

**Process Framework for Involuntary Restrictions**

CEPF Grant 110756

Fauna and Flora International

Building Capacity to Protect Besh Aral's Meadows, Marmots and Megafauna

Besh-Aral Nature Reserve, Jalal-Abad, Kyrgyz Republic

1. **Grantee organization:** Fauna & Flora International (FFI)
2. **Grant title:** Building Capacity to Protect Besh Aral's Meadows, Marmots and Megafauna
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## 8. Project background

### Importance of Besh-Aral and the Western Tien-Shan for biodiversity and people

Our project focuses on Besh-Aral State Nature Reserve (a Key Biodiversity Area and strictly protected area) and the surrounding wildflower meadow habitats. Our target area is found within the Western Tien-Shan mountain range (a CEPF priority corridor and a World Heritage Site) and is a vital stronghold for numerous threatened species found nowhere on earth except the Western Tien-Shan. These include Menzbier's marmot (found only in and around Besh-Aral, in three sites in Kazakhstan and two sites in Uzbekistan, and presumed extinct in Tajikistan) and 65 endemic plant species, including wild tulips (e.g. *Tulipa kauffmania*) and onions (e.g. *Allium pskemense*). The protection of Besh-Aral is also important for a number of large mammals and raptors (e.g. grey wolf, Tianshan brown bear, snow leopard, pallas cat, golden eagle, Himalayan vulture and saker falcon) that live in and move through the reserve as part of a corridor that spans across the wider landscape and international borders. The Chatkal River also moves through the reserve and its tributaries provide drinking water, irrigation and fishing areas for seven downstream communities in both Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Livestock grazing is the most important livelihood for these communities who depend on wildflower meadows and pasture areas found throughout the surrounding landscape for hay-making and grazing respectively.

### Statement of conservation need

Threats to Besh-Aral State Nature Reserve and the surrounding landscape are increasing and there is a narrow window of opportunity to strengthen local management before vital areas of wildflower meadow habitat (home to the globally threatened Menzbier's marmot) are either lost or irrevocably damaged.

Significant areas of Menzbier's marmot habitat outside of the reserve have already been lost or damaged as a result of gold mining and unsustainable grazing of cattle, goats and sheep, and time is running out to protect the last few areas of good habitat (e.g. in Terek Say). These threats are growing and are now also putting areas of marmot habitat inside the reserve at risk. Local reports indicate that livestock herders from nearby villages and from further afield in Kyrgyzstan (e.g. Talas oblast, Chatkal and Aksy regions) and Uzbekistan are re-entering Besh-Aral in search of grazing areas (following a long period where illegal grazing had declined) and that use of sheepdogs is also leading to increased mortality of marmots. Of greater concern, there are also media reports that up to one third of the reserve's territory ('Sandalash') could be conceded to a gold mining company in the coming years.

Although capacity of the reserve is low, until recently, it was sufficient to deal with relatively low pressure on the reserve's natural resources, and there is even some evidence of habitat recovery. However, the reserve team is now having to deal with heightened and more complex threats which are

influenced by various other actors operating in the surrounding landscape (e.g. local government, community representatives, pasture committees and mining companies). Limited dialogue and coordination between the reserve's management and these stakeholders hampers efforts to protect the reserve's territory. These same stakeholders are also not working together to reduce threats to remaining wildflower habitat in the landscape (important both for livestock grazing and Menzbier's marmots found out of the reserve).

Through scoping trips and needs assessments carried out by FFI staff in February 2018, January 2020 and August 2020, we have identified four main conservation problems that limit local stakeholders' abilities to protect the reserve and manage wildflower meadow habitat in the surrounding landscape:

(1) Efforts to protect critical areas of Menzbier's marmot habitat inside and outside of Besh Aral are hampered by out-of-date information

Besh-Aral State Nature Reserve was created in 1979 in order to protect Menzbier's marmot, a species endemic to the Western Tien-Shan. The species serves as justification for the reserve's existence, is a flagship for conservation of the area's rich wildflower meadows and is also a food source for globally threatened mammals and raptors. It could even serve as a flagship for sustainable pasture management outside of the reserve, as it is thought that the species does well in lightly grazed areas.

However, no scientifically reliable data on the species' population size, health (it may be subject to stress due to mining operations), the condition of its habitat or its co-occurring species is in place (the last population surveys were completed 2001-2 and around 12,000 marmots remained at that point). Without such data, the reserve management is unable to target monitoring and patrols to the areas where this species most needs protection. The absence of such data also weakens any case to be made to protect areas outside of the reserve under severe threat from mining or over-grazing and will ultimately undermine any efforts to protect the integrity of the reserve itself, should an attempt be made to award the Sandalash area to a mining concession.

