUCN Category I), 4 National Parks (IUCN Category II), 3 Natural Monuments (IUCN Category III) and 11 Sanctuaries (IUCN Category IV). The major problems identified in protected areas of Georgia are: non-existence of management plans or low effectiveness of existing management plans; lack of marketing; very low capacities for tourism management.

The Important Bird Areas are the most attractive places for nature tourists, including birdwatchers, because they are identified and delineated with internationally approved and tested criteria and refer to the biologically richest sites (Gokhelaşvili et al. 2004). The Protected Areas System and the Important Bird Areas of Georgia (figure 2) are compared by overlaying these maps. It is found that only 15 % of Important Bird Areas fall within protected areas. Besides, the map of Caucasian Black Grouse, one of the most attractive species for birdwatchers (Gokhelaşvili et al. 2005), is overlaid to

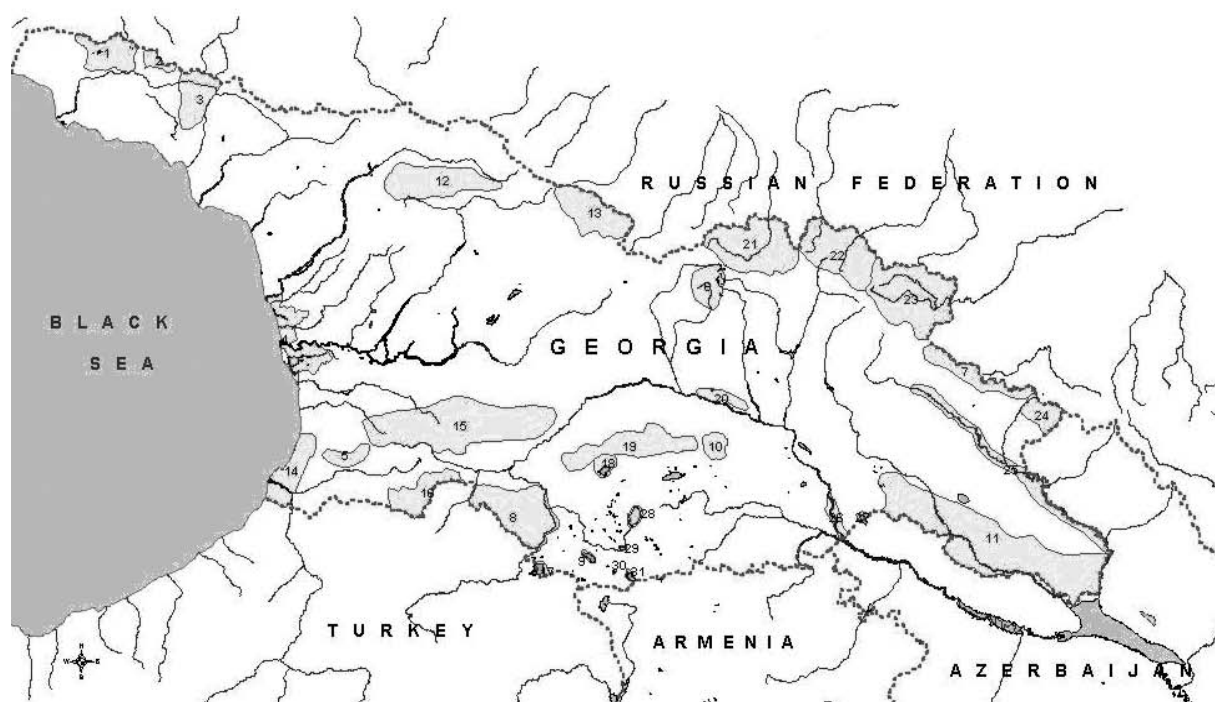


Figure 2: Important Bird Areas of Georgia.



Figure 3: Caucasian Black Grouse and Protected areas of Georgia.

the protected areas map (figure 3), which shows that only 4.5% of the Caucasian Black Grouse habitats are within current protected areas of Georgia.

Conclusion

The conclusion is made that the current Protected Areas system of Georgia does not support one of its strategic objectives to develop nature based tourism. The recommendations are presented to make relevant changes both at system-level planning and at management planning of individual protected areas. Recommendations are grouped in four major categories: 1) Enlargement of protected areas - Tusheti, Kazbegi and Lagodekhi; 2) Establishment of new protected areas at key sites – Meskheta, Javakheti, Adjara and Racha-Svaneti; 3) Capacity building of existing protected areas to improve the management effectiveness - Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park, Tusheti National Park, Kolkheti National Park, Kazbegi Nature Reserve, Vashlovani National Park, Algeti Nature Reserve and Lagodekhi Nature Reserve, 4) Development of birdwatching guidelines for the protected areas – relevant infrastructure, training of guides, national and international marketing.

References

- Gavashelishvili L., Gokheshvili R., Javakhishvili Z. & Tarkhishvili D. (2005). A Birdwatching Guide to Georgia. Tbilisi.
- Gokheshvili R., Gavashelishvili L. & Javakhishvili Z. (2005). Caucasian Black Grouse Action Plan. Tbilisi.
- Gokheshvili R., Javakhishvili Z. & Azniashvili L. (2004). Important Bird Areas of Georgia. Tbilisi.