

Process Framework

CEPF Grant 112672

Kyrgyz Association of Forest and Land Users

Conservation of wild apricots and almonds in the Isfayram-Shakhimardan Region

Kyrgyzstan

1. **Grantee organization:** Kyrgyz Association of Forest and Land Users
2. **Grant title:** Conservation of wild apricots and almonds in the Isfayram-Shakhimardan Region
3. **Grant number:** 112672
4. **Grant amount (US dollars):** approximately \$150,000
5. **Proposed dates of grant:** May 2022 – December 2023
6. **Location (country):** Kyrgyzstan
7. **Date of preparation of this document:** 10 March 2022

8. Project background

The place. The CEPF Priority KBA KYR 20, Isfayram-Shakhimardan (220,000 hectares), lies within the priority corridor 7, Turkestan and Alai mountains, and is home to at least fifteen globally threatened species. The area has a dry climate. It lies within the Kadamzhai District of the Batken Region of Kyrgyzstan. To the north is Ferghana Valley of Uzbekistan and to the south is the Alai Range. 92 percent of the district is mountainous, with the remainder being foothills, valleys, and river terraces, notably those of the Isfayramsay and Shakimardan rivers. The Uzbek enclave, Sokh, is in the northern part of the district.

CEPF priority species, wild almond (*Amygdalus bucharica*) and wild apricot (*Armeniaca vulgaris*), plus another wild almond species (*A. spinosissima*) are known to grow in the gravelly soils of the region, as do many other drought-resistant species. The two CEPF priority species are little studied in the region, with limited knowledge of their distribution and habitats.

Government. The primary protected area within the KBA is the Surmatash State Nature Reserve (66,194 hectares). The second major land manager is the Uch-Korgon Forestry Company, a state-owned forestry enterprise that operates independent from the district or regional governments. The Kadamzhai District is split into “rural communities” (ayyl aymagy) that themselves consist of several villages. Two of these are in the proposed project area: Kotormo (which includes 10 villages and 9,537 people) and Maidan (which includes 13 villages and 12,537 people). The people in Kotormo and Maidan are mainly engaged in agriculture, animal husbandry and forestry. All speak the Kyrgyz language, and they are 99 percent Kyrgyz. Each ayyl aymak has its own local government that is part of the district government – the ayyl okmotu – that is headed by the head of the Kadamzhai District.

Legal framework. The protection of rare and endangered plant species and natural plant communities is regulated by the Law of the Kyrgyz Republic “On the Protection and Use of the Flora” dated 20 June 2001, No. 53. This law creates the Red Book of the country that lists species subject to special protection. This list was last updated in 2004. It does not include *A. bucharica* or *A. vulgaris*. At the same time, the national Forest Code states that wild almonds are rare, vulnerable, and valuable. (Concept of Development of the Forest Industry of the Kyrgyz Republic for the period up to 2040, approved by the Decree of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic dated 27 May 2019 No. 231.)

Law No. 53 of 16 June 1999, "On Environmental Protection" allows for the creation of nature reserves and Law No. 18 of 3 May 2011 “On Specially Protected Natural Territories” states that it is illegal to collect forest resources, hunt, or graze livestock within nature reserves, including Surmatash. However, Surmatash has no management plan.

Local governments have the authority to create protected areas or “micro-reserves,” but the procedures for doing so are not uniform across the country and the incorporation of these into the national protected area system is still unclear.

Threats. Lack of knowledge on wild almond and apricot leads to inadvertent degradation of the habitat. This plus an insufficient legal framework to protect the species means that local people will graze livestock in sensitive areas. People also collect the species as rootstock for grafting with cultivars and for oil production. At the same time, the Uch-Korgon Forestry Company does not provide special protection to the species – forest plantations are known to introduce pests and disease. Finally, climate change is leading to the shrinking of rivers and lessening water sources, limiting the number places that endemic species can survive.

