



Ecosystem Profile

Mountains of Central Asia Biodiversity Hotspot

Technical Summary

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Mountains of Central Asia hotspot consists of two of Asia's major mountain ranges, the Pamir and the Tien Shan. The hotspot's 860,000 km² include parts of seven countries: southeastern Kazakhstan, most of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, eastern Uzbekistan, western China (Tien Shan), northeast Afghanistan (Wakhan), and a small part of southeastern Turkmenistan (Koytentag Mountains and Talimerjen). Hotspot delineation is based on the Global 200 eco-regions, with some adjustments that reflect the administrative and geographic features of the region and recommendations from stakeholder consultations in 2025. With a relatively large natural habitat, high endemism, and increasing threats, the region remains important for investments by CEPF.

Central Asia has a long history as a crossroads between East and West. In the past, it was home to the great commercial and cultural centers of the ancient Silk Road. Today, the modern equivalents include China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) and the ADB-led Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) stretching from China to the Indian Ocean, Caspian Sea and beyond.

Of the seven countries in the hotspot, Afghanistan has suffered most from decades of conflict and insecurity. Since the Taliban took power in August 2021, many internationally supported projects were suspended or cancelled, including those related to the environment and biodiversity. Similarly, the political situation in China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region makes it difficult to implement international projects. On the other hand, the rapid growth of trade and transport connections between China and Central Asia has had huge effects on the orientations of the countries, with expected impacts on biodiversity. After two decades of negotiations and planning, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and China agreed on a new railway that will connect the three countries through the mountains of Central Asia.

Many protected areas and key biodiversity areas sit near and across borders from one another, raising a prospect in bilateral and regional cooperation. Such cooperation exists in the Western Tien Shan UNESCO World Heritage Site (supported by CEPF), snow leopard landscapes and other initiatives.

Several initiatives are taking even a wider global approach to address mountain conservation issues. A Global Mountain Summit is planned in Kyrgyzstan in 2027 as part of the Five Years of Action on Mountain Development. A Global Snow Leopard Summit in 2013 resulted in the establishment of the Global Snow Leopard and Ecosystem Protection Program (GSLEP). GSLEP is active in 12 countries, including all the hotspot countries other than Turkmenistan.

Several international donors and partners are actively involved in conservation in the region. The Global Environment Facility (GEF), the European Union, and the governments of China, Japan, Germany, Switzerland, Russia, China and South Korea support programs on sustainable natural resource use and environmental projects. Private funds and charities are supporting conservation initiatives as well.

Civil society organizations (CSOs) are in a unique position to influence people's choices, habits and behavior because they are based in or work with communities. They can influence behavior of stakeholders through education, incentives, demonstration of good practice, and direct support. Several international environmental CSO are active in the region, including WCS, WWF, Fauna & Flora, BirdLife International and its partners.

Figure 1.1. Map of Mountains of Central Asia Hotspot



2. BACKGROUND

In April 2025, the profiling team of Zoi Environment Network jointly with the CEPF Secretariat began the process by formally notifying the GEF Focal Points in each country of the work ahead and announced about process through social media and emailing, including on-line survey. The team then conducted a rapid analysis of the initial profile information and the results of the CEPF grant program in phase one (2019–2025). In May-June 2025, in-person national stakeholder consultations were held in the five countries, and an online survey was conducted to update the CEPF partners and CSO database and to gather updates on key biodiversity areas, conservation outcomes, and CEPF strategic directions. In these consultations, lessons learned were briefly discussed, as well as ongoing and planned investments and synergies with updated NBSAPs and national/global biodiversity targets. The profiling team noted that the KBA standard and concept is still poorly understood in Central Asia, except among some scientists (knowing Important Bird Areas IBAs, Important Plan Areas IPAs), making the rapid update challenging.

The team held formal meetings, linked with the international biodiversity and environment days in five countries. Additionally, in April 2025, the CEPF arranged an exploratory mission to Turkmenistan as part of the prospective GEF Small Grant Program, which will be implemented by Conservation International in 2026-2030. Based on guidance from the CEPF Secretariat, there were no meetings held in Afghanistan or China, where grant-making opportunities are limited in the foreseeable future. Altogether, about 200 participants attended meetings and were consulted directly, and an additional 300 were informed.

Table 2.1. Dates and Locations of National Stakeholder Consultations and Profile Presentation Events

Date	Location	Country Covered by Workshop and inputs from online survey	Participants
May 2025	Bishkek	Kyrgyzstan	55
May 2025	Tashkent	Uzbekistan	33
May 2025	Dushanbe	Tajikistan	56
May 2025	Ashgabat	Turkmenistan	26

June 2025	Almaty	Kazakhstan	30
Total			200

Table 2.2. Contribution of Different Stakeholders to the Consultation Process

Country	CSOs	Private sector	Government	Research	Donor and int. org	Total
Kazakhstan	20	2	2	3	3	30
Kyrgyzstan	25	4	8	10	8	55
Tajikistan	32	2	7	7	8	56
Turkmenistan	16	2	3	3	2	26
Uzbekistan	17	2	2	2	10	33
Total	110	12	22	25	31	200

CEPF donors present in the region, including the EU delegations, AFD, the World Bank, and the GEF Focal Points, were informed about and involved in the consultations.

3. LESSONS FROM PREVIOUS INVESTMENT IN THE HOTSPOT

The Phase I [ecosystem profile](#) for the region was prepared by Zoï Environment Network over the period of May 2016 through March 2017. The profile identified 68 globally threatened species, 144 KBAs and 26 conservation corridors. To match the level of funding available from CEPF with a concomitant geographic scope, CEPF and the consulted stakeholders prioritized 33 species, 28 KBAs and five corridors for CEPF investment.

The CEPF Donor Council formally approved the profile in August 2017, but gaps in funding delayed commencement of the five-year investment period until November 2019, with the award of the Regional Implementation Team (RIT) grant to WWF-Russia in collaboration with ARGO Civil Society Development Association. The total allocation to the region was US\$8,000,000 with the RIT fixed at 15 percent of the total (\$1,200,000), allowing for \$6,800,000 in small and large grants. However, in June 2023, the amount for small and large grants was reduced to \$6,250,000. Additionally, due to the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-2021 and the delays that it caused in the early years of the program, the investment period was extended from October 2024 to April 2025.

