

Project Update: December 2015

Members:

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Introduction

Following our successful field study expedition to Samegrelo in September 2015, Paul Bartlett, Joachim Gratzfeld, David Kikodze and Nukri Sikharulidze had several meetings with officers of the Agency of Protected Areas and the Deputy Minister of Education and Science in Tbilisi, Georgia. Our observations in the field confirmed that *Betula megrelica* has a very restricted habitat. Around that habitat there is increasing logging and grazing activity with no control or management. It was clear that the habitat was therefore under threat from human activities. The purpose of these meetings was to explain our project, the problems faced and see what they could do to help.



Figure 1: Paul Bartlett with *Betula megrelica*, Mt. Askhi

It became clear from our talks that:-

1. Creating a protected area or national park will not dramatically change how local populations use the resources, as there is very little effective policing in existing protected areas.
2. Alternatives to indiscriminate clear felling of the wild forest, such as lowland plantations, may not be attractive as it is quite easy to remove wild timber by truck.
3. Much of rural Georgia (and Samegrelo in particular) is very poor, with few well paid jobs and a great deal of subsistence farming. Wood is the only affordable fuel available for heating. Logging and grazing are both activities that can supply a steady income, and both are traditional activities of the region.

While we will still recommend that the area around the habitats is made into a protected area, we think that a better long term solution to achieve protection for these habitats is by engaging the local populations. In particular the schoolchildren who will potentially be the next generation of loggers and grazers.

Next steps

We have developed a 3 point strategy.

Pilot Schools Programme

Initially we would like to engage a teacher to run lessons and activities in one of the main schools in Samegrelo. These lessons would teach the students about their local forest areas, the plants and animals in them, the rare species and the dangers they face. We would focus on *Betula megrelica* but also teach a wider understanding of biodiversity and its benefits and the need to manage resources. Initially we could fit this in by using appropriate lesson time plus the 1 hour a week free time in the Georgian National Curriculum and also after-school activities. We have a young and enthusiastic biology teacher in mind, who is known to the Institute of Botany and has helped us with the fieldwork. As part of this project we would like to set up links between the Georgian schools and some schools in the UK near to Stone Lane Gardens. In this way we could teach schools in both countries about conservation using a practical example. At the same time the link would provide important cultural and language exchange. We feel that the opportunity of this kind of link will create more enthusiasm for the conservation side of the project (in other words, it can be used as a sweetener to make the schools more accepting of the project, and also allow the teaching staff to fit the project into their lesson plans).

National Educational Olympiad

During our meeting with the deputy Minister for Education and Science, Dr Giorgi Sharvashidze, we were informed of a project in Georgia called the National Educational Olympiad. This is a contest between most schools in Georgia and the winners create a forum of young talent. It was suggested this forum may be able to help think of innovative ideas to interest young people in conservation of Georgian endemic species. We met with two students from this forum and they were keen to be involved in the project. So we will encourage this forum to play a part in the education of other young people in Georgia, focussing initially on the Samegrelo region. The forum may be able to use social media communication to reach the youth of Samegrelo in a way that official school channels cannot.

Influencing the National Curriculum

Ideally, we want to see the National Curriculum in Georgia changed to include more emphasis on teaching about Georgian rare plant and animal species and a greater understanding of the rich and diverse wildlife within Georgia along with the dangers posed by human activity. We are hoping that our pilot project in Samegrelo can be used as an example of how the project could be rolled out nationally in a more formal way. As our pilot project develops, we will be in regular contact with the Ministry of Education and Science to stimulate interest in changing the curriculum.

Next steps

SLG and BGCI are meeting in January to draft a Conservation Action Plan, which will then be passed to IoB for their comments and amendments. Discussions with IoB in early 2016 will decide when the Pilot Schools Program begins. It is likely that engagement with the National Educational Olympiad will begin about the same time.

Long term funding

This project will require management and grass-roots funding for several years. BGI will actively pursue funding for this, as well as taking on a project management role. Similarly, Stone Lane Gardens will pursue continuation funding from the Rufford Foundation and others.