



# WORLD HERITAGE THEMATIC STUDY FOR CENTRAL ASIA

Priority sites for World Heritage  
nomination under criteria (ix) and (x)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Background

The World Heritage Convention is one of the most important global conservation instruments and has been endorsed by almost all nations of the world, including the five countries of Central Asia. Despite the adoption of the Convention amongst all of the countries in the region, along with its vast array of diverse ecosystems, each home to many rare and endemic species, natural sites in Central Asia remain under-represented on the World Heritage list. Accordingly, in 2015, the World Heritage Committee requested IUCN to update the 2005 Central Asia Regional Thematic Study on natural World Heritage (Decision WHC 39 COM 8B.4). The World Heritage Thematic Study for Central Asia was produced in direct response to this decision, and as a contribution to supporting the implementation of the World Heritage Convention in Central Asia.

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## Aims

The study aimed to identify areas, across a regional scale, which display good potential to fulfil the requirements for inscription as natural World Heritage sites, especially those that may qualify under biodiversity criteria (ix) and (x). In addition, the study aimed to outline key strategic recommendations which will further the implementation of the World Heritage Convention in Central Asia.



Consultative workshop in Bishkek 2018, Kyrgyzstan, group photo © IUCN

## Approach

The study makes a number of recommendations, which include extensions or amendments to the boundaries of existing sites on the World Heritage (WH) List; proposals for new sites; as well as additional recommendations intended to fill the major administrative and technical gaps and difficulties observed during the study.

The following steps were taken in completing the study:

- a desk assessment and overview of sites having potential to meet the requirements of the World Heritage Convention for inscription on the WH List (January-June 2018);
- three regional consultations on priority sites for potential WH nomination (June, October and November 2018), involving 40-50 international and local experts and specialists;
- the preparation of the WH Thematic Study in consultation with the relevant State Parties, scientists and expert organizations and individuals (October 2018-March 2019).

The findings and recommendations presented in the study are subject to the limitations imposed through the methodology.

**The following nine sites and areas have been identified as having high potential for nomination or extension under biodiversity criteria (ix) and/or (x), in combination with other WH natural criteria (vii) and (viii):**

Not included on World Heritage or Tentative Lists

**Southern Ustyurt Plateau  
Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan &  
Uzbekistan**

Potential criteria- (vii), (viii), (ix), (x)

The Ustyurt plateau is a vast low-lying desert bridging the gap between the Caspian and Aral seas, characterised by a now dried-up sea, which existed there 21 million years ago. The proposed serial and transboundary site consists of at least three existing and planned protected areas across its range, encompassing around 200,000 km<sup>2</sup>. Similar to a number of other proposed desert sites in the study, any proposal for this site should make necessary comparative analyses during the proposal stages.

**Cold Winter Deserts of Central Asia**

Potential criteria- (vii), (viii), (ix), (x)

This option combines several areas recommended above, including Berektli Garagum SNR; Irgiz Turgay Reserve recommended above as an extension of the Saryarka - Steppe and Lakes of Northern Kazakhstan; Altyn-Emel listed within the 'Northern Tien Shan' site; Repetek Biosphere State Reserve, and Southern Ustyurt Plateau. Inscription of the site would establish a "finite" serial and transboundary site, intending to comprehensively represent the unique type of cold winter desert ecosystems. Although potentially difficult to implement, this alternative should be assessed further, to verify its relevance and operational feasibility.



## Currently included on Tentative Lists (TLS)

### **Tigrovaya Balka** **Tajikistan**

Potential criteria - (ix), (x)

Tigrovaya Balka strictly protected reserve is situated in the Vakhsh River valley, at the junction with the Panj river whose convergence forms the famous Amu Darya, bordering Afghanistan. Composed of a series of floodplain terraces covered by alluvial soils and containing some of the regions last remaining tugai forest, the reserve has long been considered as one of the most important PAs in the region in terms of species and ecosystem diversity values.

### **Badhyz and Kopetdag Mountains** **Turkmenistan**

Potential criteria - (vii), (ix), (x)

The Badyz and Kopetdag Mountains consists of four adjacent state owned PAs comprising 1,447km<sup>2</sup> of relict pistachio savannahs, ancient extinct volcanoes, and brackish seasonal lakes, together representing a 'cold winter desert' biome, which is currently underrepresented on the WH List. One of the most spectacular reserves in Central Asia, its significant endemic and threatened flora and fauna species make the site of great significance for *in situ* conservation.

### **Northern Tien Shan** **Kazakhstan**

Potential criteria - (vii), (viii), (ix), (x)

The Northern Tien Shan site encompasses three PAs situated in the transition zone between the Kazakh plains and the Tien Shan mountain system, and covers around 4,000 km<sup>2</sup>. The large elevation gradient manifests in an outstanding example of altitudinal succession. A large spectrum of diverse ecosystems, including deserts, deciduous and spruce forests, riparian forests and floodplains, as well as salt marshes support a relatively high biodiversity, with endemic plants and rich fauna including the snow leopard and the globally significant population of kulan in Altyn Emel.