Ultimately, the ecosystem profile for the hotspot was endorsed by the GEF Operational Focal Points in all the countries except for China. Granting commenced in Afghanistan in late 2020, but had to be suspended the following year due to political changes in the country.

As noted above, WWF-Russia of Moscow, with RIT operations based in Almaty, Kazakhstan and individual staff based in the four other Central Asian capitals, managed the program in the field. Ultimately, WWF-Russia was forced to close, such that a new entity in Almaty, consisting of the same individual experts, took over the contractual responsibilities of the RIT and associated small grant mechanism from 2024 through the close of the program.

Grants were awarded as shown below.

Table 3.1. Large and Small Grants by Strategic Direction

Strategic Direction	Allocation	Large Grants		Small Grants		Total		Balance
		No.	Amount	No.	Amount	No.	Amount	
1. Species	\$1,835,045	8	\$1,248,362	25	\$607,481	33	\$1,855,843	-\$20,798
2. KBAs	\$2,106,313	11	\$1,432,507	27	\$623,493	38	\$2,056,000	\$50,313
3. Corridors	\$600,000	4	\$529,833	2	\$38,896	6	\$568,729	\$31,271
4. Production landscapes	\$640,000	6	\$595,625	2	\$39,972	8	\$635,597	\$4,403
5. Capacity building	\$1,068,642	7	\$1,053,526	3	\$57,627	10	\$1,111,153	-\$42,511
6. RIT	\$1,200,000	1	\$1,180,275	0	\$0	1	\$1,180,275	\$19,725
Total	\$7,450,000	37	\$6,040,127	59	\$1,367,469	96	\$7,407,597	\$42,403

Table 3.2. Large and Small Grants by Country

Country	Large Grants		Small Grants		Total	
	Count	Obligation	Count	Obligation	Count	Obligation
Afghanistan	1	\$2,276	-	-	1	\$2,276
Kazakhstan	5.5	\$872,087	20	\$477,421	25.5	\$1,349,508
Kyrgyz Republic	10	\$1,407,885	14	\$277,855	24	\$1,685,740
Tajikistan	10	\$1,155,864	11	\$212,279	21	\$1,368,143
Turkmenistan	1.5	\$224,066	8	\$228,846	9.5	\$452,913
Uzbekistan	3	\$442,642	6	\$171,068	9	\$613,710
Multi-country	5	\$755,032	-	-	5	\$755,032
RIT	1	\$1,180,275	-	-	1	\$1,180,275
Total	37	\$6,040,127	59	\$1,367,469	96	\$7,407,597

The table below shows that, not counting the RIT, 95 grants were made to 69 unique organizations. Of these, only 13 were international and over half the available funds went to local groups.

Table 3.3. Large and Small Grants by International vs Local Recipient

Type	Large Grants		Small Grants		Total		Percent of Grant Funds	Unique Recipients
	No.	Amount	No.	Amount	No.	Amount		
International	19	\$2,579,453	1	\$18,757	20	\$2,598,210	42	13
Local	17	\$2,280,400	58	\$1,348,712	75	\$3,629,112	58	56
Total*	36	\$4,859,853	59	\$1,367,469	95	\$6,227,322	100	69
RIT		\$1,180,275		-		\$1,180,275		

Grants had direct impacts on species and the physical geographies – the sites and corridors – where they are found. This includes:

- Benefits to as many as 42 globally threatened species, including, for example, direct conservation and protection of native trees (wild apple, wild almond, wild pear), monitoring for conservation action of threatened birds (Slavonian grebe, Marbled duck, Saker, Asian imperial eagle, Steppe eagle, Egyptian eagle, Houbara bustard), better protected area management for a species itself (Menzbier's marmot, Semirechensk salamander, Goitered gazelle, Snow leopard, Urial), and strengthened protection from extractive use (the aforementioned fruit trees and *Crataegus knorringiana*, a species of hawthorn tree).

- Grants improved the management of 2.6 million hectares of land in 55 KBAs. This included large protected areas with improved park operations, such as Khan Tengry in Kyrgyzstan (part of the Sary-Djaz KBA), down to areas as small as one hectare, such as protection of wildlife watering places in Kazakhstan's Altyn-Emel state nature park.
- Creating new protected areas is a difficult process that requires support from the government and multiple stakeholders. Nevertheless, grantees helped promote the creation of two public reserves in Uzbekistan (Fergana Valley Nature Park, Talmarjan Wildlife Refuge) with a combined 104,000 hectares, and in Kyrgyzstan, promoted the concept of "micro-reserves" managed by communities, including nine such sites between 1 and 841 hectares.
- In the first phase of investment, "production landscapes" were understood to be non-protected KBAs – land important for biodiversity conservation that is otherwise used for farming, grazing, forestry, fishing, or the activities of daily life. In total, 804,000 hectares of production landscape were brought under improved management, including rationalization of the management of the Kayrakum Reservoir delta in Tajikistan, better management of the Kelif Hunting and Fishing Farm in Turkmenistan, and better pasture management in the buffer zone of Karatau State Nature Reserve in Kazakhstan.
- 41 local-level plans on grazing, pasture, forest management, village economic development, and buffer zones.
- Engagement with 150 distinct communities ranging in size from as small as 100 residents to as large as 4,000, helping them to become better stewards of their environment for their own benefit, particularly in relation to better pasture and less predation on livestock. Most critically, communities gained greater autonomy in control of natural resources.
- Approximately 4,800 men and 3,800 women received structured training in topics ranging from sustainable farming, agroforestry, livestock management, wildlife control, protected area management, small business, and tourism.
- At least 600 men and 500 women had increased income due to agriculture and livestock sales, tourism, guest services, and honey production.
- Projects supported the creation of 19 new partnerships and networks, such as of female political leaders in Kyrgyzstan, a three-country CSO committee for the better management of the Western Tien-Shan World Heritage Site, and an environmental CSO network in Tajikistan. Projects further strengthened 18 existing partnerships and networks, including the Central Asian Alliance for Climate Education and Global Forest Coalition's network of community-based forestry groups.
- 60 local organizations – recipients of small grants from the RIT, large grants directly from CEPF, and sub-grants from large grantees – completed a baseline and endline civil society tracking tool. Of these, 23 showed an increase in score of 5 points or more, and 16 showed an increase in score of between 1 and 4 points.

