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GLEN Anglo 2016
INEX-SDA

Supporting Natural Resource Management and Monitoring of Flora and Fauna

Reference Number: 5000300609

Host organisation: Administration of Tusheti Protected Areas

Host country: Georgia

Place of the internship: Omalo

July – September 2016

Summary

The internship titled ‘Supporting Natural Resource Management and Monitoring of Flora and Fauna’ took place in Tusheti, one of the historical regions of Georgia. It is located on the northern slopes of Greater Caucasus Mountains along the border with Russian states Dagestan and Chechnya. Today the region is partially established as natural park and protected landscapes. Under the administration of Agency of Protected Areas (APA), the governmental body for protection of nature in Georgia. There are 50 settlements across the region with long tradition and unique architecture which is protected under UNESCO. However, in recent years only dozen people stay in Tusheti for entire year. Most of the 8 400 inhabitants, together with 15 000 tourists, stay over short summer season which starts in June and finish with the first snow in the beginning of October. Similarly, more than 250 000 of sheep, cattle and horses move from the summer pastures in the mountains to the lowland pastures in Vashlovani. One of the main limitation for the development of the region is bad accessibility via unstable gravel road.

Administration of Tusheti Protected Areas (TPA) is local office of APA and the host organisation of the internship. Its mission is protection of nature, monitoring of species and development of sustainable tourism in the area. The range of tasks is executed by approximately 40 employees: rangers, visitors’ specialists, eco-tourism specialist and others. Since the mountain range is one of the global biodiversity hotspots, the content of the internship was supposed to be monitoring of biodiversity and management of natural resources. Unfortunately, there was no specialist on fauna and flora available between employees of APA who could supervise and support the internship. It turned out to be impossible to execute the original task in a scientifically meaningful way. At the end, a new project was created – a proposal for outdoor natural learning path located next to the visitor’s centre. Additionally, most of the marked touristic paths were walked and measured timewise for future signposts. Despite several challenges, the internship was successful.

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Shrnutí

Stáž nesoucí název Podpora managementu přírodních zdrojů a monitorování fauny a flóry se uskutečnila v Tušetii (též Thuško), jednom z historických regionů Gruzie. Tento region se nachází na severních úbočích Velkého Kavkazu a hraničí s ruskými federálními státy Čečenskem a Dagestánem. Dnes je téměř celé území součástí národního parku a chráněné krajinné oblasti, které spravuje vládní Agentura pro ochranu přírody (APA). Nachází se zde také 50 osídlení s dlouhou tradicí a unikátní architekturou, která je součástí světového dědictví UNESCO. V posledních letech pouze desítky obyvatel zůstávají v horské oblasti po celý rok. Většina populace čítající 8 400 lidí se vrací do historických rodových domů na letní sezónu, která začíná v červnu a končí s prvním sněhem na počátku října. Ve stejné době do oblasti zavítá 15 000 turistů. Na letní pastvu se také do hor přesouvají stáda převážně ovcí ale i koz, koní a skotu čítající přes 250 000 kusů. Na zimní pastvu se stěhují do nížin do oblasti Vašlovani. Jednou z hlavních překážek pro rozvoj oblasti je špatná dostupnost po jediné nebezpečné silnici.

Hostící organizací stáže byla místní pobočka APA – Správa Tušetické chráněné oblasti (TPA). Hlavním posláním TPA je ochrana přírody, monitorování přírodních druhů a rozvoj udržitelného turismu. Různorodé činnosti vykonává kolem 40 zaměstnanců, především správci a ochránci přírody, průvodci, specialista na ekoturismus a jiní. Kavkazská horská oblast je jedním z míst s největší druhovou členitostí na naší planetě. Náplň stáže se týkala monitorování biodiverzity

a managementu přírodních zdrojů. Nicméně mezi zaměstnanci chyběl specialista na místní fauna a flóru, který mohl na stáž dohlížet. Bez odborného vedení nebylo možné úkol provést ve smysluplném rozsahu a úrovni. Místo toho vznikla nová náplň stáže – byl vytvořen návrh na naučnou přírodní stezku vedoucí kolem návštěvnického centra. Mimoto, většina vyznačených turistických tras byla projita a byl změřen čas mezi místy, kde mají do budoucna stát rozcestníky. I přes některé nesnáze se dá stáž označit za úspěšnou.