Absence of an up-to-date baseline on marmot population size and health also undermines global efforts to coordinate conservation action and raise awareness for the species across its range in the Western Tien-Shan. It has now been 12 years since the IUCN Red List assessment for the species was updated and no global plan exists to protect the species (although recent information on the status of the species in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan does exist).

(2) Besh-Aral State Nature Reserve's rangers do not have the capacity to adequately patrol critical areas of marmot habitat

Besh-Aral State Nature Reserve is a strictly protected area located in the western edge of the Chaktal region of Kyrgyzstan. Day-to-day management is led by the reserve's Director and Deputy Director (based locally) and implemented by a team of 35 staff (26 rangers). Actions carried out by the reserve team follow an annual management plan approved by the Department of Specially Protected Areas, based in Bishkek.

Although Besh-Aral State Nature Reserve benefited significantly from a World Bank project funded from 1999-2006, today it lacks resources and technical capacity to effectively manage the 112,018 hectares site. A METT (World Bank Management Effectiveness Tracking Tool) assessment carried out by UNDP in

2019 identified a number of areas in need for improvement (lowest scores included research; working with public and private neighbors, communities and indigenous people and tourism facilities). The METT made a number of recommendations including (1) improving biodiversity monitoring (particularly in relation to increasing threats from mining); (2) establishing collaborations with local specialists to improve monitoring and research; (3) updating equipment to improve ranger safety and (4) improving engagement with local communities.

FFI carried out an additional needs assessment with the reserve's director in January 2020 which confirmed that the reserve's staff are currently unable to adequately monitor and protect Menzbier's marmot and its habitat. The reserve's team of 26 rangers find it challenging, or lack the appropriate equipment, to easily reach, stay in and patrol the more remote areas of the reserve (including parts near the Uzbekistan border, where threats from grazing are believed to be increasing). Basic biodiversity monitoring is carried out by the reserve staff but the methods are outdated and support is needed to yield higher-quality data that would help the reserve staff track threats to, and the status of, key species and their habitats in the reserve.

(3) Local support for marmot conservation is limited and local perspectives are not effectively shared and adopted into management of the reserve and the wider landscape

When Besh-Aral was created in 1979 grazing was officially banned from the area although continued in practice until 1991, when the fall of the Soviet Union, and tighter border controls between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, led to a significant reduction in grazing pressure. As far as we know, there was no process to gain prior or informed consent from local herders or communities for the creation of the reserve at the time. Since the early 90's, herders have largely used pasture land found outside of the reserve's territory. Over this period pressure on the reserve has been relatively low. In total, just over 22,000 people live in five villages within 50km of the reserve's boundary. Only one village, Ak-Tash (population 1,072) is relatively close to the reserve (5km away); the other >21,000 people all live between 20 and 50km from the boundary.

However, more recent reports indicate that pressure is now increasing with herders from local communities, from nearby regions in Kyrgyzstan and from Uzbekistan all reportedly entering the reserve to graze livestock in the high montane meadows in the summer time (where Menzbier's marmot also occurs). The METT completed by UNDP in 2019 also indicated that local communities had poor understanding of the reserve's boundaries.

Forty-one years since the reserve was created, few efforts have been made to understand the local livelihoods of the communities and pastoralists living outside of the reserve and how these livelihoods affect and are affected by the reserve's management. Our own understanding of the pasture committees in the Chatkal and Terek-Say (those closest to Besh Aral) indicates that they are – compared to other Pasture Committees FFI is working with in Kyrgyzstan – poorly organized and could, with support, more efficiently use pasture areas outside of the reserve (although this assumption needs to be more fully explored). The reserve itself has no systematic outreach programme to promote understanding of its objectives and activities with local people and there is no mechanism in place to share information, reduce conflict and address issues raised by different stakeholder interest groups.

Long-term efforts to reduce grazing pressure in the reserve are highly unlikely to be successful without greater collaboration between the reserve's management and the local pastoral communities. Outreach

efforts to persuade livestock herders against using the reserve are also unlikely to be successful unless delivered with practical messaging on alternative options (e.g. adoption of sustainable pasture management techniques).

(4) Efforts to reduce or prevent large-scale threats to Besh-Aral and the wider landscape are undermined by poor understanding on grazing and mining activity

Large-scale grazing and mining both threatens wildflower meadows in the surrounding landscape and impacts Besh-Aral.