- 65 local organizations – small grantees, large grantee, sub-grantees – completed a baseline and endline gender tracking tool. Of these, 42 showed a positive change, and 19 had an increase of 5 points or more.

Lessons from Phase I

1. Limited local CSO capacity mediated the engagement of many groups with CEPF.
2. Local CSOs sometimes purposefully limited themselves to small grants or to being sub-grantees under international CSOs.
3. The challenges presented in the two points above encouraged successive grants to the same organizations.
4. CEPF-determined “priorities” in the ecosystem profile created limitations.
5. The KBA concept requires further socialization.
6. Drafting land-use management plans was only the first step.
7. Collaboration between local CSOs was limited.
8. Overcoming limited staff capacity.
9. Replicate innovative use of technology to work in remote places.
10. Engagement with the private sector was limited.
11. The region requires active information-sharing with local and national authorities.
12. Meetings and robust science are still welcome.
13. Reviews and updates of KBAs and the hotspot boundary are still required.
14. Awareness and outreach are still welcome.
15. Nest CSO activities within international conventions to engender political support.
16. Pursue transboundary options as political space allows.

In late 2024, CEPF commissioned a consultant to undertake an [independent evaluation](#) of the RIT during Phase I to provide recommendations for the next phase.

1. The RIT may play a greater role in assuring impact.
2. Local CSOs rely on the RIT for donor engagement.
3. CSOs would benefit from more project development and management training.
4. The RIT is in a position to identify organizational development and capacity building needs.
5. The RIT can foster networks of CSOs.
6. The RIT plays a lead communication role.

4. BIOLOGICAL IMPORTANCE OF THE HOTSPOT

Geography. The Mountains of Central Asia hotspot consists of two of Asia’s major mountain ranges: the Pamir; and the Tien Shan. The total area is about 860,000 square kilometers.

The central parts of Pamir have a mean elevation of over 4,000 meters and parts of it are plateau-like in character. The Pamir includes the Fedchenko (new name Vanchyah) Glacier, which is 70 kilometers long and one of the longest non-polar glaciers in the world.

Glaciers cover four percent of Kyrgyzstan and six percent of Tajikistan. Melt water is the source of 80 percent of total river runoff in the region, and they are crucial to maintaining water flow during the hot and dry summer months. The climate is arid with most rain falling in the winter and spring. Only half of Kyrgyzstan’s land area and less than one third of Tajikistan’s land area is suitable for agriculture, mainly for grazing. Croplands and gardens occupy less than 7 and 5 percent of their land areas, respectively.

Habitats and Ecosystems. The predominant vegetation types in the hotspot are desert, semi-desert, and steppe on all the lower slopes and foothills and in some of the outlying ranges and major basins. Patches of riverine woodland forest, called *tugai*, survive along the Amu Darya, Zeravshan, Syr Darya, Chu-Talas, and Ili rivers and a few other places. At higher altitudes, steppe communities dominated by various species of grasses and herbs occur, while shrub communities are widespread in the lower steppe zone. Spruce forests occur on the moist northern slopes of the Tien Shan, while open juniper forest occurs widely between 1,000 and 2,800 meters. Meadows typically occur at higher elevations. At the very highest and coldest elevations, there is limited vegetation cover and diversity, with cushion plants, snow-patch plants, and tundra-like vegetation as well as glaciers.

The hotspot contains ancestors of domestic fruit and nut varieties: apricots, plums, apples, pears, plums, grapes, pistachios, almonds, walnuts, and pomegranates. In addition, the wild crop relatives of many cultural herbaceous plants – wheat, barley, oats, rhubarb, sorrel, anise, coriander, onions, garlic, tulips – are still found here, making the region an important storehouse of genetic diversity.

Species Diversity and Endemism. The hotspot harbors significant numbers of wild crop relatives and 5,000-6,000 species of vascular plants, almost one quarter of which are endemic. This includes 12 globally threatened tree species, of which six are endemic.

Table 4.1. Species Diversity and Endemism in the Hotspot by Taxonomic Group

Taxonomic Group	Species	Endemic Species
Plants	5,000-6,000	1,500
Mammals	140	10
Birds	530	1
Reptiles	60-80	10
Amphibians	10	2
Freshwater Fishes	30-60	5

Ecosystem Services. Tajikistan holds 40 percent and Kyrgyzstan 30 percent of the water resources serving the five former Soviet republics. Uzbekistan, with the largest share of population in the hotspot, is the biggest water consumer, in large part because of an economy based on irrigated agriculture. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, with 90 percent of their water resources coming from mountains located outside their country borders, are highly vulnerable to water shortages.

5. CONSERVATION OUTCOMES

CEPF identifies conservation outcomes at three scales, which are collectively needed to conserve global biodiversity:

1. Globally threatened species on the IUCN Red List (Critically Endangered (CR), Endangered (EN), and Vulnerable (VU)).
2. Sites that contribute significantly to the global persistence of biodiversity: Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs).
3. The landscape-scale conservation corridors necessary to maintain the ecological and evolutionary processes upon which those sites and species depend.

To track and evaluate the effectiveness of its investments (in synergy with other projects and funding), CEPF sets quantitative targets and monitors the performance of its grants and portfolios towards these targets. To this end, conservation outcomes can be measured in

terms of “number of globally threatened species benefiting from conservation action”, “area of Key Biodiversity Areas with improved management” and “area of production landscapes with strengthened management of biodiversity”.

Conservation outcomes are defined sequentially, with species outcomes being defined first, then site outcomes and, finally, corridor outcomes. Since species outcomes are extinctions avoided at the global level, they encompass globally threatened species, in the IUCN Red List categories Critically Endangered (CR), Endangered (EN) and Vulnerable (VU). Species threatened nationally – but not globally – are not identified as species outcomes: while they may be high local and national priorities, if they are common or widespread in other parts of the world, they are not global priorities. Similarly, if no formal assessment has been conducted to define a global threat status, species cannot be global priorities.

