

Russian Invasion of Georgia

Environment destruction caused by the war

10 November 2008

Regular updates can be found on the Georgia Update website:

<http://georgiaupdate.gov.ge/>

“WWF called on all parties capable of helping put out forest fires in central Georgia to work together to extinguish them. The fires, centered in the Borjomi-Kharagauli area about 70 km to the west of Gori, threaten protected and Priority Conservation Areas in the Caucasus...”

WWF – 20.08.08

“The World Bank notes with grave concern the reports of forest fires in the Borjomi area of Georgia. This area includes the first National Park in Georgia, which possesses a unique ecosystem and biodiversity of global value, cultural heritage and other natural resources”

World Bank – 20.08.08

“An independent investigation on the environmental consequences of the war is necessary (as has been after the intervention in Kosovo) to assess the damage and to see where assistance can be given.”

*Statement of the
Seventh Meeting of Black Sea Greens
31st of October- 1st of November 2008, Istanbul*

It will be difficult for the men and women living in the region of Borjomi in central Georgia, as well as for those who returned to their homes in the city of Gori, occupied by the Russian army for 10 days in August 2008 to forget the terrifying sounds of Russian aircraft swiftly followed by an ecological disaster as incendiary devices lit up an old-growth forest suffering from an unusually prolonged drought.

Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park

On 15 August, Russian military started a fire in the area adjacent to the village of Tsaghveri, in the region of Borjomi, damaging a significant part of the region's countryside. The fire spread quickly from territories around Tsaghveri to Borjomi on the right bank of the river Gujarela and touched significant areas of the forests in that area.

Despite the huge efforts taken against the fire, it spread over 950 hectares of forest land. An area of 250 hectares was totally destroyed, and 150 000 m³ of standing trees were lost. As a result, the forest's ecosystem lost its ecological function, as well as commercial value.

In the affected area, endemic and other species were almost completely destroyed, including Himalayan yew, spruce, abies, pine, beech, oak, hornbeam and many varieties of forest wildlife.

The area harbors the highest density of small Caucasus pine forests, as well as the biggest specimens of *Picea orientalis* in Caucasus. Since these are endemic species, found nowhere else, their destruction reduces the globe's biodiversity. The fires also affected significant stands of temperate old-growth and virgin forest. Since old-growth forests have been felled or cleared almost everywhere else in the planet's temperate zone, the surviving stands also have global significance.

The fauna of the region experienced significant damage as well. The territory damaged by the fires was inhabited by numerous animal species, some which are on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) "red list", including brown bear (*Ursus arctos*), lynx (*Lynx lynx*), deer (*Cervus elaphus*), chamois (*Capreolus rupicapra*), otter (*Lutra lutra*), whitetail eagle (*Haliaeetus albicilla*), Caucasus cock (*Tetrao mlokosiewiczi*), Caucasus viper (*Vipera kaznakovi*), Caucasus salamander (*Mertensiella caucassica*), vesper bat (*Myotis bechsteinii*), European bat (*Barbastella barbastellus*), and the Caucasian squirrel (*Sciurus anomalus*).

The blaze spread over the Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park, where four different fires devastated the landscape. The Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park is internationally recognized as the most important protected area anywhere in the South Caucasus. Besides the high cost of conservation, it was also a model of natural protection, confirmed by the Protected Area Network Parks certificate.

On 20 August, Russian incendiary devices were dropped in the Ateni gorge, near the city of Gori. The resulting blaze raged through over 60 hectares before it could be contained.

On 24 August, a freight train carrying crude oil blew up on a Russian mine near the village of Skra, in central Georgia. The train was composed of 34 wagons, each loaded with 60 tons of crude. Twelve wagons and 720 tons of oil burned out on the spot, releasing massive clouds of toxic smoke. About 4,000m² were contaminated with crude oil, posing a threat of groundwater pollution.

Port of Poti and the Kolkheti National Park

In the port of Poti, five Georgian warships and three coast guard patrol boats were sunk by Russian navy ships, releasing 50 tonnes of oil, diesel fuel and lubricants into the Black Sea. The resulting oil slick at first spread between the port of Poti and the village of Anaklia, 20km to the north, before being swept further north, into the marine part of the Kolkheti National Park, by local currents.

Kolkheti National Park provides feeding grounds for various species of sturgeons, some endemic to the Black Sea (*Huso huso*, *Acipenser sturio*, *Acipenser nudiiventis*, *Acipenser stelatus*, *Acipenser gueldastaedtti*, *Acipenser persicus*) and dolphins (*Phocoena phocoena*, *Tursiops truncatus*, *Delphinus delphis*). A number of smaller rare and endangered species were threatened too.