Pictures from top left to bottom right: 1) The road between Alvani and Omalo. 2) Grassland at Lower Omalo. 3) Measuring time duration of turistal trails. 4) Shop with locally produced handicrafts. 5) Upper Omalo. 6) Rich apline flora in July.



Introduction: My background and motivation for this internship.

The title of the internship ‘Supporting Natural Resource Management and Monitoring of Flora and Fauna’ sounded like something I had been looking for. By the time I applied for GLEN, I had finished bachelor study on International Development Studies and started a master programme on Sustainable Rural Development in Tropics and Subtropics at Czech University of Life Sciences. My idea was to narrow down from overall development cooperation to more nature science and agriculture oriented study. The internship seemed to be a wonderful opportunity to learn how to do the field work, to get insight how to manage natural park and explore mountainous ecosystems besides others.

My motivation was enhanced by the location and living conditions of the internship. First of all, Georgia was for some time on the list of the countries I wanted to visit. Moreover, I knew from some friends about beauty of Tusheti – a historical region on the border with Russia, located in the Caucasus mountains with average altitude around 2 000 m a. s. l. I was also familiar with the fact that Czech Development Agency (CDA) is one of the donors active in the region since the establishment of the natural park in 2004. I consider interesting to live in the remote mountains and try to get critical view on the practice and the effect of the development cooperation. Finally, I considered that in case the internship was not what I had expected, still it would mean living for three months in the mountains far from my daily life as a student. As presented in this report, some doubts had become reality but overall, I consider the internship to be an amazing experience and powerful learning process. Please note that I write the report from the perspective of young white girl who never travelled out of Europe before.

Location: Description of Tusheti linked with experiences and practicalities

Probably I could write a whole report on Tusheti because I found it really fascinating, yet with many insecurities. I cannot write much about Georgia itself because I did not visit almost any other part of the country except Tusheti and Tbilisi. Tbilisi was the first and the last place on my stay in Georgia. Beside taking airplane from the airport, it was also a shopping centre for us. Once we had decided to descend from the mountains, we had to make a shopping list because only limited variety of food and drinks were accessible up there. Tbilisi is also a place where some Tushetian people live, study or work. However, most of them live in Kakheti region, in Telavi or Alvani. While having only summer houses with long family tradition up in Tusheti. According to census from 2003, there is 8 400 people.

Alvani and Telavi are the most important supply and transition points on the way to Omalo, main village of Tusheti at the 2 000 m a. s. l. We got to know detailed description how to get from Tbilisi to Omalo from a website of Czech help-camp taking place in Omalo during summer. Yet, it was not easy to find a right marshrutka at the Isani station in Tbilisi without the knowledge of Georgian or Russian language and alphabet. From our contact person in TPA we had received rather general information how to travel there but she helped us to organise the final part of the way – more than four hours long ride by four-by-four car. Although it is only 100 km from Telavi to Omalo, the gravel road leads slowly up through the river valley to Abano pass (2 500 m a. s. l.) and further to the mountains. It is pronounced to be one of the most dangerous roads in the world. And indeed, it is recommended to travel with trustful and experienced driver. But many fatal accidents on this road

or other roads within Tusheti are caused by a drunk driver or a defect of a vehicle. Therefore, it should be always reconsider taking a lift by unknown people.

In comparison to lowlands, summer is the only season when are people in Tusheti. The season starts in May and ends with first snow in October. There is simply no access afterwards. Once the snow falls on the road, it is impassable. At the same time, it is the only infrastructure connecting the region with the rest of the country. Literally the only infrastructure, because there is not electricity connection. In some valleys, deeper inside the mountain ridge, there is no signal either. The luck of access is influenced by neighbourhood with Russia and correlate with poor infrastructure within the region. It can be fatal to drive other than four-by-four car. Not surprisingly, horses remain common mean of transport between the most isolated settlements. Over winter there is a dozen of people staying. To keep control over land and change rangers' shift, once a month government sends a helicopter with fresh supply. Therefore, it was implicit to complete the internship during the summer.