Species Outcomes

A total of 126 species outcomes were identified during the ecosystem profile updating (for comparison in 2017 – 68), around half are animals (mainly vertebrates) and other half are plants (Table 5.1). Assessments of the global conservation status of mammals, birds and amphibians are comprehensive, and relatively up to date. Assessments of reptiles and fishes are patchier, while only a tiny proportion of invertebrates have been assessed according to the Red List categories and criteria. The same is true for plants, only a small fraction of which have been assessed for their conservation status. Even considering this, 22 of the 29 CR species in the hotspot are plants. The part of the hotspot within Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan has a high number of globally threatened species.

Table 5.1 Synthesis of globally threatened species in the hotspot

Group	CR	EN	VU	Total
Vertebrates (total)	7	16	35	58
<i>Mammals</i>	0	3	5	8
<i>Birds</i>	2	6	14	22
<i>Reptiles</i>	2	1	4	7
<i>Amphibians</i>	0	1	1	2
<i>Fishes</i>	3	5	11	19
Invertebrates	0	0	7	7
Plants	22	20	19	61
Total	29	36	61	126

Site Outcomes – Key Biodiversity Areas

5.2.1 Methodology

Site outcomes comprise KBAs: sites of importance for the global persistence of biodiversity. KBAs are identified for biodiversity elements for which specific sites contribute significantly to their global persistence, such as globally threatened species or ecosystems. The identification of KBAs uses multiple criteria and sub-criteria, each with associated quantitative thresholds (IUCN, 2016). Sites are identified as KBAs when they meet at least one of the following criteria:

- A1: presence of a significant proportion of the global population of one or more globally threatened species.
- A2: presence of a significant proportion of a threatened ecosystem.

- B1 to B4: presence of geographically restricted biodiversity (which may not necessarily be threatened), including individual species, co-occurring species, assemblages of species, and ecosystem types.
- C: ecological integrity: sites that hold wholly intact ecological communities with supporting ecological processes.
- D: exceptional biological processes, including demographic aggregations (such as seasonal breeding or feeding aggregations of a species), ecological refugia, and source populations essential for the survival of the species.
- E: irreplaceability: sites identified through a complementarity-based quantitative analysis of irreplaceability as being essential for achieving conservation goals, where loss would significantly reduce options for biodiversity protection.

The global KBA Standard (IUCN 2016) and the guidelines allow several approaches and choices for delineation. In two situations delineation was relatively simple and straightforward:

- Where a candidate KBA generally coincided with the boundaries of an existing protected area with effective enforcement and management.
- Where a candidate KBA could be defined geographically, such as a section of a river, a micro-catchment, or other geographic element (mountain ridge, a distinct occurrence of sand or rock), where conservation management could be applied effectively or is already in use.

Many KBAs in the Mountains of Central Asia fall into one or both categories.

A total of 170 KBAs, covering a combined area of about 200,000 square kilometers, were identified in the ecosystem profiling update process. Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have the most KBAs by number and the combined area. Afghanistan and Turkmenistan have the fewest KBAs, due to the relatively small area of these countries included within the hotspot. There is no doubt that further desk research and fieldwork as part of projects or targeted research grants would improve the quality of KBA delineation and identify additional global KBAs in the hotspot.

Of the 170 KBAs identified within the hotspot boundaries during the initial ecosystem profile and its subsequent update, 153 are confirmed, global KBAs, which cover an area of 175,910 km², equivalent to about 20 percent of the hotspot. As of summer 2025, when the ecosystem profile was updated, about 50 KBAs within the Mountains of Central Asia hotspot were considered "confirmed" global KBAs in the global KBA database, primarily for birds (A1 or D1 criteria) or mammals (A1). This global database did not include any "confirmed" KBAs focused on flora in the Mountains of Central Asia. According to the initial (2017) and updated (2025) ecosystem profiles, the majority of KBAs within this hotspot are triggered by endemic flora species and their communities (B1, B2 criteria for 80-100 sites). Collaborating further with the KBA Secretariat and through national KBA working groups and processes (to be promoted and established) can help improve the completeness of the KBA database and expand its coverage to include species beyond birds and mammals for the Mountains of Central Asia hotspot.

Table 5.2. Number and area of KBAs in the hotspot

Country	Number of confirmed global KBAs	Total area of confirmed global KBAs (km ²)	Number of KBAs with global/regional status not confirmed
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Afghanistan	1	1,090,000	0
China	14	3,146,000	10
Kazakhstan	24	2,609,000	2
Kyrgyzstan	34	2,891,000	2
Tajikistan	37	4,313,000	2
Turkmenistan	3	377,000	0
Uzbekistan	40	3,165,000	1
TOTAL	153	17,591,000	17

Corridor Outcomes

Conservation corridors are large-scale spatial units necessary to maintain ecological and evolutionary processes. Corridors were identified with a view to: meeting the area requirements of wide-ranging species; maintaining ecological connectivity among KBAs; ensuring the uninterrupted delivery of key ecosystem services; and enhancing resilience of ecosystems to climate change. Twenty-six conservation corridors were identified in the initial ecosystem profiling process, covering a combined area of 580,000 square kilometers, equivalent to 67 percent of the area of the hotspot.

Figure 5.1. Overview map of KBAs in the Mountains of Central Asia Hotspot



Figure 5.2. Overview map of conservation corridors in the Mountains of Central Asia Hotspot



6. SOCIOECONOMIC CONTEXT

The hotspot is a politically nuanced and sensitive region but all countries share deep cultural links. The five Central Asia countries share a common regional communication language (Russian) and cultural, political, and economic history. There are obvious differences in economic power and stability when comparing countries across the hotspot, including China and Afghanistan. As a whole, the population within the hotspot is young and rapidly growing. Urban populations and city sizes are growing across the region; nonetheless, more than half the people of Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan live in rural areas and are directly dependent upon natural resources.