### **Repetek** **Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan**

Potential criteria - (ix), (x)

The serial and transboundary proposed Repetek site centres around one of the oldest reserves in Turkmenistan, Repetek State Biosphere Reserve, having been established in 1928, encompassing an area of around 346 km<sup>2</sup> in the southeastern Karakum desert. Another good example of a 'cold winter desert' biome, the site is one of the few natural desert sites in Central Asia with large coverage of black saxaul, and the landforms, flora and fauna adaptation and endemism associated with these ecosystems, including the most complete assemblage of bird species typical of the Karakum desert.



## Currently inscribed on the World Heritage List

### **Golden Mountains of Altai** **Russian Federation**

Criterion - (x)

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The existing WH site is located entirely in Russia, owing to its status as the original centre of biodiversity for montane plant and animal species in northern Asia. It is recommended to extend the site to include the Katon Karagay NP, in Kazakhstan, which itself already constitutes part of the existing Great Altai Transboundary Biosphere Reserve. Inclusion of this protected area bordering the current site will strengthen conservation and management of Altai biodiversity; and enable the expansion of threatened species of high value for science and conservation and their critical habitat.

### **Saryarka- Steppe and Lakes of Northern Kazakhstan** **Kazakhstan**

Criteria - (ix), (x)

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This site is currently inscribed largely due to the globally significant population of Saiga Antelope present within its boundaries. In light

of recent shifts in the conservation status of the species, the WH Committee recommended extension of the WH property in order to secure key habitats for the species, including important breeding areas and migratory routes, in particular through the Altyn Dala Conservation Initiative. Achieving these steps would likely enhance the site's qualification under the criteria through which it is inscribed.

### **Western Tien-Shan** **Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan & Uzbekistan**

Criterion - (x), potential for (ix)

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This transboundary WH property is located in the Tien-Shan mountain system and consists of 13 component parts drawn from seven protected areas. It is recommended to assess the opportunity to extend the WH site to include Manass Wildlife Refuge (Kyrgyzstan) and Ugam Chatkal NP (Uzbekistan), among other PAs; review its eligibility to criterion (ix); and, as recommended by the WHC, to rationalise the existing boundaries and remove components of the property which do not contribute to its OUV.



# Additional Recommendations

## **Create and/or update current Tentative Lists**

State Parties are encouraged and invited to re-examine or review their Tentative Lists (TLs), with a focus on criteria (ix) and (x) without excluding other natural criteria (vii and/or viii). Findings of this Thematic Study should be taken into account while reviewing TLs.

All TLs should be updated after a consultation process to ensure that the sites included in the lists are harmonized and have the highest potential for nomination at the regional level, based on a solid overall comparative analysis, which was not possible to conduct during this process.

## **Improve the protection regime of areas and ecological corridors that have the highest values for natural heritage**

The identification of areas of sufficient size and establishment of adequate buffer zones will be of highest importance for nomination under either biodiversity criterion, to enhance and maintain the natural processes and preserve the state of conservation of those species. Thus, ecological corridors and key habitats for wildlife and migration need to be clearly identified and delimited for prioritization. This work seeks inputs from relevant conservation processes and conventions<sup>1</sup>. Efforts should be made not only to extend existing protected areas but also to set up new ones.

## **Consider a range of international designation mechanisms to recognize areas of global importance**

Areas of international importance and sites recognised under other international legal instruments or through knowledge-based tools (international/regional inventories of areas important for biodiversity conservation) can help formulate Statements of Outstanding Universal Values of existing and future WH sites.

## **Foster transnational cooperation and identify transboundary sites to support ecological functionality that guarantees the maintenance of the natural processes**

There is strong potential for identifying transboundary and transnational sites. Some protected areas from the region may have difficulty in meeting the requirements of WH, if only areas within one country are included. Therefore, it would be helpful to foster cooperation and agree on a common regional strategic approach between State Parties for the identification and delimitation of transnational and/or transboundary sites.

## **Develop a continuous dialogue among the stakeholders**

The need to develop dialogue among stakeholders at all levels, e.g. local, national, regional and international, emerged as one of the major conclusions of the consultations conducted during this study. This dialogue should be strengthened in the future, based on more frequent and regular exchanges and stronger cooperation between stakeholders (e.g. State Parties, scientists, NGO's, local communities).

## **Improve enforcement and compatibility between local, national and international regulatory frameworks**

Difficulties in the practical implementation of international laws and agreements at national and local levels, related to a lack of compatibility among the diverse regulations, were mentioned during the consultations. Efforts should be made by State Parties to improve this compatibility in the future and adapt their national legal and regulatory frameworks stemming from international commitments on biodiversity conventions.

## **Conduct training sessions and activities on how to prepare nominations**

Consultation workshops confirmed that difficulties observed during the IUCN evaluation process could be associated with the lack of capacity for WH nomination. In order to overcome these shortcomings, there is a need to develop operational guidance focusing on specific phases of the nomination process such as the preparation of a comparative analysis, nomination under criteria (ix) and serial and/or transnational or transboundary sites.

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<sup>1</sup> E.g.: Convention on Migratory Species, Ramsar Convention and their subsequent agreements and programs.

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