Due to the alpine climate, the weather in Tusheti is not easy to predict and it can be both warm and cold. In our year, July was rather cold and wet (10 – 20 °C), whereas August was dry and hot (up to 30 °C). Before we left at the end of September, we had a chance to experience autumn rainy days and first snow cover around 2 500 m of altitude. The alpine fauna and flora is very diverse and treasure several endemic species. To protect pristine nature, in 2004 the natural park was established with support from international donors. Till now, there are several development projects every year run by various bodies and dealing with issues of nature conversation, biodiversity monitoring, sustainable tourism, infrastructure or gender inequality. There are some positive results of these projects but the future of the region is not clear.

As mentioned before, the main village of the region is Omalo, formed by Lower and Upper Omalo, with several dozens of inhabitants. There are other approximately 14 villages and together 50 historical settlements across the region which are more or less connected via gravel roads. In past, people lived in these villages entire year, they had grown staple crops and kept mixed herds. Majority of herds were commonly grazing in Tusheti during summer and moved for winter pasture to Vashlovani. Due to the several factors, only few people maintain fields today but transhumance pastoralism is prevailing. Although, most of the area is protected, the dominant vegetation cover are pastures. The lack of management, knowledge and cooperation between shepherds and rangers leads to enormous erosion problems, degradation of soil and loss of habitats.

Nowadays, tourism has become alternative income generator. From the beginning, it has been supported by various international donors, such as the World Bank, USA government, German GIZ, Caritas International or Czech CDA. Thanks to this financial support, in most of the village are open guesthouses with solar panels, there are marked touristic trails, there is working bakery and few other services. There are various jobs related to tourism, for example car drivers, horse trail guides or handicraft. It creates employment possibilities also for women, who traditionally are not involved in pastoralism and horse keeping. Despite of abundance of international donors projects, the unemployment in the region is very high. Many young people search for their work in Telavi, Tbilisi or abroad. Wages are rather low and does not cumulate savings for future investments into house reconstruction or better cars. All in all, the living conditions (no electricity, bad infrastructure, luck of employment) are tough and insecure.

Although the living conditions are simple and services for tourist underdeveloped, there is every year more and more people coming to spend their holidays in Tusheti. Not only that there is beautiful nature, but also people are very hospital and preserve unique traditions inherited from the historical development of the region. Mountains were always refuge for members of minority groups. In Tusheti it resulted into a common religion with roots in Orthodox Catholic church with features coming from animist religion and pagan practices. It is not allowed to eat pork meat. There are sacred places in villages and around or ancient forests where women are not allowed to enter. Women during their menstruation should not be close to food storage, brewery or church. The status of religion and rules are changing indeed. On the one hand, during the summer holidays many Tushetians return to a village of their ancestors to celebrate and they apply traditions, e. g. separated seats for women and men at the feast. On the other hand, with the flow of tourist it is not possible to keep it strict and young generation might not take over everything.

Host organisation: Objectives of TPA and various roles of employees

The internship was hosted by Administration of Tusheti Protected Areas (TPA). It is a local office of Agency of Protected Areas (APA), the governmental body of Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources Protection. The objective of ATPA is to protect the nature of designated protected areas, monitor species within the protected areas and enhance sustainable tourism. Since 2014 an independent body for management of forest and landscapes (areas with settlements and cropland) within the protected areas was established - Tusheti Protected Landscape Administration. TPA is based in Alvani, where is an office for administration staff. During summer, visitors' centre in the forest close to Lower Omalo, is run by tourist specialists. It serves as visitors' centre, ranger station, hotel, hostel and probably in the future as a conference hall. It provides some additional services for tourist. But many facilities are not working as they should. In past years pilot projects for bird watching and wild goat watching tours were developed but they are not implemented.