Population growth and high population density in some areas causes increasing demand for land and water resources, and has the potential to increase fragmentation of habitats and increase overexploitation of natural resources, particularly water and pastures. Conservation efforts in the region need to address pressures on the land and water resources by mitigating infrastructure risks and supporting sustainable rural livelihoods.

Population. The hotspot is home to 71 to 77 million people (table 6.1). Most are young (median age 17-25) and living along the main rivers or oases. In the next 25 years, by 2050 the population in the hotspot may approach 90-100 million. Out of Uzbekistan's total population of 37 million, at least 27 million live in the hotspot, including the Ferghana Valley. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are noteworthy: their populations in 1950 were each about 1.5 million, and today, they have 7.3 million and 10.5 million people, respectively. Due to natural population growth and migration, the population of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of China has grown from 4 million in 1950 to 26 million today.

Table 6.1. Population estimates in the hotspot, 2025

Country	Estimated population within hotspot (million)	Density per km ² (within the hotspot)	Annual population growth (percent)	Population increase 2000 - 2025 (percent) in the hotspot	Rural population as percent of total*
Afghanistan	0.1	1-5	2.5	-	73
China	20-25	20-30	0	20	35
Kazakhstan	7-8	10-20	1.3	-	40
Kyrgyzstan	7	35	1.6	40	58
Tajikistan	10	70	2.1	60	73
Turkmenistan	0.1	10-20	1.5	-	53
Uzbekistan	27	80-500	2	50	50
Total	71-77	90	-	-	

Income. Over the past ten years (2015-2025), economic development has increased significantly within the biodiversity hotspot, except in Afghanistan and its Wakhan Valley – part of the hotspot. However, income levels vary greatly. Kazakhstan and China have comparable GDP per capita, while Tajikistan remains less developed, and Afghanistan is one of the least developed countries in the world.

Table 6.2. Economic statistics for the countries in the hotspot

Country	GDP per capita, 2020-2024 (range)	Percent Annual GDP Growth, 2020-2025
Afghanistan	\$400-600	2-5
China	\$10,000-13,000*	5-10*

Kazakhstan	\$9,000-14,000	5
Kyrgyzstan	\$1,400-2,400	5-8
Tajikistan	\$800-1,400	5-8
Turkmenistan	\$6,500-8,500	5-8
Uzbekistan	\$2,000-3,000	2-6

Poverty. Since the initial ecosystem profile was released in 2017, poverty levels have fallen in most of the hotspot countries. Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and China are considered the wealthiest in the region with minimal poverty levels, strong social support and jobs in state-owned enterprises. Uzbekistan's poverty rates fell below 10%, driven by economic growth and rural poverty reduction. Poverty in Tajikistan declined from 56% in 2010 to below 20% in 2024. Over the same period, the proportion of the population considered middle class increased from 8% to 33%. Despite the more stable security situation, poverty in Afghanistan remains widespread, with estimates ranging from 55% to 65%.

Remittances. 2024 was a year of record-high remittances for Central Asian countries: Uzbekistan received \$15 billion (13% of GDP), Tajikistan \$5.8 billion (49% of GDP), and Kyrgyzstan \$3 billion (24% of GDP). Russia remains the main source of remittances, despite decline in the number of migrants.

Agriculture. The major zones of agriculture – Ferghana, Tarim, Chu-Talas, Zeravshan – all rely on irrigation. Currently, Central Asia has 10 million hectares of irrigated lands: Uzbekistan 4.3 million ha, Kazakhstan 2.2 million ha, Turkmenistan 1.8 million ha, Kyrgyzstan almost 1 million ha, Tajikistan 0.8 million ha. With climate change, the area is increasingly vulnerable to drought and soil degradation.

Extractive industries. In terms of revenue, if not employment, mining is most notable in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and China. In Kyrgyzstan, most of the large mineral reserves are in the high mountains, as they are in Tajikistan. Mining and minerals contribute about 50 percent of the national export earnings in Tajikistan (gold, aluminum, antimony, other) and Kyrgyzstan (gold, coal, other minerals).

Energy and transport. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have the largest hydropower potential, and both countries are actively seeking to exploit this. Currently, Kyrgyzstan has 2,700 MW of installed hydropower and Tajikistan 5,000 MW, less than ten percent of their technically feasible hydropower potential. Ongoing development and planning is taking place on Kyrgyzstan's Naryn and Sary-Djaz rivers and in Tajikistan's Vakhsh and Zeravshan.

Forest management. The percentage of forest cover in this arid region is low. Most natural forests and plantations are state owned and managed, although individuals and associations can enter long-term leases with the state and often do so for fruit and nut forests and timber plantations. All countries in the biodiversity hotspot are actively pursuing afforestation programs that focus on desert forests (especially in the Aral Sea region) and green belts in and around populated areas. Fuel wood is one of the main sources of energy for cooking and heating in the mountains, due to the lack of affordable alternatives and irregular power supply.

Tourism. With the exception Afghanistan, international and domestic tourism within the region is booming, with destinations based around hot springs, ski resorts, mountaineering, major lake-based resorts, and cultural heritage sites. Hunting tourism is locally important in Kyrgystan and Tajikistan. Nature parks – lakes, forests, view-sites – are all extraordinarily popular and frequently suffer from the number of visitors.

Almaty is considering developing a major tourism hub in the mountains nearby the city, which have several protected areas. Uzbekistan is building and planning major ski and mountain resorts upstream from Tashkent (Charvak Lake) and in the Turkestan Mountains. Kyrgyzstan is developing the "Three Peaks" resort near Karakol and Jyrgalan in the eastern part of Issyk Kul Lake. All of these plans and developments must be sustainable and consider biodiversity conservation rules, water protection and sound waste management.

The role of women varies across the region, and the differences in gender – in terms of gender development and equality – are reflective of the varying levels of development and traditions of each country. The role of women e.g., the relationship of women to decision-making on natural resources; barriers to women and women's organizations in organizational management is a factor in the CEPF investments, that needs to be considered by grantees.

Under the Taliban rule, Afghanistan has the highest gender inequality. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan all show high rates of female secondary education. Overall, situation with engaging women in conservation and natural resources management is improving, and many local CSOs and conservation initiatives are led or promoted by women. Although women have a quota for public office participation, including environmental bodies, they are most often employed in science, education, and healthcare. In the first phase of CEPF grants, there was balanced participation of women and men.

