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THE UNEP/GEF PROJECT TO CONSERVE A NETWORK OF FLYWAY WETLANDS USING THE SIBERIAN CRANE AS A FLAGSHIP SPECIES: CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE SIBERIAN CRANE CONCERTED ACTION

(Prepared by the International Crane Foundation in consultation with the CMS Secretariat)

Background

1. The UNEP/GEF Siberian Crane Wetland Project's origins lie in a 25-year history of collaboration between the International Crane Foundation (ICF) and a network of scientists concerned about the conservation of the Siberian Crane and the wetlands the species depends upon. The *CMS MoU concerning Conservation Measures for the Siberian Crane* provides an international policy framework for coordinating conservation measures for this Critically Endangered species. At the third meeting of the MoU Range States, it was decided that a large international project should be developed and submitted to GEF to support the implementation of the Conservation Plans. This UNEP/GEF project was approved and started in March 2003 after a two-year preparation phase.

2. The regional coordination of the project is being executed by ICF, and national teams in China, Iran, Kazakhstan and the Russian Federation coordinate national and site level activities. CMS is represented on the Steering Committee for the project, and one regional project staff based in Moscow (Siberian Crane Flyway Coordinator (SCFC)) is co-financed by CMS and GEF, and coordinates CMS MoU activities with assistance from ICF staff.

Project aims and activities

3. The project is designed to improve the ecological integrity of a network of globally important wetlands that are of critical importance for migratory waterbirds and other wetland biodiversity, using the globally threatened Siberian Crane as a flagship for this effort. The project undertakes actions principally at three levels:

- (a) *Site level:* a range of measures is being undertaken at each of 16 key sites in relation to their specific circumstances. These aim to address identified threats and build management capacity.
- (b) *National level:* specific actions to strengthen the national framework for wetland and waterbird conservation, international cooperation, and activities that support site conservation. In China, flyway coordination within the country is also a priority.

- (c) *International level:* building capacity for the coordination of flyway networks of wetlands along the West/Central and East Asian flyways for migratory waterbirds, led by sites of importance for Siberian Cranes. These networks are being coordinated with other flyway conservation initiatives in order to form an integrated programme, contributing significantly towards the implementation of international conventions and delivering activities under the Conservation Plans of the *CMS Siberian Crane MoU*.

Current status of project implementation

4. The project is now approaching its mid-term review, and the progress achieved to date differs between the four participating countries and regional component.

Regional Activities

5. In general, the project's Regional Coordination Unit (RCU) staff assists the national teams in the four countries with project implementation. ICF succeeded in obtaining co-financing through the Luce Foundation to support environmental education activities at key sites in China; and the Charlotte and Walter Kohler Charitable Trust funds for Mazandaran Crane Conservation Association activities in Iran. Kohler also funds support activities in several Siberian Crane Range States not participating in the UNEP/GEF project (i.e., Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, India, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan). ICF is also supporting an American graduate student's research study at Poyang Lake, linked to a GEF project activity.

6. The Moscow Zoo hosts the Siberian Crane Flyway Coordination office linking efforts under the GEF project, CMS MoU and Crane Working Group of Eurasia. Work on strengthening Siberian Crane Flyway Coordination in East and West Asia included participation in an education/ecotourism workshop in Mongolia and NE Asia Crane Site Network meeting in Japan, and invitation of East and West Asian representatives to attend the CMS MoU Fifth Meeting in Moscow in April 2004.

7. Significant effort was invested in the development of a *Western/Central Asian Site Network for the Siberian Crane (and other migratory waterbirds)* culminating in the endorsement of the site network by the Range States at a CMS meeting in New Delhi on 13 June 2005. The meeting also approved criteria and procedures to nominate network sites, and an interim working group was appointed to review nominations. An unofficial list of 21 sites for potential inclusion in the network was suggested by the States represented at the meeting.

8. A centralized regional database system has been designed and approved. This is managed by the SCFC with technical assistance from Wetlands International – Russia Programme, and will provide a means of bringing together data from the four project countries, and making this information available to a wider audience. Two regional training workshops on data management were held in Kostanay, Kazakhstan and Beijing, China.

9. Regional environmental awareness activities included the design and publication of stickers, buttons, and booklets on the Siberian Crane, and coordination of Crane Day events at 28 sites in Russia and Kazakhstan.