In total, there is around 40 employees: rangers, visitors' specialists, eco-tourism specialist, head of the office and administration staff. Majority are rangers operating in distant areas of the park. Their main task is to control the area, protect animal species from poachers and monitor fires. However, some of them lack adequate education and interest in the conservation of nature. Their wages are average (still low), but thanks to the poor organisation and low interest, they can do part time jobs. Paradoxically, there is no capacity to monitor biodiversity, control pasture management and monitor erosion. There is also no capacity to do guided tours and watching tours. Despite some trainings done in cooperation with Georgian NACRES (Centre for Biodiversity Conservation & Research) and German GIZ, it seems to be without any progress. Nevertheless, it is important to state that this critique is based on my own view of nature protection originated from different environment and different position. I acknowledge that my understanding of the situation and all numerous factors, roles, responsibilities is very limited.

Living conditions: Accommodation, food and living space

The host organisation provided an accommodation as well as living space for us. From the description which will follow, it can look like insufficient facilities, however both of us were familiar with the situation before thanks to the volunteers from the previous year. TPA provided us with space in the hostel, which is situated in the forest next to the visitor's centre. The building of hostel

is quite big, there is no electricity and no water. It is very simple setting with only bunk beds in partially separated units. We were assured that places in the hostel will not be offered to anyone else. But it happened regularly that some rangers or other employees had to sleep there as well. The building of visitors’ centre was whole summer under reconstruction which affected also some facilities for employees. At the beginning, there was no shower working. For us, there was only a tap next to the hostel. Later, there was one shower for all employees with warm water only during sunny days. In the building of the visitors’ centre was also an office and a room which served as a kitchen. From time to time, there were problems with electricity because it was generated by photovoltaic panels. Paradoxically, the visitors’ exposition, whole building and surrounding are equipped by lights switched on only when the main generator is running. It happened two or three times when there had been tourists accommodated in the hotel. Cooking was possible only on a gas stove.

In general, the facilities for living provided by TPA were simple but there were some advantages which convinced us to stay. First of all, the accommodation was for free. We neither contributed to the cost for gas and we were invited to use the food brought from Alvani by relatives for our colleagues. This was indeed a big advantage, otherwise we would have to find our own supply chain or buy food in local shop, which is of course more expensive and it provides only basic staff. Moreover, by living together with our colleagues we could get familiar very soon and get involve into their everyday life. People around visitors’ centre were a crucial factor. The centre is a meeting point for local authorities and starting point for tourist. Simply by being present at the visitors’ centre we got to know international experts executing projects that summer in Tusheti, people coming in charge of APA or NACRES and tourists. From practical point of view, most of the days there was electricity available. However, living there was far from being really included because of the language barrier and gender inequality.

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Picture from the left to the right: 1) Hostel provided for volunteers by TPA and the tap with water in front. 2) Preparing birthday cake in the ‘kitchen’ for employees in the visitors’ centre.



The internship: Original plan, adjusted project and other activities

As mentioned above, our internship was focused on the monitoring of fauna and flora and management of natural resources. The title itself is very wide and due to the amazing biodiversity in the area, it is not easy to execute such task. Before arriving, we were assured that a senior

specialist on biodiversity had worked out a plan for us. We met with the specialist during the first week but it turned out that the lady is specialist on eco-tourism and she is not well familiar with fauna and flora of the area. Apparently, monitoring of biodiversity was one of the tasks which TPA was obligated to fill according to long-term plan. Unfortunately, none of the employees at the spot had necessary knowledge and motivation to coordinate us. Within first weeks we tried to collect information on fauna and flora, we searched for available resources and what was already done within TPA. We contacted some expert or our professors to advise us possible methods for the task. We did not find any meaningful method which we could implement with our basic knowledge of species in Caucasus mountains. After three weeks, we joined geobotanical research taking place in Jvarboseli, one of the villages. Research was conducted jointly by GIZ and NACRES with mixed team of botanists from Tbilisi and ecologists from Germany and Austria.