Grazing throughout the landscape is mostly managed and regulated by Chatkal and Terek-Say Pasture Committees which are themselves managed by the Local government (Ayil Okmotu). The Committees are responsible for developing and monitoring Pasture Management Plans (which dictate where and how much livestock can use pasture areas). Several different mining companies (mostly focused on gold) operate in the landscape, and these companies vary in their size and their likely willingness to adhere to environmental legislation.

There is currently very poor understanding of (1) how both grazing and mining activity overlap with the reserve's territory and with Menzbier's marmot habitat in the wider landscape and (2) the extent of their secondary impacts (e.g. polluting local rivers, stress to wildlife from noise, facilitation of hunting from migrant workers etc).

Without a rigorous assessment of mining and grazing activity in the landscape it is extremely difficult to identify which areas of habitat are at greatest risk of being lost or highly degraded. This in turn undermines efforts to engage with Pasture Committees, the Ayil Okmotu and Mining companies and ultimately convince them to reduce, regulate or avoid activity in the most sensitive areas. Ultimately, the lack of such an assessment means that the State Agency for the Environment and Forest Protection also lack hard data needed to prevent or address any unlawful extraction in the area.

The grant from CEPF will support actions to address each of the four issues named above, including, critically, improving the capacity of Besh-Aral authorities and staff to better manage the reserve and engage with stakeholders operating in the surrounding landscape.

The work will take place in a particular social context. Besh-Aral is located within the far western reaches of Jalal-Abad province. On the Kyrgyz side of the reserve's boundary, there are five villages in the vicinity of the reserve, with a total population of close to 22,000 people. Of these villages, only Ak-Tash is based reasonably close to the reserve boundaries, with the other four between 20 and 50km away. All villages are relatively remote and are at least 150 km by road from the nearest large town, Kerben. The most important livelihood is related to livestock grazing; typically men are responsible for grazing livestock in the surrounding pasturelands, but women are also involved in, and benefit from, the sale of livestock products, including meat, milk, butter, cheese etc. A smaller number of villagers are also employed by mining companies, particularly in Terek-Say.

As described in other sections of the proposal, before the establishment of Besh-Aral reserve in 1979, people in both Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan used Besh-Aral as a grazing area. Grazing levels have decreased significantly since then with grazing mostly carried out in pasture areas outside of the reserve. However, evidence indicates that grazing is increasing again in the reserve's areas.

In part down to the remote location of these villages, the local pasture committees in these areas have received less technical and financial support from NGOs and from government to improve pasture management. As a result, the pasture committees are less well organized compared to others we are aware of in Kyrgyzstan. Their Pasture Management Plans do not adopt various techniques to support more sustainable long-term use (e.g. rotational grazing, limiting grazing in sensitive areas, grassland restoration, use of efficient breeds etc.) that have been proven to be effective in other areas of the country.

## **9. Participatory implementation**

FFI's Kyrgyz and international staff conducted scoping trips to the reserve and relevant state agencies in February 2018, January 2020, and August 2020. The January 2020 visit included a needs assessment with the Besh-Aral reserve director. These consultations led to specific project endorsements from:

- The State Agency for Environmental Protection and Forestry, Department for Specially Protected Areas (3 September 2020)
- Chaktal Village Government (27 August 2020)
- Besh-Aral State Nature Reserve (28 August 2020)

The project will help to determine perspectives of local residents and herders operating in the landscape as a critical first step towards improved engagement with the reserve's management and towards more sustainable use of the wider landscape. Interviews and workshops carried out will be attended by at least 25% women (with higher participation of men expected due to the likely focus on livestock grazing). The project will help to develop mechanisms for improved collaboration between the reserve's management and local communities, and we will ensure that voices of both women and men from all villages are represented in these fora. Their perspectives and viewpoints (collected under interviews carried out by FFI) will also be presented to FFI and recommendations will be made to adapt reserve management accordingly.

## **10. Criteria for eligibility of affected persons**

Eligible people will include people from the five villages within the vicinity of the reserve who graze animals or otherwise benefit from livestock products, plus the small number of people employed by mining companies. These villages are together home to approximately 22,000 people. Four of these villages are between 20-50 kilometers of the reserve and one, Ak-Tash is somewhat closer.

## **11. Measures to assist the affected persons**

FFI anticipates improved patrols by reserve staff to ensure local adherence to already existing limits on grazing and entry into the reserve. There will be no new laws or regulations put in place. Nevertheless, it is possible that individuals currently grazing their animals in the reserve, illegally, will now be instructed by the reserve staff to take their animals to other available public land.

FFI project personnel will work to minimise any impact on local people through the following activities.

