

**Social Assessment**

**3 April 2023**

**CEPF Grant 114017**

**Plateau Perspectives**

***Strengthening Co-management in Yagnob National Park for More Effective Conservation***

**Yagnob Valley, Tajikistan**

## **Grant Summary**

1. **Grantee organization:** Plateau Perspectives
2. **Project title.** Strengthening Co-management in Yagnob National Park for More Effective Conservation
3. **Grant number.** 114017
4. **Grant amount (US dollars).** Approximately \$172,000
5. **Proposed dates of grant.** June 2023 – February 2025
6. **Countries where activities will be undertaken.** Tajikistan
7. **Date of preparation of this document.** 30 March 2023
8. **Summary of the project** [copy and paste Project Rationale and Project Approach from proposal].

### Project Rationale

The CEPF Ecosystem Profile was prepared in 2016, before Yagnob National Park was designated in 2019. Scientists who helped define the place that CEPF calls KBA TJK 6, with 2,000 hectares, focused on nesting sites of Egyptian vultures and the presence of six other globally threatened species, as shown in Appendix 4 of the Profile. When the park was declared, it included the entire valley and extends to a neighboring KBA, TJK 7, Upper Gissar, all of which lies in the CEPF corridor called the Koytendag and Hissar Mountains. Our project will focus on the area of the park, with 58,771 ha, which encompasses all of KBA TJK 6, parts of TJK 7, and extends into the larger CEPF corridor.

The Government of Tajikistan formally established Yagnob National Park in May 2019 in the upper portions of the Yagnob Valley. This recognition came after over ten years of considerable effort by several local community members and project partner NGO "Anahita Public Organization" (APO) in raising awareness about Yagnobi ecological and socio-cultural heritage as an integrated biocultural territory. Culturally, Yagnobi people are descendants from the Sogdian Empire and have long been the custodians of the Yagnob Valley. Regarding its biodiversity and ecological value, Yagnob Valley constitutes a globally recognized Key Biodiversity Area (KBA) in Tajikistan, encompassing parts of the Zeravshan and Hissar mountain ranges in the priority conservation corridor known as the "Koytengdag and Hissar Mountains."

The national park was created to preserve and restore natural complexes with special ecological and cultural values, to preserve the unique cultural heritage, to develop responsible tourism, to conduct research, and to achieve sustainable use and conservation of natural resources. The national park has opened new possibilities for the conservation of biological and cultural diversity in the Yagnob territory. The local communities and Tajik government agencies have just developed and agreed a formal management plan for the new park. However, although there is general agreement that the national park should operate along principles of "community co-management," these have not been explicitly incorporated into the recently endorsed plans. There is nonetheless a keen interest from the authorities to collaborate and learn about proven management approaches, community-level engagement, tourism development, and other aspects of national park design and operations.

Additionally, local communities are the best potential allies for Yagnobi conservation, and they are ready to participate if/when invited and/or welcomed; they also are keen to

engage in appropriate conservation-friendly income-generating activities such as the development of a trail network with associated homestays and other related local social enterprises if suitable training and support were available. This project thus comes in response to both *need* and *opportunity* - with the desire of local communities to develop appropriate sustainable income generation alongside their involvement in conservation action, and with the national park authorities welcoming (and in fact, keen to receive) technical inputs and guidance for developing the park in more effective ways through collaborative approaches with the Yagnobi people and communities in the region.

However, if the project were not implemented, then the national park authorities would not be pro-actively exposed to 'best practice' working models of park co-management, professional capacities of national park staff and local community members would not be strengthened in ways that enable new partnership-based conservation approaches to be trialed and anchored in the Yagnobi context, conservation actions initiated by the national park would generally alienate community members, advances in the development of alternative income generation approaches would be slowed, and ultimately without the full support of communities the national park would be unable to carry out regular comprehensive wildlife monitoring across the landscape, conduct anti-poaching patrols in remoter regions of the park where threats of incursion are highest, or engage with youth and women through schools for raising awareness and commitment to biodiversity conservation.