7. POLICY CONTEXT

Environmental Governance

The primary government agencies responsible for conservation in each country are as follows:

- Afghanistan: National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA) and the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation, and Livestock (MAIL)
- China: Ministry of Ecology and Environment
- Kazakhstan: Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources
- Kyrgyzstan: Ministry of Natural Resources, Ecology and Technical Supervision
- Tajikistan: Committee on Environmental Protection, National Biodiversity and Biosafety Center
- Turkmenistan: Ministry of Environmental Protection
- Uzbekistan: National Committee on Ecology and Climate Change

Policy and legislation among each of the countries is robust and clear, but implementation is conducted by a diverse array of government agencies that may not be coordinated or motivated.

Protected Areas

Formal protected land within the hotspot varies by country from four percent in Turkmenistan to 22 percent in Tajikistan, with protected areas ranging in size from micro-reserves of several hectares to the massive Tajik National Park in Tajikistan (2.6 million hectares).

- Species management areas – locally known as *zakaznik* – correspond to IUCN category IV. These are the numerous protected areas in the hotspot, but many of them are “paper parks.”
- Forestry management areas – locally known as *leskhoz* – apply to most forest lands and set regimes for fire management, pest control, grazing, and timber harvest.
- Hunting concessions are supervised and licensed by the state environmental authorities, and increasingly, are managed privately.
- Water protection zones – rivers themselves, riverbanks, and associated groundwater reserves (with sizes varying depending on the importance for drinking water supply or other purposes) – are legally controlled by government entities.
- Botanical gardens and zoological parks play a key role in *ex-situ* conservation and research of endangered and endemic species, and they may harbor species confiscated from the illegal trade (particularly zoos). The botanical gardens in Almaty and Tashkent have the best botanical collections and research facilities in the region.
- Ecological corridors and micro-reserves, are among the new types of protected areas. Thanks to CEPF support and the active engagement of local civil society organizations, several micro-reserves have been established and officially recognized in Kyrgyzstan's regulations. In 2025, the first 800 000 ha ecological corridor was created in central Tien Shan, Kyrgyzstan, to support the ecological connectivity for snow leopards, mountain sheep and goats (under CAMCA project).
- Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures (OECMs) are being contemplated as part of the efforts to expand conservation coverage beyond formally protected areas.

Table 7.1. Membership in international conventions and regional conservation initiatives

Country	CBD	CITES	Ramsar	CMS	GSLEP	CAMI	UNFCCC	UNCCD
Afghanistan	X	X		X	X	X	X	X
China	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Kazakhstan	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Kyrgyzstan	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Tajikistan	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Turkmenistan	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
Uzbekistan	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Table 7.2. Membership in regional environmental agreements and cooperation mechanisms

Country	Regional adaptation action plan	Regional environmental action plan	Aral Sea (IFAS). commissions (ICWC, ICSD)	The Ustyurt Memorandum on wildlife	Water	Aarhus	Espoo
Afghanistan	-	-	-	N/A	-	-	-
China	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	-	-	-
Kazakhstan	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Kyrgyzstan	X	<i>suspended</i>	<i>suspended</i>	N/A	-	X	X
Tajikistan	X	X	X	N/A	-	X	-
Turkmenistan	X	X	X	X	X	X	-
Uzbekistan	X	X	X	X	X	X	-

Table 7.13. Participation in species action plans and MoUs

Country	Argali	Bukhara deer	Saiga	Siberian crane, Demoiselle crane	Raptors	Great bustard
Afghanistan	X			X		
China				X		
Kazakhstan	X	X	X	X	X	X
Kyrgyzstan	X				X	
Tajikistan	X	X				
Turkmenistan			X	X		X
Uzbekistan		X	X	X	X	X

Under the Convention on Biological Diversity, each country has revised National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans. The NBSAPs are summarized in the full Ecosystem Profile.

8. CIVIL SOCIETY CONTEXT

The trend in the region is one of greater government control over CSOs, particularly since a high point of civil society engagement following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The reasons for this are many and can be sensitive, but include issues of democratic governance, ethnicity and religion, and perceived and real threats from abroad and from within countries. The result is that there are now more requirements for organizational and project registration than in the recent past. Nonetheless, CSOs are generally welcome to engage at the local level, particularly for biodiversity monitoring, environmental education, public awareness, and to showcase “best practice” from abroad.

Comparing across countries, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and China have the strictest rules for the engagement of CSOs via support from international donors. Scientific institutes in these two countries have high standards and adequate funding from national authorities, while CSOs play a role in protection of flagship species and education. In both countries, funding from international entities to local NGOs must be first approved by appropriate authorities. Engagement of civil society in Xinjiang is prescribed in various ways. Academic and scientific organizations, such as the Academy of Science and universities, receive the most funding and have the greatest ability to conduct field work, especially compared to smaller and independent groups, which are underrepresented.

Perhaps at the next level are Tajikistan and Kazakhstan. Tajikistan’s environmental CSOs are largely based in Dushanbe. Some CSOs operate in the north (Khudjand), south (Khatlon) or Pamirs (Khorog). A significant amount of climate change money coming into the country over the past 15 years flows to adaptation and disaster risk reduction. Local CSOs and public groups are also active in species surveys, support for protected areas, conservation of agro-biodiversity, and sustainable development and forestry projects. Kazakhstan has numerous CSOs in its various large ecosystems (e.g, northern steppes, southern deserts, mountains). Those focused on the mountain environment are in Almaty and south-east Kazakhstan (Shymkent, Taraz, Ustkemen), in the Tien Shan, Karatau and Altai Mountains. Many have offices in the capital city, Astana, outside the hotspot, to maintain links to the government and donors. Kazakh CSOs play an active role in biodiversity programmes and legislation, implement field projects on conservation and maintain regional and international relations.

CSOs in Kyrgyzstan play a significant role in shaping biodiversity programmes, environmental monitoring and innovations. However, there is a growing conflict between conservation aims and development aims (typically related to mining, hydropower and

infrastructure), particularly in the western and central Tien Shan. In addition to CSOs, civil society activists and community leaders play important role.