China

10. The State Forestry Administration is the National Executing Agency (NEA), with the National Coordination Unit (NCU) based at the National Bird Banding Centre in Beijing. There are five project sites in China – Poyang Lake Basin (Jiangxi Province) and four sites on Songnen Plain in NE China: Zhalong (Heilongjiang), Xianghai (Jilin), Momoge (Jilin) and Keerqin (Inner Mongolia). A high density of activities has been in progress at the main Phase 1 sites of Poyang Lake Basin, Zhalong NNR and

Xianghai NNR. Only preliminary activities have taken place at the Phase 2 sites, Keerqin NNR and Momoge NNR. These have been supported by training and education activities at national level.

11. At national level the training programme has been efficiently implemented, and various national consultants have provided guidance to site-level activities. A national waterbird monitoring scheme is being implemented for key sites along the Siberian Crane's migration route, and ground and aerial surveys are being conducted for large waterbirds in NE China and Poyang Lake Basin. The management capacity of a network of 15 county forest bureaus around the entire Poyang Lake Basin has been strengthened through the provision of vehicles, equipment and training. The protected areas network at Poyang is also being strengthened through the upgrading of Nanjisan Provincial Nature Reserve (151,973 ha) to National Nature Reserve (NNR), amongst other measures.

12. Water management has been a key issue in China, and good progress has been made in drafting water management plans to aid wetland restoration at the sites in NE China. In particular, emergency water releases have been achieved for Zhalong NNR, and work is in progress to secure guaranteed water supply in the long term. The involvement of Songliao Water Management Commission (for NE China sites) and Jiangxi Integrated Office of Mountains, Rivers and Lakes (for Poyang Lake Basin) has been essential in this process. Tangible results at other sites included the diversion of floodwaters to restore wetland areas at Xianghai and Momoge in 2005 (in the face of an extended drought), with resulting increases in numbers of Siberian Cranes using these wetlands. Environmental education activities have also been prominent at Poyang, Zhalong and Xianghai including camps for schoolchildren, co-financed by the Luce Foundation through ICF. Education centers at Nanchang (Poyang) and Momoge were also completed with co-financing from other sources.

Iran

13. The National Coordination Unit is hosted by Iran's Department of Environment (DOE), with three project sites – Fereydoon Kenar Non Shooting Area (Mazandaran Province), Bujagh National Park and Amirkelayeh/Rud Posht (Gilan Province). The main focus of activities at this stage is on Fereydoon Kenar, with preparatory activities at Bujagh National Park and Amirkelayeh / Rud Posht (potential re-introduction sites).

14. The main achievements to date have included the declaration of Fereydoon Kenar as a Non Shooting Area (5,427 ha) and subsequently as a Ramsar Site, and the establishment of Bujagh National Park (3,280 ha). Site management committees have been established for both sites, and management capacity has been increased through the employment of additional staff (5 local guards at Fereydoon Kenar, and additional staff at nearby DOE offices; 8 new staff at Bujagh), as well as equipment and facilities at Fereydoon Kenar. Significant work with local duck-trappers at Fereydoon Kenar has led to the establishment of four new Trappers Associations and provision of GEF funds for small grants and loans for approved activities. The first phase of a contract to test sustainable agriculture methods based on the Farmer Field School methodology at the Fereydoon Kenar was successfully completed, including drafting of guidelines for adoption of the approach. This work is being done in cooperation with the UNDP/GEF Small Grants Programme in Iran.

Kazakhstan

15. A series of meetings and negotiations finally resulted in the Forest and Hunting Committee (FHC) of the Ministry of Agriculture signing a MoU with ICF to join the project on 2 September 2004, after protracted delays due to re-organization of the responsible government agencies. Formal project start up took place in January 2005, following preparatory activities. This project is closely allied to the UNDP/GEF Kazakhstan Wetlands Conservation Project, and shares a common Project Steering Committee to ensure good coordination. There are four project sites (staging areas) in Kazakhstan, all located in Kostanay Province. Naurzum Nature Reserve is the main focus of work in

Phase 1, while a proposal is being prepared for the establishment of a *zakaznik* (nature reserve) covering Urkash and Zharsor Lakes.