### Project Approach

The project will support a suite of interconnected and reinforcing activities under five components that will support the implementation of the Yagnob National Park's existing management plan (namely C1. Wildlife Surveys and Baselines, C2. Community Wildlife Monitors, C3. Alternative Livelihoods); to build the park's management capacities (C4. National Park Management Plan); and to build community awareness (C5. Environmental Awareness and Education). Each component and its related activities contribute to strengthening the overall management effectiveness of Yagnob National Park, particularly with co-management approaches.

The park operates mainly at the local level, with broad oversight from the State Agency of Specially Protected Natural Territories under the Committee for Environmental Protection of the Republic of Tajikistan. Significantly, from the beginning, the national park was conceived to build and strengthen partnerships with local communities - seeking to protect the natural heritage along with the unique and endangered Yagnobi sociocultural heritage present in the valley. Thus, the park authorities are open to the notion of "co-management" and, furthermore, through their long-standing relationship with Plateau Perspectives' partner organization, Anahita PO, they welcome all the support that this project will bring to strengthen the Yagnob National Park. Currently, the national park has six staff members, all local: four rangers (including the Park Director), one security staff, and one cleaner.

Many of the project's activities will equally strengthen the professional capacity of the communities living in the park to contribute to conservation goals, both through the national park's operations as well as independently, the latter building on a recognition of the communities' long-standing sense of attachment to the land and their

commitment to maintaining the ecological integrity of the area. Altogether, around 18,000 Yagnobis live in different parts of Tajikistan, of which approximately 650 live in the valley in very challenging environmental and socioeconomic conditions (there used to be around 4,000 people living in Yagnob Valley). The people who live in the valley are here collectively referred to as “the local community,” but equally may be referred to as a cluster of smaller groups (sub-communities), each with just a few families. Of the approximately 30 villages that once existed in the valley, many are now abandoned and, in many instances, only 2 or 3 families now reside in any given hamlet. Following the major social disruptions that were inflicted on the people in the 1970s when the vast majority of the people were forcibly removed, local customary laws and traditional knowledge have eroded and the local community is to this day still in the process of rebuilding. Currently, only 11 villages in the Yagnob Valley are inhabited and the community organizes much of its communal life with guidance and logistics provided through elected village leaders; one of whom is appointed also as the first director of Yagnob National Park.

Anahita Public Organization (APO) – and hence Plateau Perspectives, working in partnership – has been working closely with the local community for over a decade, in close collaboration with the senior village leader supplemented by numerous community consultations and multiple projects. Verbal consent has been given to APO and its trusted partners to participate and contribute into community affairs – ranging from education and health to the development of alternative income-generating opportunities such as community tourism, the protection and promotion of the Yagnobi language and other cultural concerns, and the development of the national park as a tool for jointly achieving common goals in nature conservation and local socioeconomic development.

The project focuses on two core themes: (i) co-management and (ii) local livelihoods. Longer-term conservation outcomes will be maximized by developing partnerships with the Yagnobi communities through co-management approaches. This broad strategy will be advanced through implementation of agreed conservation-oriented monitoring and research, in particular with the use of camera traps by park staff and local community members to jointly monitor selected endangered wildlife (most probably snow leopard) along with the development of a system of community wildlife monitors (park wardens), a series of high-level dialogues and workshops, and a study tour (exchange visit) to other parks that are successfully employing co-management to achieve conservation outcomes. In parallel, local community livelihoods also will be supported – in line with the mission of the national park – with the development and strengthening of alternative forms of income generation; bringing special focus on community-beneficial tourism. This will be achieved through practical measures that aim to strengthen local capacities in relevant aspects of tourism value chains as well as the national park’s capacities to plan and engage with tourism as a mechanism for development and conservation, including beneficial informational resources and a trail network in the park. For the furthering of community-beneficial tourism, three main ingredients will be explored through this project in addition to the core strategy of providing more space for community dialogues and local capacity building, namely the development of (a) a network of trails (identifying, marking, mapping, and possibly improving existing trails; note that no new trails will be created and no forest areas will be negatively affected); (b) the trial use of a yurt as an alternate (mobile) form of accommodation, useful especially for winter purposes; and (c) preliminary monitoring of local weather patterns

that could affect access and tourism use of the valley. All these elements are building on tourism that is already beginning to emerge but that lacks comprehensive planning and for which capacities are inadequate. Finally, both themes (co-management and alternative livelihoods) will be undergirded through the project with educational and awareness-raising activities undertaken in local schools with school children who, in turn, may influence their families.

