

Preparation of Georgia's report on the Emerald Network of Areas of Special Conservation Interest

Narrative Report

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List of Abbreviations

EEA – European Economic Area

EIONET - The European Environment Information and Observation Network

EU – European Union

EUNIS – European Nature Information System

Res. 4 – Resolution No. 4 (1996) of the Bern Convention

Res. 6 – Resolution No. 6 (1998) of the Bern Convention

Res. 8 – Resolution No. 8 (2012) of the Standing Committee, adopted on 30 November 2012 on the national designation of adopted Emerald sites and the implementation of management, monitoring and reporting measures

1. Introduction

Emerald Network is a pan-European ecological network with the goal to preserve the biodiversity of Europe. The Network was established as part of the implementation of the Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (Bern, 1979), also known as the Bern Convention. Georgia became a Contracting Party to the Convention in 2009.

Besides being an obligation to be fulfilled under the Bern Convention, the development of the Emerald Network is stipulated by the EU-Georgia Association Agreement. Therefore, its implementation is of a paramount significance for Georgia's efforts towards European integration. Notably, the development of the Network is also part of the Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan of Georgia (2014-2020).

Emerald Network monitoring is an ongoing process. Systematic reporting across Europe is essential for understanding pan-European trends of species' and habitats' conservation status and for the Standing Committee to evaluate progress towards meeting the Convention's aims. According to Resolution No. 8 (2012)¹ reporting needs to be conducted on a six-yearly basis using a uniform reporting format as closely as possible with the reporting done by EU member states under Article 12 of the EU Birds Directive and Article 17 of the EU Habitats Directive.

Each country was expected to submit one general report, which was to include mandatory information about several provisions of the Bern Convention. In addition, the main achievements under the implementation of the Recommendation No. 16 (1986) and Resolution No. 5(1998), and the main measures taken to ensure the coherence of the Emerald Network had to be briefly described.

The reports had to be prepared for the endangered natural habitat types (EUNIS classification) included in the Annex I of Resolution No. 4 (1996) and the species requiring specific habitat conservation measures listed under Annex I of Resolution No. 6 (1998). In the first reporting cycle the Bern Convention secretariat selected a short list of habitats and species for reporting (see **Annex 1** for the sample species report and **Annex 2** for the habitat report sample).

Reporting under Resolution No. 8 was a standardized process and relevant guidelines were provided by the secretariat. The standard report consists of Annexes from A to F.

This narrative report describes the process of the preparation of Annex B, which covers the protected species, and Annex D, which covers endangered habitat types for the reporting period of 2013-2018 as required by Resolution No.8.

2. Objectives

The overall goal of the project was to assist the Government of Georgia with the implementation of the Bern Convention.

¹ <https://rm.coe.int/1680746515>

The specific objective was to prepare Georgia's first report on the Emerald Network of Areas of Special Conservation Interest for the period 2013-2018.

NACRES was assigned to prepare Annexes B and D of the above national report.

3. Methods Used

The methodology for the preparation of the report to the Bern Convention followed the guidelines provided by the Standing Committee - *the Ad-hoc restricted Group of Experts on Reporting on the Emerald Network of Areas of Special Conservation Interest* agreed on 26 September 2017 in Belgrade on the reporting format on the conservation status of species and habitats, which was adapted from the one developed by the EU, to ensure systematic and pan-European approach between EU and non-EU countries.

The overall outline of the report was as follows:

Annex A – General report: gives an overview of the implementation and general measures taken.

Annex B – Report format on the main results of the surveillance under paragraph 4.1 of Resolution No. 8(2012) for Resolution No. 6(1998) species (Except Bird Species which are handled under Annex F): gives background information for assessment of the conservation status of a species.

Annex C – Assessing conservation status of a species (Species evaluation matrix): the evaluation matrix used to assess the conservation status of a species using the information in the Annex B reports. The assessment conclusions for each species are also reported in the respective Annex B report.

Annex D – Report format on the main results of the surveillance under paragraph 4.1 of Resolution No. 8(2012) for Resolution No. 4(1996) habitat types (Habitat type reports): gives background information for assessment of the conservation status of a habitat.