CSOs in Afghanistan played a similar role like in Kyrgyzstan, but now with Taliban in power, women cannot participate and CSOs face many restrictions. Some environment-focused CSOs still operate but face the shortage of funds.

Each of the countries has CSOs which can be described as “local,” covering smaller parts of the country (usually district or province-level), “national,” covering all the country, “regional” with offices or partners in multiple countries, and “international,” often based outside the hotspot. Many CSOs face similar challenges, to varying degrees:

- National government controls, limitations via monitoring, and inspections.
- Limited technical and organizational capacity.
- Lack of recurrent or sustainable funding.
- Differing and challenging donor requirements, including different major languages (English, Russian, Chinese) and donor expectations.

9. THREATS TO BIODIVERSITY IN THE HOTSPOT

In the table 9.1, upward arrows indicate growing threats, downward arrows indicate declining threats, and straight arrows indicate continuing threats.

Table 9.1. Threat Trends by Main Ecosystems (2015-2025)

Main Ecosystems	Habitat change, fragmentation	Pollution, including plastic	Overuse	Climate change	Invasive species, gene pool erosion
Evergreen forests	→	→	→	→	-
Wild fruit & nut forests	→	→	→	↗	↗
Desert forests	↘	→	→	-	-
Tugai, riparian forests	→	→	↗	↗	-
Deserts, semi-deserts	↘	→	→	↗	-
Steppes	→	→	→	↗	-
High mountains	→	→	→	↗	-
Rivers and lakes	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗

Habitat change and fragmentation. Changes in land use, the modification of natural river flows (dams, canals, riverbed and lake shore development), sizable withdrawals of water from rivers for irrigation or installation of large renewable energy parks (wind, solar) are the common examples of habitat change. Tugai (riparian) forests have been particularly affected by irrigation and hydropower projects. Although some CSOs raise concerns about such threats, local CSOs rarely critically review and address the multi billion-dollar investments with high-level interests associated with hydropower, large renewable energy parks, regional roads and energy corridor projects. They do, however, participate in public consultations and safeguards review.

New large-scale irrigation plans in northern Afghanistan and the construction of the Kosh Teppa Canal, started in 2021 by the Taliban authorities and expected to be completed in 2026-2030, may increase water withdrawals from the Amu Darya River by 5-10%. The

canal's intake and location are on the edge of the biodiversity hotspot and KBAs. These developments are of concern to both governments and CSOs in downstream states. The Aral Sea, located outside the mountain biodiversity hotspot, is a dramatic example of habitat change, water and land resource overuse, and their cumulative impacts.

In this region, most lowland semi-deserts and foothills have long been converted to agricultural use, mainly for cultivation of cotton and cereals. Conversion and use of land for grazing is also historical in the lowlands and foothills, while upland natural pastures (alpine meadows and grasslands) are used in the summer. This conversion has resulted in the loss of grasslands and semi-desert grass-wormwood communities, with loss in soil fertility. Poor water management and irrigation practices have led to salinization of soils, and the overuse of fertilizers and pesticides.

Threats resulting from the expansion of linear and industrial infrastructure and changes resulting from economic development are relatively significant. Rapid growth in trade and connectivity in Central Asia is driven by socioeconomic and geopolitical factors.

In diminished and fragmented habitats, migratory species of wild animals often come into contact with and compete with livestock for pasture and water. This increases the risk of disease transmission between them. Therefore, preserving habitat connectivity helps mitigate the risk of disease outbreaks in wildlife and reduces the transmission of diseases between wildlife and livestock and decreases the risk of zoonoses. These issues are already addressed by the "One Health" approach and ongoing projects.

Expansion of settlements, development of mining, boom in large and small tourism and energy infrastructure is accompanied by loss, change and fragmentation of habitats and reduction of ranges.

Extensive development of small hydropower may have significant cumulative impacts on water ecosystems – a recent concern raised in almost all consultations on the update of ecosystem profile.

Illegal hunting reached high levels in the hotspot and across Central Asia in the 1990s-2000s, a period of socio-economic disruptions and transition. However, in the past 10 years (2015-2025), hunting bans and major restrictions in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, as well as penalties and enforcement elsewhere, have improved the situation of many large mammals and flagship species. The markhor goat, snow leopard, argali, and urial have all recovered.

On the other hand, populations of less charismatic or "common" species, such as the Menzbier marmot or Central Asian tortoise, as well as species on the edge of their range, are declining, due to illegal hunting, excessive collection, often in combination with other pressure factors.

Similar to illegal hunting, the illegal collection of plants is a threat for endemics for sale (e.g., tulip species) and for household use (e.g., medicinal plants).

Overgrazing. Overgrazing leads to soil erosion and reduces fresh grass yields and species compositions, leading to growth of less palatable or inedible grasses. A high concentration of livestock can lead to disease transmission and epizootic risks. Overgrazing is common in many forests and protected areas.

Human-wildlife conflict is primarily a threat in Afghanistan's Wakhan Valley. There, herders retaliate against snow leopards by killing, trapping, and poisoning them in an attempt to protect their livestock. In the other countries of the hotspot, the criminal penalties for killing a snow leopard and very high fines seem to serve as sufficient deterrent. However, for other predators, such as wolves, authorities allow and even reward trapping and hunting.

Invasive alien species (IAS) are a serious threat to freshwater and isolated mountain ecosystems. In the past, commercial fish species were introduced to Issyk Kul Lake and the Talas River with immediate impacts on endemics. More typical than purposeful introduction, however, has been the spread of invasives due to habitat change.

Pollution is a threat in the industrialized parts of the hotspot and downstream. Xinjiang stands out as being at risk from industrial discharges and hazardous waste due to its rapid economic growth, although it is not alone. The freshwater basins of Issyk-Kul Lake, in the Ferghana Valley, and the Ili-Balkhash are also at risk of water pollution. Several active and abandoned tailings sites pose risks. The improper use of agrochemicals or incomplete knowledge of their environmental impacts can severely impact populations of raptors and fish. CEPF grantees and other CSOs are concerned about the growing presence and impact of plastic waste and illegally dumped solid waste in waterways.