The project is organized according to four main dimensions, into which the project's three work packages and activities (see below) will contribute and through which impacts and longer-term outcomes are anticipated: (i) biodiversity, (ii) human well-being, (iii) capacity of civil society, and (iv) regional enabling conditions for conservation.

Biodiversity: Selected wildlife species will be better protected - with reduced instances of poaching, regular monitoring (both visually and through remote sensing cameras), and increased community awareness and appreciation. Target species will include snow leopard (with field work using camera traps, supplemented by direct animal sightings and documentation of snow leopard sign including prints, scrapes, and scent markings) and another 1 or 2 wildlife species – either fauna or flora – to be decided jointly by community members and national park staff. Biodiversity conservation impacts will be achieved both through improved knowledge of species abundance and distribution patterns, which inform management decisions, and through increased awareness and appreciation amongst local communities for biodiversity that will be engendered through joint actions under this project.

Human well-being: Alternative livelihoods will be developed for local community benefit – leading to increased incomes and broader social benefits related to local empowerment and increased hope. Livelihood interventions will include support for developing new roles for residents as community wardens (this will be supported by awareness raising and capacity development activities under the project, leading to the development of a community-based network of wildlife monitors) along with development of assets-based livelihoods, e.g. developing responsible tourism in the Yagnob Valley. Capacity building in support of the development and improvements in small enterprises related to homestays, food production, nature guiding etc. will be offered to community partners. In addition, following this there will also be increased possibility that the national park shall wish to hire more field staff locally (in parallel with partnering with community wardens).

Capacity of civil society: Local communities in Yagnob Valley will be mobilized for conservation and the development of responsible livelihood alternatives such as ecotourism, including development of relevant associations based on shared interests (initially these will be informal, but if deemed appropriate then more formal recognition may be sought as well). Regionally, a "Friends of Yagnob Valley" (or "Friends of Yagnob National Park" – whichever may be deemed as the most appropriate under local circumstances, based upon local advice) will also be launched as a social mechanism for information sharing, awareness and promotion of conservation values, recognition of the valley as an important biocultural territory, and for mobilizing resources (such as contributions of time and expertise as well as possible financial and in-kind donations) for promoting/advancing conservation outcomes in Yagnob Valley. Outreach into schools

with awareness campaigns will dovetail well with such a social platform and ensure greater inter-generational interest in the valley's future. Finally, through the partnership approach adopted for the implementation of this project, the knowledge and capacities of a national partner NGO, Anahita PO, will also be strengthened.

Regional enabling conditions for conservation: National park staff and community monitors/wardens will receive training through the project's various field-based actions, the awareness of national park authorities of opportunities provided by co-management approaches will increase through the study tours and workshops organized, and the park's management plan will be reviewed and (potentially) amended in support of more community-centric approaches for biodiversity conservation in Yagnob Valley thereby building on and strengthening the aspirations of the Yagnobi community in regard to their biocultural territory.

9. **Indigenous People affected:** This section will describe the Indigenous People in the project area.

The Yagnob Valley is home to the Yagnobi people. Culturally, Yagnobi people are descendants from the Sogdian Empire and have long been the custodians of the Yagnob Valley. The Yagnob community has a long-standing sense of attachment to the land and a commitment to maintaining the ecological integrity of the area. Altogether, around 18,000 Yagnobis live in different parts of Tajikistan, of which approximately 650 live in the valley in very challenging environmental and socioeconomic conditions (there used to be around 4,000 people living in Yagnob Valley). The people who live in the valley are here collectively referred to as "the local community," but equally may be referred to as a cluster of smaller groups (sub-communities), each with just a few families. Of the more than 20 villages that once existed in the valley, many are now abandoned and, in many instances, only 2 or 3 families now reside in any given hamlet. Following the major social disruptions that were inflicted on the people in the 1970s when the vast majority of the people were forcibly removed, local customary laws and traditional knowledge have eroded and the local community is to this day still in the process of rebuilding. Currently, only 11 villages in the Yagnob Valley are inhabited and the community organizes much of its communal life with guidance and logistics provided through elected village leaders; one of whom is appointed also as the first director of Yagnob National Park.