Annex E – Assessing conservation status of a habitat type (Habitat type evaluation matrix): the evaluation matrix used to assess the conservation status of a habitat type using the information in the Annex D.

Annex F – The information reported in Annex F for Bird species includes data used to undertake the assessment of population status at Pan-European level together with the information needed to evaluate the main drivers and impact of the Emerald Network on the bird species populations at country level.

The Standing Committee selected habitats and species on which contracting parties were requested to report in the next report covering the period 2013-2018 (see Appendix for the list of habitats and species to be covered).

Eight natural habitat types (EUNIS classification) and 16 species of 5 plants, 4 mammals, 1 reptile, 2 fish and 4 invertebrate of Georgia were included in the short list for the first reporting cycle. The information included in the report covered the entire territory of Georgia and were sub-divided into the biogeographic regions. Those were alpine, black sea and steppic regions. Some species or habitats were restricted to only one or two of the regions, while others were represented country-wide.

The report for the species included comprehensive information on the range, population and habitat inside the biogeographic regions of Georgia. Short-term (last 12 years) and long-term (last 24 years) trends for the above-mentioned parameters were also assessed. Based on this information the future prospects and the overall conservation status for the species were evaluated. Additional information given by the experts included the current pressures and future threats based on which the conservation measures were recommended.

In addition to the biogeographic regions of Georgia, the population size and trend was also assessed for the entire the Emerald Network.

The data acquired from the reporting process included the reports and standardized distribution maps that had to be prepared in a specified map format (10 x 10 km ETRS89 grid in ETRS LAEA 5210 projection). Additional maps such as species distribution would also be included if available.

The Bern Convention requested the countries to report national distribution information of species and habitats using the 10x10km grid. This would allow the national data to be used in parallel to those on species and habitat distributions produced by the EEA member states to show a full European coverage of species and habitats distribution. Future prospects had to be filled out to indicate the trends in the species parameters as good, poor, bad or unknown. Information on pressures, threats and conservation measures were also reported using agreed standard lists.

The guidelines provided on the reference portal for Resolution No. 8² were used for the report preparation as well as for the input of information in the reporting format. Limited field work has been carried out during the reporting period and the majority of the information was based either on the previously collected data or the expert opinions.

The reports were prepared by relevant specialists. Habitats, plant species and the majority of mammals were assessed by the NACRES team, that included a botanists and zoologists. For the other animal species external experts were invited. The reporting format was adapted as a questionnaire and provided to the experts as a guidance. Mr. Giorgi Mamadashvili from the National Forestry Agency prepared data on the invertebrates; Drs. Bela Japoshvili and Davit Tarkhnishvili both from Ilia State University respectively prepared reports on the fishes and the reptile.

² <https://www.coe.int/en/web/bern-convention/reporting-res.-8-2012->

4. Description of Activities

In the first phase, a project team was set up and introductory meetings were organized. Both the Team Leader and experts were familiarized with the reporting guidelines and analysed suggested methods for species and habitats assessments. In parallel, the team gathered preliminary information on the features (species and habitats) to be reported on and clarified any possible taxonomic or classification issues i.e. once again reconfirmed the existence of those species and habitats in Georgia (certain concerns and questions had been raised by some experts since the last biogeographical seminar, which require clarification). Additional consultations were taken from a wider circle of experts on specific questions.

After clarifying all possible taxonomic (for species) and classification (for habitats) issues, the team agreed on the methodology for assessing of and reporting on the selected species and habitats.

The second phase consisted of a comprehensive literature review and analyses to gather all existing information on the species and habitats to be reported on; information gaps were identified and the feasibility of field surveys were assessed considering the limited time and resources of the project. Additional rapid assessments and brief surveys were conducted to fill some of the identified gaps for priority features as appropriate.

During the third phase, draft individual reports were prepared and submitted to NACRES by team members. The team leader reviewed the draft individual reports and compiled the first draft report. *Annex F* of the report dealing with the bird species had been also incorporated into the first draft report as it became available from Ilia State University.