Firstly, through facilitation of two joint-stakeholder meetings, we aim to mediate improved communication between the reserve staff and the local grazing communities so that they can work together to resolve and develop solutions to illegal grazing through dialogue, reducing the likelihood of the need for enforcement by the reserve staff. We anticipate that results of these meetings would include (1) reserve staff have greater understanding of situation faced by local herders leading to proportionate responses to illegal grazing; (2) grazers have better understanding of reserve management and increasingly opt to use pasture land outside of the reserve and (3) the reserve commits to work with and support local grazing communities to adopt improved pasture management techniques in public lands outside of the reserve, lessening the need for people to use the reserve territory.

Secondly, FFI will help pastoral communities to address barriers they face to grazing in the areas outside of the reserve. Working closely with the local Pasture Committees and with the support of local pasture experts, we will develop an action plan for sustainable pasture management. The plan will include clear guidance to support those people currently using grazing areas in the reserve on how to make better and more efficient use of pasture areas outside of the reserve. The plan will be based on improved understanding of pasture use in the landscape (including the physical, social and economic barriers to greater use of pasture areas outside of the reserve) and this will be developed following completion of interviews with at least 40 local people and through meetings with the local Pasture Committees.

## **12. Conflict resolution and complaint mechanism**

FFI will ensure that local stakeholders are aware of the work and understand how to voice complaints, if any. We will:

- Post information in local languages in each village, at our own offices in Bishkek, at the reserve offices, and at the State Agency in Bishkek.
- Hold public meetings explaining our activities. FFI will host a small meeting at the start of the project in the office of the Besh-Aral Reserve and in the surrounding villages. In these meetings FFI staff will introduce the CEPF project, inform stakeholders about FFI as an organisation and share information on how to contact FFI and CEPF representatives throughout the project period.

FFI will create fliers about the project's objectives and planned activities and these will also include contact information for FFI staff. Fliers will be distributed to each of the five surrounding villages to further increase local awareness of the project activities

During all meetings and in general interactions with the public, FFI personnel will inform local people and other stakeholders that they have the right to raise a grievance at any time with FFI, Besh-Aral reserve personnel, or CEPF about any issue relating to the project. Before starting the project implementation, local communities will be informed of the objectives of the grant. They will be given telephone numbers and e-mails of contact persons at FFI, the reserve, and CEPF. This information will also be put on all education materials that will be produced during this project implementation including posters, brochures, and booklets. Contact information of the Regional Implementation Team and CEPF will be made publicly available in local languages. FFI will respond to grievances raised in writing within 10 working days of receipt and communicated to CEPF within 15 days.

We will inform stakeholders that grievances should proceed in the following order below. If the stakeholder is unsatisfied with the response at any step, they may proceed further.

- Project Manager, FFI. Dr. Jarkyn Samanchina – [Jarkyn.samanchina@fauna-flora.org](mailto:Jarkyn.samanchina@fauna-flora.org), +996 , 502 557 277
- Mr. Amankulov Raikan, Director of Besh-Aral State Nature Reserve, +996 777 320 724
- Mikhail Yakovlev, RIT country coordinator, +996 708 148 015, [mihey-painter@mail.ru](mailto:mihey-painter@mail.ru)
- Lizza Protas, RIT Team Leader, WWF-Russia, [lprotas@wwf.ru](mailto:lprotas@wwf.ru)
- CEPF Executive Director: [cepfexecutive@conservation.org](mailto:cepfexecutive@conservation.org)

### **13. Implementation Arrangements**

The project will be delivered on the ground by FFI's team in Kyrgyzstan, with technical input from staff in the UK and several local consultants. The FFI implementation team in Kyrgyzstan is made up of:

Dr. Jarkyn Samanchina, Country Director, Kyrgyzstan. Jarkyn is responsible for implementation of the project on the ground. She will represent FFI at several high-level project meetings and will ensure that the project is delivered to a high quality and meets expected safeguards.

Ormon Sultangaziev, Central Asia Ecologist. Ormon will ensure high quality technical outputs for the project, particularly in relation to the delivery of field surveys and work with pasture management. He will work closely with marmot zoologists involved in fieldwork planned under the project.

Nazgul Turdumatova, Programme Officer, Kyrgyzstan. Nazgul will lead on marmot habitat surveys and will also support completion of a Red List Assessment.

Bolot Tagaev, Sustainable Livelihoods Coordinator, Kyrgyzstan. Bolot will carry out socioeconomic surveys with local communities in the area and will compile stories on the lives of rangers and local pastoralists for a film to be produced by the project.

Mariia Cherniavskaia, Programme Assistant, Kyrgyzstan. Mariia will assist with all aspects of the project, and will also input technically to field activities. Mariia will support organisation of various workshops planned with local people, rangers and marmot scientists, planned for the project.