In the second part of our internship, we focused on two tasks. First was measuring of time between crossroads on marked touristic trails. We were asked to do this work by CDA which should equipped crossroad by signpost in summer 2017. Even though, visitors’ specialists were familiar with touristic trail, exact information on duration were missing or incorrect. Second, we created a proposal for the nature learning path leading in the forest around the centre. Its objective is to supplement indoor exhibition about Tusheti by information about nature, about environmental friendly behaviour and by interactive stations for children. Our vision was to create the proposal, get finance from GIZ and started with some stations which are possible to construct by ourselves. Our idea was welcomed within TPA as well by headquarter in Tbilisi. We had a chance to present it to the director of APA. At the end, we were not allowed to start the work because of security measurements and because there was no finance at that moment. Our internship finished without any clear statement on the future of the learning path.

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Pictures from the left to the right: 1) Field work during geobotanical research near Jvarboseli. 2) Festival ‘Tushetoba’ held at the visitor’s centre.



In general, the time of the internship passed very fast and there are not many concrete outcomes but at the same time we did not feel useless or bored. There was a lot of people coming to the centre with whom we could interact. We talked with tourists and gave them tips for hiking trails which we had done before and we knew their quality and duration. With our colleagues, we did also some hiking which was extraordinary experience in terms of breaking some stereotypes on

both sides. In September, we joined a fieldwork monitoring condition of pastures and interviewing shepherds. It was well connected with our field of study and we really enjoy insight into such work and we gain new knowledge. We also participated in a shooting of a documentary about Tusheti Protected Areas.

Communication: With contact person and colleagues

The communication with our contact person before arriving worked well even though we received only rough information about the living conditions and our task. Her office was in Alvani and she stayed at the centre at the beginning and during summer holidays. She could speak fluent English and she was appreciated our presence between her colleagues from several reasons – motivated others to speak English, breaking stereotypes and promoting gender inequality. On the other side, she did not help us with our task because she neither understand how it should look like or what should be done. The fact that she was most of the time in Alvani was limiting factor for successful communication and progress in the task.

On the other side, there was always at least one person speaking fluent English in the visitors’ centre. Most of the rangers, who had shifts in the centre, could also speak some English. Some of them were translating for us from time to time. But it was not enough to understand daily schedule and overall organisation in TPA. We were not involved into discussions between the employees with responsibilities and power. We were dependent on others to tell us what they consider to be important. At the end, I had an impression that rangers on the lower position were not involved into decision making, they were given tasks and they were waiting for the order. At the same time, rangers on the higher position were usually older, could not speak any English and spent less time in the centre. Another aspect of lack of information could be our gender, as women we were not supposed or expected to participate some activities and discussion.

Tandem partner: Trust building, sharing and friendship

The relationship between me and my tandem is probably the most valuable outcome of whole GLEN cycle. Our communication went well already on the seminars and in between. Our expectations and ideas for our internship were compatible or similar. We met together on the airport in Tbilisi and stayed most of the time together. There was only one week in September when we separated. We agreed on having a reflection and evaluation round once a week and we kept this ritual till the end. It helped us a lot to clarify some situations and get to know better how the other person communicate and think. The fact, that there was one person with whom I could speak about anything and to whom I could trust, helped me a lot in processing the experience and looking ‘under the surface’ of our everyday life. In the given conditions, I really appreciated to have female tandem partner, because gender had considerable influence on behaviour, communication and perception from our colleagues and Tushetian people. The process of sharing and reflecting on our experience continues till today as new feelings are popping up. We came both motivated to execute the original task but none of us was unhappy with the flow of the internship. We really enjoy working together on our project of the learning path and on other small things.