The draft report was presented in the first national reporting workshop, which was attended by representatives of the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture (MoEPA) and other key stakeholders as well as by experts.

Subsequently, comments and suggestions from key stakeholders were considered and the project team **finalized Georgia's report on the Emerald Network of Areas of Special Conservation Interest** and submitted it to the beneficiary (MoEPA) and the donor (GIZ). The report was also submitted to the Bern Convention.

The reporting team participated in the Third Workshop on Reporting under Resolution No. 8 (2012) of the Bern Convention that was held in Paris (23.04.2019). During the training sessions, the existing issues were discussed and the future recommendations were provided. The workshop covered the following topics: the reporting tool, the range tool, distribution maps and the reporting reference portal. The new skills, knowledge and guidance that were acquired during this meeting were of great use in the report preparation.

Field surveys were carried out to collect general information for the identification and assessment of forest habitat types. We based the information on the coastal dune scrub (B1.6) on an accurate distribution map and personal consultation with a wetlands specialist³. As for the Mediterranean xeric grassland (E1.3) or the Central European subcontinental thickets (F3.246), we largely relied on expert opinion as well as on the review of the extremely limited available data and literature. The point distribution of terrestrial underground caves,

³ Izolda Machutadze, Researcher at Batumi State University

cave systems, passages and waterbodies (H1) was mapped in 2014. This resource in combination with the consultation with experts was used for the reporting.

Some of the short-listed animal species are common in Georgia, e.g. brown bear (1354 *Ursus arctos*) and wolf (1352 *Canis lupus*) and relatively more information was available on these species through long term scientific studies by various institutions. The other target species (both plants and animals) are relatively rare. However, little was known about the specific threats to those species which made it difficult to planning adequate conservation activities. Therefore we prepared recommendations solely based on expert opinion rather than empirical data.

5. Results and Lessons Learned

5.1. Results

The final reports for all habitat types and species have been compiled in the Reporting Tool and uploaded on the Central Data Repository of the EIONET portal both as Access database and in **xml format** (see example in Annex 1).

The distribution maps were created for the species and habitats in two separate files with the 10X10 km grid system. The standardized maps were uploaded as ESRI shape files.

It was difficult to meet many of the reporting requirements for certain species and habitats due to lack of information. The reports were often based on expert opinion with limited amount of available information. Much more comprehensive field surveys would be necessary in several repetitive cycles to generate solid scientific data on the current state of certain habitat types and species as well as to determine current trend.

All the documents including the reports as well as the maps were placed on the Central Data Repository of the EIONET⁴ server.