The goal of this project is to improve the habitat for globally threatened wild almond and apricot species within the Isfayram-Shakhimardan KBA by addressing some of the issues named above.

Isfayram-Shakhimardan is a large area with at least three major land administrators (Kadamzhai district government Surmatash SNR, Uch-Korgon Forestry). We will not improve the management of the entire area within the life of this grant, but instead will focus on wild almond and apricot as a way to organize related interventions.

Component 1. Legal Review and Improvements. As noted above, the law “On the Protection and Use of the Flora” which creates the Kyrgyz Red Book has not been updated since 2004 and does not include *A. bucharica* or *A. vulgaris*. We will review the law and propose a general update of the listed species. We will prepare support for specific listing and protection of wild almond and apricot. Listing of these species creates better guidance to district governments and state land managers. We will present our recommendations, with proposed language to allow for the listing of these species, to the Ministry of Natural Resources, Ecology and Technical Supervision, the Forest Service under the Ministry of Agriculture and the National Academy of Sciences.

Component 2. Ecological review of the KBA. Protection of the wild almond and apricot in Kadamzhai district, as well as the many other globally threatened species, requires an understanding of where these species are, specifically, and also a better understanding of threats from grazing and collection by local people, and disease and pests from the forestry estate. We will prepare a biological survey that identifies groves or clusters of the two target species, and then assesses the threats in these locations.

The team doing this work will consist of short-term consultant experts in biology, soils, climatology (for changing water flows and rainfall), and mycology (for assessing fungal diseases).

Component 3. Improved management on large tracts of state land

The two largest land units with direct control over the management of the KBA are the Surmatash State Nature Reserve and the Uch-Korgon forestry estate. Working with these two entities can lead to wholesale improvements.

While Surmatash is an IUCN Category I reserve that was established in 2009, it lacks resources. Most importantly, it does not have a management plan. We will provide the expertise to help draft a management plan, that among other things, ensures conservation of priority species like wild almond

and apricot. At the same time, we will help reserve authorities complete the Management Effectiveness Tracking Tool.

The managers of Uch-Korgon forestry estate have indicated their support for this project, partially because it helps them meet sustainability obligations to the government. They have agreed to establish a 0.30 hectare nursery for wild almond and apricot and a separate, 2-hectare replanting zone for these trees. Additionally, they will create a 4-hectare area to protect an area of particular plant diversity. Following innovations in the Himalayas, we will help build an “artificial glacier” or an “ice stupa” – a mound of snow and ice that, as it melts, provides water to the protected zone below.

We plan to engage 5 men to help establish the nursery and 5 women to manage the nursery.

Component 4. Community Engagement in Kotormo and Maidan ayyl aymagy. Our work in the communities will follow two tracks.

First, we will raise awareness in these villages that Isfairam-Shakhimardan is a place of special ecological importance, with diverse and unique species. This will include conducting outreach in the villages at public meetings, providing basic information about ecology of the region, and special information on the need to protect wild almonds and apricots. We will also discuss how Surmatash reserve is protected by law, how we are helping develop a new management plan, and how people are obligated to follow existing laws on entering the reserve to collect products or graze their animals. We will also post signs indicating areas of biological importance.

We plan to train 25 people (at least 8 of whom are women) as outreach staff to explain to the communities the importance of the KBA.

Second, we will address one reason people graze their animals look for resources in the wild areas, which is that they do not have alternatives for their income. Thus, we will consult with the communities on income generating options. While we consult first on final choices, we expect that we will support growing of high value fruit and nut trees (domestic species of almond, walnut, pistachio, and apricot), and beekeeping near to these same groves, plus processing and marketing of these products.

We are planning to train 50 men in the management of the fruit orchards and beehives and 50 women in processing and marketing of products.

This approach creates the possibility of negative outcomes that this safeguard plan is designed to mitigate against.