16. Significant progress has been made on related national and site activities, including the expansion of Naurzum Nature Reserve by 103,000 ha to include Kulagol Lake and development of the buffer zone for this reserve; initial work to remove low impoundments in the reserve's catchment should improve water supply to the reserve's wetlands. A stakeholder committee has been established and has met. At the other project sites, the specially protected zone around Kulykol Lake was increased from 2 to 6 km, and autumn migration monitoring of globally endangered waterfowl species is covering a number of wetlands in Kostanay Province. Environmental education and awareness-raising have been in progress with the assistance of Naurzum NGO, with "Crane Day" festivals held at Naurzum (Karamende) & Urkash-Zharsor (Druzhba) project sites and in Kostanay City with special TV reporting; Kostanay Oblast level TV program and newspaper articles have been made about the Siberian Crane and project activities.

17. Legal developments have included the development of a new Specially Protected Area (SPA) Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan; a draft bill on the Republic of Kazakhstan's participation in CMS and the Ramsar Convention was approved by the Chamber of Deputies on 28 September, and will next go to the Senate for approval; five new normative legal deeds for wildlife (migratory species included), management and conservation strengthening have been prepared and submitted to the Government. A Training Seminar was conducted for national SPA heads and specialists by FHC; and the Governmental budget 2005 for the Kazakhstan SPA system was submitted and adopted, with significantly increased funding allocated for Naurzum NR. The project has some association with these developments through FHC.

Russian Federation

18. The NEA for the Russian Federation is the All Russian Research Institute for Nature Protection, under the Ministry for Natural Resources (MNR). National project coordination is undertaken from Moscow, with the assistance of the Association of Ecological Education and Programmes for national training and awareness activities. A West Siberian Coordination Unit in Salekhard is operated by the Sterkh Foundation and a Yakutia Coordination Unit in Yakutsk is operated by the Institute for Biological Problems of the Cryolithozone. There are four project sites in Russia: Kytalyk Resource Reservation in Yakutia and three in West Siberia – Kunovat River Basin, Konda-Alymka Rivers Basin and Tyumen-Kurgan Transboundary Territories. All are breeding sites for the Siberian Crane, except the last site which is a staging area and re-introduction site.

19. National activities have focused on consultancies working to harmonize national and regional level legislation on nature protection; development of management planning guidelines; satellite telemetry studies and national and regional publicity through newspapers, radio, TV and other media. Crane Day Celebrations have been held at all Project sites, TV and radio programs in west Siberia Region and Yakutia Region, and work in schools near the project sites.

20. In West Siberia, stakeholders meetings have been held for the project sites in 2004 and 2005, and meetings held with the relevant authorities to discuss threats including oil exploration (Konda Alymka), hunting base development (Tyumen-Kurgan) and measures to provide urgent management cover for federal *zakazniks* (including Kunovat and Belozersky in Tyumen-Kurgan) following the withdrawal of staff and equipment by the Agriculture Ministry. A test well within the site was unsuccessful in finding sufficient oil for production in 2004 and subsequently removed. However, the threat remains. Regional and national project staff are in dialogue with MNR and some oil companies at present to try to establish some cooperation regarding conservation and development opportunities in West Siberia.

21. A survey of local communities was conducted near Kunovat in May 2004 to collect information about observations of the Siberian Crane, and other issues; questionnaire surveys have also been conducted; and aerial surveys of the breeding grounds in 2004 and 2005. The Armizon district hunting office at Tyumen Kurgan is playing an important role in raising awareness of hunters about the Siberian Crane, including recording sightings by hunters. The latest threat to this site is the highly pathogenic form of avian influenza, which was reported in the area in August 2005.

22. Activities in Yakutia focus on the main breeding grounds for the Siberian Crane in Kytalyk Resource Reservation, and also on identifying flyway routes and staging areas through Yakutia. While the start of implementation was delayed due to bureaucratic obstacles, some good progress is now being made. Kytalyk has been significantly extended to 1.607 million ha, the extended boundaries are now being mapped for the land cadastre, and the Yakutian Ministry for Nature Protection is considering upgrading its legal status. Objectives for initial capacity building measures have been agreed. During 2005, ground surveys were conducted of Siberian Cranes and other important species in a focal area of Kytalyk, 8 juvenile Siberian Crane chicks were banded and plans for PTT deployment made for 2006. Datasheets and GIS maps are being prepared for Siberian Crane flyway sites within Yakutia based on summer survey work and satellite imagery. Stakeholder committees are functioning for both Kytalyk and Yakutia-level activities, and project staff from Yakutia have participated in flyway meetings for both West/Central and East Asia.

Further Information

For further information on the project, please see the following websites:

www.scwp.info (*project website*)

www.sibeflyway.org (*Siberian Crane Flyway Coordination website*)

www.savingcranes.org (*ICF website*)

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