Challenges and solutions: Gender, communication and language

In general, our stay went smooth and we did not need to face any crises or open conflict. However, under the surface there were several challenges which I even discovered later. There are still many

things and situations I am not sure how to understand or interpret and I need to process them further. The first challenge we had to face was a language barrier. Neither me nor my tandem could speak Georgian or good Russian. Our only communication language was English. However, we tried to learn Georgian and that was truly appreciated by our colleagues. Even our basic knowledge of the language helped us to communicate with other people and maybe to distinguish us from tourists. Usually, we could also use other languages such as German or French. But we could participate only in small talks. We were not included into discussions within employees therefore we did not know what was happening and we could not influence our position within the organisation, neither fully use our background and knowledge.

The communication, I found to be very problematic within TPA. As mentioned above, there was a lack of communication and discussion between various positions within TPA. Since we were mostly with young rangers and visitors’ specialists, I had an impression that they are not involved in discussion or listen by older colleagues. There were some distant family connections between some employees which could influence their relations too. The motivation into work was low as well as the understanding of conservation of nature and necessary steps toward a healthy environment. Lack of knowledge and motivation was probably present at the top level of the institution too. In the course of planning the nature learning path, I realized that there is a certain lack of communication and dependence between TPA and APA. For our project, it meant that we were not able to influence whether it could be constructed or not. It depended only on the decision of the director of APA. Similarly, we found it difficult to start to do something new or try to improve some current structures (for example hiking maps in the centre, services or the exposition). We did not feel encouraged to do it neither we know who could help us.

All in all, our position and power was also influenced by our gender. As both of us being women, we could feel that there are some tasks which we are not expected to be interested in and to manage. For example, when we started with planning of the nature learning path, we cleared some parts of the forest to show where exactly it should stand. Being able to use tools and willing to do it ourselves surprised our colleagues. Sometimes it was rather funny to break some stereotypes. On the other hand, our male colleagues never participated in dish washing and cleaning. From the side of our female colleagues, we were not expected to participate on such tasks either because we were guests. We were usually the only women present at the evening gatherings (‘supra’) and drinking alcohol. It is impossible for me to detect whether other women would be welcomed to sit together and allowed to drink together with male colleagues. Most of the time, strict gender roles and patriarchy was annoying. But because of such social structure, I must admit that it is not necessary safe for a girl to move alone there. We were warned not to do some farther hiking alone, which was reasonable because of real danger from aggressive shepherd dogs.

The end: Results, effects and further engagement

Although we had to face some challenges during the internship and the outcome may not seem to be significant, I consider time spent in Tusheti as very valuable and precious. It is not possible for me to evaluate what did our presence give to our host organisation. I can only conclude what did the internship brought to me. First of all, it taught me a lot about myself, about my needs, my way of communication and my abilities in a new environment. It started a process of being more sensible about my own rights, my own needs especially from the position of a woman. From my point of view, many situations which we had to face to, were caused by different understanding of

what does it mean to be a woman between us and our colleagues. I would like to say that our discussion and interaction were valuable for both sites but I am not sure about it. One aspect I did not recognise until being back home, was a position of a European woman. In comparison to Tushetian woman it was privileged position but at the same time abused by men. In spite of some problematic features, I was charmed by the Tushetian culture and our community. I would like to stay connected with the country hence I will try to situate my master thesis there. One possibility is to elaborate on gender role in agricultural cooperatives which would be very enriching for me as well.

I am still not finished with reflecting my experiences and there is a lot of question marks in my head. From that reason, I do not plan to implement my Global Education Activity (GEA) this year. First, I want to go through the GLEN cycle once again as a part of the preparation team. Gain possibility to participate on sessions again and get deeper with inner processes. However, gender will be most probably the topic I will work on during my GEA. There is an idea of summer school on Theatre of the Oppressed, Impro and Participatory methods in a small village in Sudeten in Czech Republic in cooperation with experienced theatre artist. Our objective is to bring young people from several European countries together with local people and to explore these methods as a tool for communication, solution and community building. It will need a lot of preparation hence we plan to do it in 2018. Nevertheless, I can proudly say that I can observe substantial changes of some of my attitudes compared to the time before GLEN. And I am very glad I have participated.