- Listing of wild almonds and apricots as protected species could lead to reducing people’s access to land where those species grow.
- Improved management of Surmatash could lead to people not being able to graze animals or collect forest products in the area, although technically this is not allowed already.
- Improved management of Uch-Korgon forestry estate could lead to people not being able to graze animals or collect forest products in the area.

9. Participatory implementation

KAFLU has about 1,000 members in the Batken region, where the Kadamzhai District and project area is located. In this region, we recently implemented a project on sustainable pasture management that identified solutions to pasture management conflicts in Maidan and Markaz. We also are part of an ongoing project with Fauna & Flora International, "Protection of wild tulips and support of grazing communities in the mountains of Kyrgyzstan", in two pilot sites in the Batken region. KAFLU also provides consulting services to agro-forestry operations in the region. Thus, we have multiple ongoing relationships in the region.

We received formal endorsement of this proposal from:

- Maidan District, Director, E. Abdilatov, 18 January 2022
- Kotormo District, Director, R. Tabaldiev, 18 January 2022
- State Agency for Environment and Forestry, Uch-Korgon Forest Enterprise, Director, A. Temirbayev, 15 January 2022
- Ministry of Agriculture, Director, A. Musaev, 30 December 2021

During implementation, Component 1 will include round-table discussions with stakeholders in Kadamzhai about the implications of formally protected wild almonds and apricots. Component 3 will require the inputs of many stakeholders to improve habitat on the Uch-Korgon forestry estate. Last, Component 4 is entirely about community engagement, especially to develop grazing plans and identify alternative incomes sources.

10. Criteria for eligibility of affected persons

Eligible people include the residents of Kotormo and Maidan, particularly about 3,700 households living close to Surmatash Nature Reserve and the Uch-Korgon forestry estate. Of those, we will focus on those that graze animals and collect products in those two land areas.

11. Measures to assist the affected persons

- First, we will raise awareness in these villages that Isfairam-Shakhimardan is a place of special ecological importance, with diverse and unique species. This will include conducting outreach in the villages at public meetings, providing basic information about ecology of the region, and special information on the need to protect wild almonds and apricots. We will also discuss how Surmatash reserve is protected by law, how we are helping develop a new management plan, and how people are obligated to follow existing laws on entering the reserve to collect products or graze their animals. We will also post signs indicating areas of biological importance.
- Engagement of up to ten people to help manage the nursery.
- Training of 50 men in the management of fruit orchards and beehives and 50 women in processing and marketing those products.

12. Conflict resolution and complaint mechanism

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

- Have a communications and public relations specialist who is a point of contact for all issues.
- Maintain information and links about the project on the KAFLU website.

During all meetings and in general interactions with the public, KAFLU personnel will inform local people and other stakeholders that they have the right to raise a grievance at any time with KAFLU, local authorities, nature reserve personnel, forest estate 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 KAFLU, the district government, 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 Kyrgyz or Russian, as appropriate. If KAFLU receives a grievance, it will communicate the grievance, together with a proposed response, to CEPF and the RIT within 15 days.

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

- Communications Specialist (to be determined), kyrgyzafllu@gmail.com
- Aitkul Burkhanov, Project Manager, KAFLU, a.burkhanov58@gmail.com, +996-555-704-878
- Mihaile Yakovlev, RIT country coordinator, mihey-painter@mail.ru
- Lizza Protas, RIT Team Leader, WWF-Russia, lprotas@wwf.ru
- Conservation International Ethics Hotline: +1-866-294-8674 / secure web portal: <https://secure.ethicspoint.com/domain/media/en/gui/10680/index.html>

13. Implementation Arrangements

The project will be coordinated from KAFLU offices in Bishkek and in the field from the city of Kadamjay. The primary field-facing personnel will be:

- Team Leader: Aikul Burkhanov (Bishkek)
- Communications Specialist: TBD (Kadamjay)
- Field Coordinator: TBD (Kadamjay)