

Ecotourism expedition to the Ile-Alatau National Park

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Ile Alatau National Park was founded in 1996 and occupies a territory of 202, 292 ha on the northern slope of Zailiiskiy Alatau in the south of Kazakhstan. The park was founded to protect unique mountain landscapes with its flora and fauna, to improve recreation and tourism opportunities and to carry out research on methodologies for protection of natural complexes under recreation pressure.

The park's elevation ranges from 600m to 4,540m above sea level; The highest peak is Constitution Peak. Tens of other peaks within the park's territory exceed 4,000 m above sea level. Flora of the park includes 1,000 species, the majority of them being typical to the forest midmountain zone. Fauna diversity is very rich with 2,000 species of identified invertebrates, 245 vertebrates, including 8 fish species, 4 amphibians, 8 reptiles, 178 bird species and 47 mammals. The attractiveness of the park for tourism is enhanced by the largest glacier of the northern part of Zailiiskiy Alatau – Dmitriyev's glacier (17km sq in area), Bolshoye Almatinskoye Lake of rock dammed and tectonic origin (area of 1km sq and depth of 39.3m), radon and siliceous thermal springs, petroglyphs, Talhiz and Turgen medieval settlements and burial grounds dating back to the early Iron Age (Dzhanyspayev 2006).

The park is located as close as a 30 minute drive from Almaty with a population of almost 1,5 million people. According to Iskanderov, the number of tourists in 2008 reached 190,000 people (2009). Some issues that the administration of the park face include: illegal occupancy of the land, construction and tree cutting, uncontrolled tourism, littering and budget shortages for protection of borders (Iskanderov 2009; www.greensalvation.org 2009). From an ecological point of view, the pollution of air and waters lead to glaciers melting, deforestation, decrease in animal populations and ultimately, have an effect on landscape and biological diversity of mountain ecosystems. For the development of tourism the main obstacles are: poorly developed recreation infrastructure, insufficiency of nature oriented ecotourism programmes, limited experience of staff members in ecotourism implementation, carrying capacity limits enforcement, and the lack of highly qualified staff due to low wages (Begembetov and Vinogradova 2006).

The study was conducted in the format of an ecotourism expedition to Ile-Alatau national park. The expedition was organized with the following purposes: collection and systematization of data on tourism potential of the Kazakhstani part of Northern Tyan-Shan; development of ecotourism routes; production of cartographic material; monitoring of the behavior of the snow leopard; identification of Edelweiss's types; collection of medical-biological data and participation in sport competition. Only mountaineers eligible to participate in mountain tracks of the 6th category (the most difficult one on the grading scale 1-6) and those eligible to lead mountain tracks of the 3rd category could participate in this trip. There were 14 participants in the expedition, the total length was 167km, trip duration - 20 days.

The planned route was successfully completed by all the participants, 20 ecotourism routes were tested and recorded with details such as time to the site, length, best time of the day to start the journey, description of relief, optimal traverses, safety issues as rockfalls and avalanches. Two passes were tracked for the first time, descriptions were completed and registered in the Federation of Sport Tourism and Tourist Multiathlon of Republic of Kazakhstan. The diary of the group leader contains such information as presence of other tourist groups on the top (by picking

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a note at the top and leaving a new one), info on river crossings (time of the day), description of optimal routes thorough the passages and mountain tops.

The main outcomes of the expedition included the following: the guidebook titled "Across Northern Tyan-Shan" that contains the description of 20 ecotourism routes of different degrees of difficulty, assessment of technical difficulties of passes and ascents, tourist maps and illustrations, video film about the expedition, 500 photos, data on the behavior of snow leopard in natural habitat, herbarium of edelweiss etc.

The results of the expedition allowed us to develop and test 20 optimal ecotourism routes for the territory of Ile-Alatau national park. The list of necessary equipment and their weights, as well as best sites for food and equipment depots were prepared.

It was concluded, that the territory of Ile-Alatau national park has a great potential for mountain ecotourism and mountaineering. Since the last expedition during Soviet times, the relief and other physical geographical characteristics have changed and needed to be reflected on the maps. Park's administration can use the developed routes and cartographic materials in their ecotourism programmes and promote ecotourism opportunities for people in different physical condition – from amateurs to professional mountaineers.

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