"The history of the people inhabiting Yagnob Valley in Tajikistan has common roots with formerly powerful Sogdiana—an ancient state of Central Asia from the 6th century BC to the 7th century AD. [...] The natural isolation of the Yagnob Valley appealed to the Sogdians as a safe place to live [...] During 1970 and 1971, Soviet authorities deported the entire population of the Yagnob Valley to the cotton plantations around Zafarobod on the northwest border between the Tajik and Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republics. [...] In 1990, the Dushanbe-based Council of Ministers passed a resolution to reestablish all villages from which people had been deported. [...] Since independence [in 1991] the government of Tajikistan has promoted national awareness of the country's Sogdian heritage as part of an effort to construct a new national identity.

Although the Yagnobi are now permitted to return to live in the Yagnob Valley, only about 500 have done so since all of the homes had been destroyed and the valley is lacking infrastructure and economic base. About 4,500 Yagnobis remain in Zafarobod, the largest Yagnobi population center. In spite of the suffering and hardship [...] they have retained much of their culture and continue to speak Yagnobi as their first language. [...]

The valley of the Yaghnob River is situated in the middle part of Central Asia, at the border between mountains and desert plains. It has long been influenced by great historical events, wars and invasions, but its isolation protected the Yaghnobis traditional way of life, methods of natural resource use, and language. The remote valley is inaccessible for six months of the year. [...]

Yaghnob Valley represents an example of an “isolated peripheral area” [...] where each mountain valley has its own unique ethnic and cultural style of life and land use structure, highly adapted to natural conditions. The upper portion of the valley is a refugium of the Yaghnobi ethnos and its environment—a naturally isolated, ancient cultural landscape, with a highly adaptive economy. [...]

Remembering their traditional knowledge, [they] slowly began to rely on using locally available materials after returning to their ancestral land in 1990s. More than 30 plant species are used as medicinal plants in food preparation. [...]

For the last ten years, considerable effort has been directed to raising awareness about Yaghnobi ecological and spiritual heritage [finally leading to the creation of the] Yaghnob National Natural Park in May 2019. The park was created to preserve and restore natural complexes that have a special ecological and cultural value, to preserve the unique Yaghnobi language and cultural heritage, to develop ecological tourism, to conduct research, and to achieve sustainable use of natural resources. [...] The Yaghnobi community and Tajik government agencies are currently developing a co-management plan for the new park.”

Excerpts from “Yaghnob National Natural Park” written by [REDACTED], 12 August 2020. Source: <https://sacredland.org/yaghnob/>

More social context may also be read in the section “Mountain farming in Yaghnob Valley of Tajikistan” in the regional report recently published by the ICCA Consortium, entitled Territories of Life in West and Central Asia & the Caucasus: Diversity, present status, and threats (by Samakov and Foggin, see <https://report.territoriesoflife.org/national-and-regional-analysis/west-central-asia/>) (<https://report.territoriesoflife.org/national-and-regional-analysis/west-central-asia/grasslands-mountains/#tajikistan>).

10. **Potential impacts:** This section will assess expected project impacts (both positive and adverse) on Indigenous People.

Positive impacts will most likely include greater authority for Yaghnobi people via formal co-management approaches over the protected area and its natural resources. This can lead to greater “ownership” and more sustainable use of resources, with the anticipated positive impacts including *inter alia* healthier ecosystems with better water flow, shrub and tree coverage, landslide mitigation, and wildlife presence.

Positive impacts may include increased revenue from tourism within one to three years of project completion as well as enhanced pride in cultural heritage. In theory, though, tourism may also lead to negative impacts through overuse, disruption and/or disputes over revenues and benefits. Unmet expectations (such as if no or only limited tourism) may also lead to negative outcomes; thus, even discussion of potential future tourism has within it some inherent risk.

