

**EUROPE / NORTH AMERICA**

**COLCHIC RAIN FORESTS AND WETLANDS**

**GEORGIA**

# WORLD HERITAGE MINOR BOUNDARY MODIFICATION PROPOSAL – IUCN TECHNICAL EVALUATION

## COLCHIC RAINFORESTS AND WETLANDS (GEORGIA) – ID No. 1616bis

### 1. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Colchic Rainforests and Wetlands World Heritage property in Georgia is a serial property with seven component parts boasting ancient deciduous Colchic rainforests and wetlands, including percolation bogs and other mire types of the Colchic mire region. The combined area of these component parts totals 31,253 hectares (ha) with buffer zones totalling 26,850 ha.

The property was inscribed in 2021 (Decision 44 COM 8B.8). In its inscription decision, the World Heritage Committee commended the State Party “for its commitment to expand the buffer zones of the property and to consider further enhancement of the conservation of the property by potentially adding additional areas, especially to protect critically endangered sturgeon through plans for a new protected area adjacent to the property”. The Committee also strongly encouraged the State Party to “submit the proposed extensions of the buffer zones of the Churia component part towards the North and of the Nabada component part to support the conservation of the sturgeon population as a minor boundary modification, if possible, by 1 February 2023.”

Furthermore, the Committee requested the State Party to continue to assess (a) “the feasibility of expanding the buffer zones around component parts 4, 5, 6, and 7 to ensure that they have higher connectivity”, and (b) “the feasibility of expanding the buffer zone to protect coastal dunes that provide a barrier between the unique percolation mires and the Black Sea”, besides other request.

IUCN’s previous evaluation can be found in document WHC/21/44.COM/INF.8B2, which contain relevant analyses. The relevant documentation is available at <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1616/documents/>.

### 2. SUMMARY OF PROPOSED BOUNDARY MODIFICATION

Georgia submitted a minor boundary modification on 1 February 2023, proposing the extension of the buffer zones of the property’s component parts Churia, Nabada and Grigoleti. The combined area proposed to be added to the buffer zones amounts to 1,203 ha.

The buffer zone of Churia would be almost doubled from 879 to 1,622 ha. The northward extension coincides with the Strict Protection Zone and the Traditional Use Zone of Kolkheti National Park. Furthermore, an additional 270 ha would significantly increase the buffer zone of Grigoleti northwards, currently at 328 ha. The area is mostly subject to the Traditional Use Zone of the

National Park, along with a small section of the Strict Protection Zone. The buffer zone extensions would improve the hydrological buffering function and add a layer of protection against nutrient and pesticide inputs from agricultural areas and encroachment of any potential infrastructure developments.

Nabada’s buffer zone currently measures 2,586 ha and would be slightly extended by 190 ha through a new buffer zone section separated from the existing buffer zone and covering the lower part of Rioni River. The Rioni River represents important habitats for six Critically Endangered sturgeon species. The area corresponds with a newly created Strict Protection Zone of Kolkheti National Park.

### 3. IMPACT ON OUTSTANDING UNIVERSAL VALUE

The minor boundary modification proposal highlights the positive impacts the buffer zone extension would have for the integrity of the property. The enlarged buffer zones would increase the area where permitted activities are more strictly controlled and therefore reduce the threats arising from alterations to the hydrological regime, peat extraction, nutrient and pesticide input from agriculture and encroachment from infrastructure development. It will improve the hydrological and ecological connectivity and resilience of the component parts, where appropriate, and support the re-colonization of sturgeon from Rioni River to other areas.

All proposed buffer zone areas are subject to the same protected area regime as the existing buffer zones. They are subject to a legally binding management plan prescribing the prohibited and permitted activities in the Traditional Use Zone and Strict Protection Zone. The management authority in charge of the management of the additional buffer areas will be the administration of Kolkheti National Park.

In its 2020 evaluation, IUCN has noted that the integrity of the property could be further improved if the buffer zone of component parts 4 (Imnati) and 5 (Pitshora) would be joined with the nearby buffer zones of component parts 6 (Nabada) and 7 (Churia) as this would enhance connectivity and include river habitats for critically endangered Sturgeon. In response to IUCN’s remarks, the State Party provided supplementary information in 2020, confirming the feasibility to expand the buffer zones and that an extension of Kolkheti National Park was already in preparation. IUCN welcomes that the State Party has started the implementation of the above through the submission of a minor boundary modification, in line with Committee Decision 44 COM 8B.8.

The minor boundary modification proposal also included in an Annex a summary and conclusions of the “Feasibility study on expanding the buffer zones around the component areas of Grigoleti, Imnati, Nabada and Churia”, in line with the Committee’s request in its Decision 44 COM 8B.8. The present boundary modification proposal represents the result of the first conclusion of the feasibility study stating that this extension is immediately feasible. The study further concluded that another buffer zone extension would be possible in the medium term, as soon as the legal basis and the relevant management regime has been established. This second buffer zone extension would consist of seven areas being added to the existing buffer zones. Finally, the feasibility study concludes that the creation of a continuous buffer zone encompassing the Imnati/Pitshora, Nabada and Churia component parts would not be feasible for socio-economic reasons and not necessary to protect the property’s OUV. IUCN welcomes the results of this feasibility study and the State Party’s commitment to act upon these results.

In conclusion, IUCN recommends the Committee to accept the minor boundary modification proposal as it is

in line with Committee Decision 44 COM 8B.8. IUCN further encourages the State Party to implement the recommendations of the feasibility study and to subsequently submit another minor boundary modification proposal to further strengthen the buffer zone arrangements, in line with Committee Decision 44 COM 8B.8.

#### 4. RECOMMENDATION

IUCN recommends that the World Heritage Committee adopts the following draft decision:

The World Heritage Committee,

1. Having examined documents WHC/22/45.COM/8B.ADD and WHC/22/45.COM/INF.8B2.ADD,
2. Recalling Decision **44 COM 8B.8**, adopted at its 44th (Fuzhou (China)/Online, 2021) session,
3. Approves the proposed minor boundary modification for the **Colchic Rainforests and Wetlands (Georgia)**.

**Map 1:** World Heritage property and proposed minor boundary modification