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Nukus reflections on transboundary cooperation in Ustyurt

25 participants from Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, as detailed in Annex I, met at a regional Knowledge Exchange meeting in Karakalpakstan (Uzbekistan), held from 18-20 May 2023. The workshop was organized within the project “Ecological and economic development of the Aral Sea region” supported by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and implemented by the GIZ.

The objectives of the meeting were 1) to inform about ongoing nature conservation activities in the protected areas of Ustyurt region, 2) to define gaps in and issues for transboundary cooperation, and 3) to discuss steps to further strengthen transboundary nature cooperation in Ustyurt.

The following gaps and issues were identified:

1) Impact of border fences on migration

Situation:

Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan are member states of the Central Asian Mammals Initiative (CAMI). At CMS COP13, CAMI Parties were urged to adopt conservation measures, such as removing barriers to migration, in the Transboundary Conservation Hotspots identified for CAMI, such as Southern Ustyurt.

During the Knowledge Exchange meeting, results of field expeditions in Southern Ustyurt along the Kazakh-Uzbek border from the Uzbek side as well as from the Kazakh side were presented. At the Uzbek border, initial results from camera traps, installed in spring 2023, were evaluated. At the Kazakh border, an assessment was conducted based on sightings and track recording in 2021. The results show, that the fence is a barrier for ungulates both resident in the region and potentially able to enter from neighboring territories (gazelles, urial, kulan, etc.). As a result of the fencing, the gazelle and urial populations were fragmented and their seasonal migration routes is affected. In addition, wire fences are also a direct factor in increasing mortality in the gazelle population. Cases of death and severe injury to gazelles have been repeatedly recorded.

In 2023, the ACBK will conduct further surveys on wire fences along the Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan border and assess their impact on wildlife. Based on this, new information and proposals will be provided.

Recommendations for next steps:

For an improvement of transboundary migration, based on scientific results, a closer collaboration with border services is recommended.

As a result of the Kazakh border visit in 2021, the following recommendations were handed over to the border authorities in Kazakhstan in 2022:



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- In the southern border section of Kazakhstan with Uzbekistan, adjacent to the Southern Ustyurt National Park in Uzbekistan, it is recommended to remove 4-5 lower rows of fencing along its entire length – this will allow transboundary migration of goitered gazelles, urials and potentially kulans.
- Until a mutual solution between Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan is found in the frame of the CAMI/CMS, the currently open gaps on Kazakh side shall be closed in a way that the ungulates can not enter the corridor that turn out to be death traps.
- Remove the fence on the Kazakh side of the border section with Turkmenistan along the Gaplangyr cliff (about 69 km long), as this area is critical for both goitered gazelles and the urial. Here, the border fence is without function, as vehicles are not able to cross the steep cliffs.
- On the remaining part of fencing along the Kazakh-Uzbekistan border (about 205 km), where goitered gazelles were also observed, openings should be provided at certain intervals.

At the end of May 2023, within a joint expedition of scientists and representatives of border services the implementation of the first recommendations will be considered.

On the Uzbek side of the border fence, in total 20 camera traps were installed at the border between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Continuous scientific evaluation of the data is considered very important and shall be pursued. It was proposed to check the camera traps every six months to get a comprehensive picture of migration at the border.

The participants propose to work further on scientific data on border migration, also with the help of camera traps on the Turkmen side of the border, to present results at the 14th COP CMS in Samarkand in October 2023. The event is regarded as a good opportunity for a policy dialogue on impact of fences along the borders on migration of wild animals.

2) Conservation & protected area management

Situation

In January 2022, the Cold Winter Deserts of Turan were nominated as a World Heritage Site by the three states of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. In the Ustyurt region, the Complex (Landscape) Reserve Saigachy and Southern Ustyurt National Park from Uzbekistan and the Gaplangyr State Nature Reserve from Turkmenistan have been nominated. A final decision on inscription is foreseen for September 2023. A designation as World Heritage would significantly enhance the sites and commit the participating state parties to protect the World Heritage across borders in accordance with the UNESCO guidelines.

In Mangystau Oblast (Kazakhstan) it is planned to expand the Ustyurt State Nature Reserve. The planned new cluster is bordering to Turkmenistan in the south and to Uzbekistan in the east. The natural-scientific rationale (ENO) has been approved by the Scientific and Technical Council of the Committee of Forestry and Wildlife of Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources. The technical-economic rationale (TEO) is currently in process. The expansion of Ustyurt State Nature Reserve is expected in 2023.

Recommendations for next steps:

The participants see great potential in the possible inscription of the Cold Winter Deserts of Turan on the World Heritage List. In case of inscription, the UNESCO requires the establishment of a transnational management system. This can be done within the framework of a Memorandum of Understanding, which the



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three countries have signed as part of the World Heritage nomination. It was suggested that the experience of the transnational World Heritage site Western Tien-Shan, whose transnational management system is currently being elaborated, should be used as a model.

The establishment of a transnational management system for the World Heritage components can be a preliminary stage for the establishment of a transboundary protected area in Ustyurt. As an appropriate regional organization to support and backstop the establishment, the participants defined the Interstate Commission on Sustainable Development (ICSD) of International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS). The Turkmen delegation is ready to bring this proposal to the agenda of the next meeting of the ICSD.

From the Kazakh side, interest was expressed in the issue of including the planned protected area cluster in Southern Ustyurt in the nomination of the Cold Winter Deserts Turan after expansion of Ustyurt State Nature Reserve.

3) Monitoring

Situation:

All participants expressed interest and need for a regular exchange of monitoring data. However, there is a weak basis for sharing of data, knowledge, best practice examples and technologies, and for promoting scientific cooperation and coordination. On the one hand, this is due to the fact that the type of monitoring is based on national legislation and there are no unified monitoring standards. On the other hand, the dissemination of monitoring data requires the consent of the according governmental authorities.

In the Southern Ustyurt National Park, the implementation of SMART as a digital monitoring tool has started successfully. However, due to the lack of sufficient transport, SMART monitoring is mainly carried out on foot. SMART was also introduced in the Complex (Landscape) Reserve Saigachy. Currently, however, the data quality is not yet sufficient to move from the test phase to the application phase.

Recommendations for next steps:

As long as there are no officially approved regional databases for data exchange, the participants aim to exchange as much data as possible on an informal level. For this, the Knowledge Exchange was seen as an important step to establish contacts and build trust.

SMART can play an important role in standardizing monitoring standards and facilitating the exchange of data. Here, further strengthening of the tool is necessary. In Southern Ustyurt National Park, monitoring surveys with cars or motorcycles would significantly improve monitoring quality. In Saigachy, further capacity building via trainings and supervision is needed. For both protected areas, the exchange with other protected areas where SMART is applied is of high importance.

The implementation of SMART in other protected areas in the area in Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan may promote future data sharing.

CONCLUSION

To address these issues, participants to the workshop expressed their strong commitment towards the elaboration of a Memorandum of Understanding on transboundary cooperation between Kazakhstan,



Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The main goal of the MoU is to improve nature conservation in Ustyurt region by strengthening coordination and cross-border cooperation.

Nukus, Uzbekistan, 20 May 2023

Annex I: List of participants