11. **Participatory preparation:** This section will describe the participation of affected communities during the project design process (i.e. prior to submission of the full proposal), and explain how Free, Prior and Informed Consent was obtained during project preparation or will be obtained prior to implementation of project activities affecting Indigenous Peoples.

Plateau Perspectives has engaged with key stakeholders in Yagnob Valley in two main ways: directly through an exploratory trip to the Yagnob Valley in June 2017, prior to the establishment of the national park, and in mediated ways through its main partner organization in Tajikistan, APO, along with other project-relevant organizations (with their own long-standing relationships with local communities) such as Central Asian Partnership, through which community-beneficial tourism and trail network will be advanced in the course of this project. In these ways, the project team has engaged with local stakeholders for already more than a decade.

Partnership agreements are highlighted elsewhere (under Organizational Strengths). In addition, professional guidance has been sought and received in regard to the project's strategy from the Global Snow Leopard and Ecosystem Partnership (GLSEP) Program, which has led to some aspects of its current formulation. Likewise, both Central Asian Partnership (CAP) and its affiliated venture "Yagnob Trails Network" as well as Global Parks (GP) in Canada were consulted and their recommendations are incorporated.

Finally, in regard to Yagnob National Park, Plateau Perspectives was consulted in 2019 to determine how best to incorporate co-management principles into its management plan and regular operations, with the aim of ensuring inclusive and equitable conservation. The park's first director and Plateau Perspectives' director spent two days together back in 2017; currently communications are mediated through APO and the national park has agreed to offer a letter in support of the project.

Most directly, the Anahita Public Organization (APO) – and hence Plateau Perspectives, working in partnership with APO – has been working closely with local communities for more than a decade, in close collaboration with the senior village leader supplemented by numerous community consultations and multiple projects. Verbal consent has been given to APO and its trusted partners to participate and contribute to local community affairs – ranging from education and health to the development of alternative income-generating opportunities such as community tourism, the protection and promotion of the Yagnobi language and other cultural concerns, as well as the development of the national park as a tool to jointly achieve common goals of nature conservation and socioeconomic development.

At the inception of work in the field, the project managers will seek and receive the Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) from appropriate representatives of the 650 Yagnobi who are now living in the valley.

12. **Mitigation measures:** This section will outline measures to avoid, minimize and mitigate adverse impacts and provide culturally appropriate benefits.

The nearest-term negative impact could be disputes over the theoretical distribution of revenues/benefits from tourism. The mitigation measure will be facilitated discussions led by APO, which is effectively indigenous to the area (working at the behest of local communities, i.e. by invitation). If people do not agree with plans, even in theory, we will not promote such tourism any further.

At some later date, negative impacts could result from overuse or culturally disruptive behavior by tourists. The mitigation measure will be in the planning phase, determining the appropriate number of visitors and creating a mechanism to control and review this.

At some late date, negative impacts could equally result from the inequitable distribution of revenues/benefits. As above, the mitigation measure will be for Yagnobi leaders to create a mechanism, in advance, to create a mechanism to ensure equitable sharing.

Models for such mitigation measures have been demonstrated by Plateau Perspectives through its prior work in the Tibetan Plateau region (Qinghai Province, China) and in Kyrgyzstan. For examples, see following reference documents and video production.

██████████, and ██████████ 2020. Promoting conservation and community development through ecotourism: Experiences from valued conservation landscapes on the Tibetan plateau. Plateau Perspectives Working Paper. Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan: Plateau Perspectives. Available at <http://plateauperspectives.org/wp-content/uploads/HPS-2020.pdf>

██████████. 2020. In Kyrgyzstan, community-based tourism shows a way forward. The Third Pole, July 31, 2020. Available at <https://www.thethirdpole.net/en/culture/in-kyrgyzstan-community-based-tourism-shows-a-way-forward/>

Video: "The Future We Want: Building Partnerships in Ecotourism and Conservation for Mountain Sustainability" is a ~20-min film produced by Marc Foggin & Pavel Bolshakov about the development of ecotourism in Central Asia, based on an exploratory venture organised by Plateau Perspectives and Horseback Planet Society around Lake Issykul in Kyrgyzstan in October 2019. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fuDZa3Qd5hY>.

