

WORLD HERITAGE NOMINATION – IUCN COMMENTS TO ICOMOS

CULTURAL LANDSCAPE OF KHINALIG PEOPLE AND “KÖÇ YOLU” TRANSHUMANCE ROUTE (AZERBAIJAN)

IUCN has considered this cultural landscape nomination based on a desk review of the nomination dossier. Nominated under criteria (iii) and (v), the Cultural Landscape of Khinalig People and “Köç Yolu” Transhumance Route comprises 40,443.26 ha with a proposed buffer zone of 100,491.85 ha. Embedded in five administrative districts and traversing five landscape types, the nominated property comprises the high-mountain village of Khinalig and yaylaqs (highland pasture used in the summer season), qishlaq (lowland pasture used in the winter season in the semi-desert plains in central Azerbaijan), as well as the 200-km long Köç Yolu seasonal transhumance route.

The nomination dossier notes that these areas provide the livelihoods for the semi-nomadic Khinalig, who hold the indigenous knowledge about the transhumance, seasonal plant, and fruit gathering, natural resource management, rotational grazing, and communal management of pastures in a close socio-ecological relationship. Their cultural practices have allowed optimal use of grazing pastures while keeping the environmental risk factors such as erosion and overgrazing under control. The nomination dossier indicates that water management systems provide access to drinking water in all parts of the nominated property regardless of the weather conditions.

Various legal instruments intend to protect the nominated property from urbanization and industrialization. The buffer zone is protected against the construction of industrial facilities and exploration works that can harm its functional, structural, and visual integrity. A master plan aims to ensure that any development projects in the buffer zone would be carried out in a manner that protects the property’s OUV, including integrity and authenticity. Regarding the protection of natural values, IUCN notes that the “Köç Yolu” Transhumance Route of the nominated property crosses the Shahdagh National Park (IUCN Category II) established in 2006. Recreation, tourism, and other economic activities are possible in the national park as long as they do not harm the ecosystems in the national park. The Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources controls these activities. While the presence of threatened species would need to be confirmed, IUCN also notes that the nominated property may overlap with the range of several Critically Endangered species (e.g., Ship Sturgeon, *Acipenser nudiventris*; Stellate Sturgeon, *Acipenser stellatus*, Sociable Lapwing, *Vanellus gregarius*), and Endangered (e.g., Egyptian Vulture, *Neophron percnopterus*) and Vulnerable species (e.g., Goitered Gazelle, *Gazella subgutturosa*; Oak Polypore, *Buglossoporus quercinus*). The nomination indicates that the Khinalig people protect the natural environment thanks to ‘non-use values’; for instance, the hunting of vultures and felling of trees are considered a sin and are consequently banned.

Nevertheless, IUCN noted a range of pressures on the pastures and other key ecosystems of the nominated property, including the construction of a new road from the village of Susay to Khinalig, the increase in livestock grazing (i.e. from 10,000 sheep in the 1920s to 55,000 thousand in 2020), climate change, and the increasing risk of wildfires in pasture areas. In turn, these impacts may threaten the livelihood of the Khinalig. To address such challenges, the nomination proposes a new integrated protection mechanism for the nominated area by expanding the border of the existing Khinalig reserve and including the entire nominated property in a single administrative unit by 2023. In addition, modifications to the Land Code have been proposed to enable the continuation of the functions of the summer and winter pastures.

IUCN recommends ICOMOS encourages the State Party to establish an integrated approach to the management of the landscape in which the nominated property’s carrying capacity is scientifically determined and managed to sustain the livelihoods of the Khinalig, including monitoring of threatened species and freshwater biodiversity in the rivers along the transhumance route. The carrying capacity would set and guide the limits for tourism and inform the response and adaptation to climate change. IUCN also recommends ICOMOS consider with the State Party commissioning an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) for a new road that is being constructed from the village of Susay to Khinalig to ensure no impact on the nominated property’s proposed OUV.