⁴ The European Environment Information and Observation Network

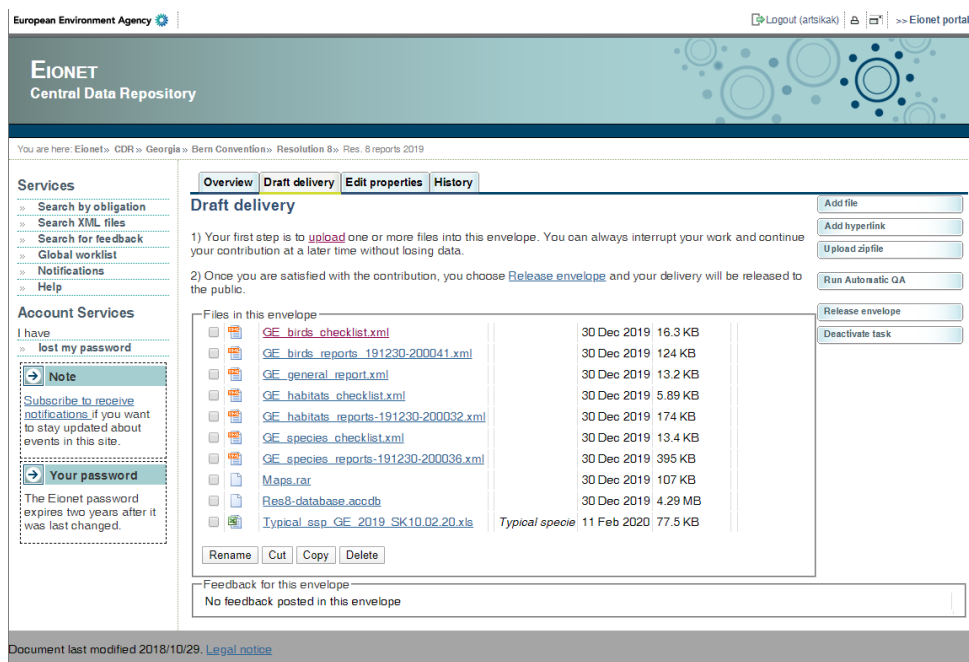


Figure 1: Sample of data placed on EIONET Central Data Repository.

5.2. Lessons Learned and recommendations

Certain challenges were encountered both in the data gathering phase as well as the reporting part. The main issue was the lack of data on both the Res. No. 4 habitat types as well as the Res. No. 6 species. Therefore many fields in the report had to remain blank. There was an attempt to minimize such blank fields by consulting more than one experts on the same subject. However, this approach still didn't produce any valuable additional information. It is, therefore, extremely important that credible studies are initiated for each of the reporting feature (species and habitats) as soon as possible in order to accumulate sufficient data by the next reporting cycle.

Recommendations for improving future reporting process:

- International expertise should be employed to help clarify issues with habitat classification according to EUNIS.
- Regular monitoring and assessments are needed to gather information on current pressures or future threats of the species and habitat types could be overcome by.
- Taxonomic and genetic studies need to be carried out for understanding the current situation for certain Res. 6 species.
- Additional work is needed to identify or possibly reclassify certain Georgian habitat types of Res.4 according to EUNIS.
- Some habitat types are not compatible with the local situation in Georgia in terms of indicator species and need to be updated.

- The distribution maps need to be updated.
- *G1.6 Fagus woodland* is widely distributed in Georgia. However, untouched sections or priority areas for conservation need to be identified.
- *H1 Terrestrial underground caves, cave systems, passages and waterbodies* need to be studied in more detail; the available distribution map has distribution points rather than the outlines of entire cave systems.
- *E1.3 (Mediterranean xeric grassland) and F3.246 (Mediterraneo-Euxinian deciduous thickets)* habitats need to be identified in the field and their distribution maps need to be created.
- The promotion of local scientists to use EUNIS classification system for their research would create more capacity towards fulfilling Bern Convention obligations in future.

Appendix

Short list of habitats

CODE	HABITAT
B1.6	Coastal dune scrub
D4.1	Rich fens, including eutrophic tall-herb fens and calcareous flushes and soaks
E1.3	Mediterranean xeric grassland
F3.241	Central European subcontinental thickets
G1.6	Fagus woodland
G1.A4	Ravine and slope woodland
G3.9	Coniferous woodland dominated by Cupressaceae or Taxaceae
H1	Terrestrial underground caves, cave systems, passages and waterbodies

Short list of species (non-avian)

	CODE	SCIENTIFIC NAME
F	1134	<i>Rhodeus sericeus amarus</i>
F	1146	<i>Sabanejewia aurata</i>
I	1014	<i>Vertigo angustior</i>
I	1060	<i>Lycaena dispar</i>
I	1042	<i>Leucorrhinia pectoralis</i>
I	1083	<i>Lucanus cervus</i>
M	1352	<i>Canis lupus</i>
M	1355	<i>Lutra lutra</i>
M	1308	<i>Barbastella barbastellus</i>
M	1354	<i>Ursus arctos</i>
R	1220	<i>Emys orbicularis</i>
P	6216	<i>Hamatocaulis vernicosus</i>
P	1428	<i>Marsilea quadrifolia</i>
P	2098	<i>Paeonia tenuifolia</i>
P	1758	<i>Ligularia sibirica</i>
P	1939	<i>Agrimonia pilosa</i>