Video: "Yagnob ICCA" is a ~5 minute video about exploratory trip in Yagnob Valley in June 2017. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6snYVbI1icg>.

13. **Timeline and resources:** This section will present an implementation timeline for each measure listed in Section 12, together with an estimate of resource needs.

██████████ and ██████████ from Plateau Perspectives and ██████████ from APO will be formally tasked with leading discussions on trail maps, tourism facilities, and tourism promotion. ██████████ and ██████████ have led such discussions previously. There are no additional financial resources needed for such interventions, as mitigation measures are discussion-based and built into the project approach.

14. **Monitoring and evaluation:** This section will explain how compliance with Safeguard Policy 7 on Indigenous Peoples will be monitored and evaluated. Monitoring and evaluation methodologies should be adapted to the local context, indicators, and capacity.

Project activities and progress will be monitored regularly and corrective measures will be implemented as needed. Monitoring will be conducted in collaboration with Yagnobi leaders and other local authorities. All work is designed to be collaborative with the communities themselves, where people can express their concerns, approval, and recommendations.

The project will also meet frequently with government agency representatives to assess progress toward project goals, including authorities in Dushanbe as required.

The project team and collaborators will meet periodically to monitor the project, review progress toward goals, and determine corrective actions, including in collaboration with external advisors, as needed.

**15. Disclosure:** CEPF requires that Social Assessments are disclosed to affected local communities and other stakeholders. Please describe your efforts to disclose this plan.

The project will put in place a grievance mechanism to provide people concerned that the activities undertaken or facilitated by this project may be adversely affecting them; noting however, that the Yagnob National Park (YNP) and 'the project' (i.e. the activities that are supported by PP and CEPF) are two distinct entities. Anyone who is concerned that any of the project's activities may be harmful to their own interests, or might cause any social or environmental harm, is encouraged to proceed in a two-step manner: first, to contact the project team (details below) and discuss informally what issues or concerns are at stake; and second, if the concern persists, they may submit their concern to the project team in writing. Concerned parties shall be reassured that, for both stages, they will be heard and assisted in a fair and timely manner. The specifics of the grievance mechanism (as well as the project's communications approach more generally) will be elaborated within the first three months following the project launch and closely linked with standard principles and procedures related to social and environmental impacts. The grievance mechanism will be available to all actors involved in the project or directly affected by project activities, held and available in two locations: in the Yagnob National Park HQ and the Anahita PO office.

Any local community, organisation or any other affected group that believes they are negatively affected by project activities may submit a complaint, though all parties are encouraged to engage in open dialogue first (as outlined above) before submitting a formal complaint. If the project team receives a written complaint, it will seek to respond in a fair and timely manner about the issue raised and resolve this directly with the complainant, mediated through APO. If no satisfactory resolution can be found, however, the project team will then escalate the concern to the project donor (by way of the CEPF Regional Implementation Team and CEPF Grant Director), seeking their advice on the matter.

Notably, however, although this project is supporting the development of Yagnob National Park, it does so with the goal to help it better serve community interests in tandem with promoting inclusive conservation. The project is neither responsible for the generic impacts of formally established protected areas nor for any action of the national park beyond the specific activities in which it is engaged or supports. All complaints will be filed in a complaint register, including detailed records of the agreed corrective actions, with due regard for confidentiality of information.

We will share all grievances – and a proposed response – with the Regional Implementation Team and the CEPF Grant Director 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.

- Director of Anahita PO, email [anahitatti@gmail.com](mailto:anahitatti@gmail.com), tel. +992 938297474
- Plateau Perspectives, email [info@plateauperspectives.org](mailto:info@plateauperspectives.org)
- Regional Implementation Team via <https://www.mca.earth/en/contacts/>
- Conservation International Ethics Hotline: +1-866-294-8674 / secure web portal: <https://secure.ethicspoint.com/domain/media/en/gui/10680/index.htm>