Indirect threats stem from demographic pressure, the demands for socio-economic growth, weak institutions and limited awareness.

Primary threats can be summarized by country as:

- **Afghanistan – Wakhan Valley:** overgrazing, poaching of wild sheep for meat; loss and degradation of habitat; climate change impacts; and overexploitation of natural resources.
- Threats in **Xinjiang, China** are from extractive industries, infrastructure development, and increasing consumption. Mass tourism is threatening particular sites.
- **Kazakhstan:** overgrazing, collection of plants, boom in tourism and renewables, and gene pool erosion are among the main or emerging threats. The use of chemicals to protect crops and livestock poses a threat to birds of prey.
- **Kyrgyzstan:** overgrazing and the overuse of natural resources (especially of fruit and nut forests) are the main threats. Other threats: pollution of water streams with waste and plastics, destruction of water ecosystems by mining and gravel extraction, poaching, and illegal collection of wild plants. An emerging threat is growing tourism.
- **Tajikistan:** declining knowledge base in science and academia; low capacity of state actors responsible for conservation; rapid population growth combined with poor economic prospects of communities in forest and pasture areas; agricultural expansion right to the borders of protected areas.
- **Turkmenistan – Koytentag:** overgrazing, changes in land and water use, and poorly organized tourism are the main threats in this area.
- **Uzbekistan:** Loss of habitat, agriculture-related pollution, unregulated and growing tourism, and infrastructure development are among main threats. Poaching is a lesser issue.

10. CLIMATE CHANGE ASSESSMENT

Climate change impacts are being felt across the hotspot, where temperature increases range from 0.2°C to 0.4°C per decade over the last 60 years (as shown in numerous national and international reports on climate change). The spring and fall seasons exhibit the largest warming. Winter temperatures increased in the southern parts of Central Asia. Higher temperatures have resulted in increased evaporation and reduced soil moisture content, especially during the dry summer months, thereby amplifying the risk of droughts in lowlands and reducing the amount of surface run-off in small river basins, especially in Turkmenistan and in the Ferghana Valley rivers. In China's section of the hotspot, Xinjiang, climate warmed by 0.3 °C per decade and precipitation showed an incremental trend, resulting in glacial retreat, increased river runoff, lake expansion, and changes in vegetation cover.

Impact on human health. The number of days with temperatures above 40°C has been increasing in the densely populated areas of Central Asia. This has a negative impact on agriculture and rural and urban populations affected by heatwaves. Extreme weather events are expected to grow in intensity and duration (e.g. heatwaves, rain or snow events, droughts). Climate warming is affecting the permafrost, which may lead to an increased risk of rock instability and changes in land use in high altitude pasture areas and nival-glacier ecosystems, which cover a third of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Impact on biodiversity. Various studies expect mountain forests and pastures to move up in elevation and to decrease in size, but it is not known if higher elevation soils will support these ecosystems. Productivity of mountain forests is expected to decline for slow-growing juniper forests.

The hotspot is important for both endemic and endangered species as well as for agro-biodiversity, from which cultivated plants have originated. The hotspot harbors wild relatives (landraces) of important agricultural crops and domesticated fruit and nut trees that possess resistance and tolerance to pests, diseases, and climatic stress; thus, are of incredibly high value.

Emissions. The main greenhouse gas emitters in the biodiversity hotspot are Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and China's Xinjiang. Xinjiang's carbon emissions increased from 161 million tons in 2005 to 605 million tons in 2021, growing annually by 8 percent. Such significant growth reflects the region's rapid industrialization and urbanization. The industry accounts for most of the carbon emissions (450 million tons, or 75% of the total). Xinjiang per capita emissions are twice as high as those of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, both of which are high. Xinjiang is also rapidly expanding its renewable energy capacity. In 2024, the region generated 41 billion kWh of photovoltaic power and 75 billion kWh of wind power.

Kazakhstan's current emissions (340 million tons) are below the 1990 level (380 million tons), though growth in emissions is observed in the industrial, transport, and waste sectors. According to Kazakhstan's carbon neutrality strategy, forest ecosystems are expected to absorb 20 million tons of CO₂ by 2030 and 40-45 million tons by 2050–2060. The current carbon sequestration of forests is estimated at 10 million tons/year. The main emitters within Kazakhstan's part of the hotspot are the industries, transport and waste in and around Almaty and Shymkent.

Most of Turkmenistan's carbon emissions occur in the energy sector. Total emissions are estimated in the range of 70-80 million tons, though this figure may be higher given the

presence of super-emitters. In Uzbekistan, GHG emissions remained stable over the past 30 years, in the range of 190-210 million tons. Per capita carbon emissions are declining, and the share of renewable energy is growing.

Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have low carbon emissions – about 15-20 million tons each (30-40% below of the 1990 level) – due to the high share of hydropower in their energy mix and their less industrialized economies. They aspire to achieve carbon neutrality by increasing hydropower and transitioning to a green economy. Since 2022 Kyrgyzstan implements GCF-FAO project to increase carbon sequestration in forests and rangelands in the middle part of the country.

The total estimated emissions in Afghanistan range from 20 to 30 million tons (depending on the year of reference and estimates). This puts the country's per capita emissions at less than 1 ton/person, which is one of the lowest in the world.

Responses. All countries have designed national climate strategies and NDCs that cover both mitigation and adaptation. The NDCs of Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan pay particular attention to adaptation, including nature-based solutions.

At the regional level Several organizations and projects contribute to Central Asia's collective and cross-border capacity to respond to climate change. From 2016 to 2024, the Climate Adaptation and Mitigation Program for the Aral Sea basin (CAMP4ASB), designed and implemented with support of the World Bank, has been the main regional climate cooperation and policy coordination platform. In 2023-2030, the World Bank implements the Central Asian Regional Resilient Landscapes Restoration Program (RESILAND CA+), which focuses on forest and pasture restoration, nature-based disaster risk reduction measures, and improving the management effectiveness of forestry and protected areas. CAREC is acting as regional collaboration and knowledge hub under this program. Other regional structures partially dealing with climate change responses include the Regional Centre for Hydrology, Regional Glaciology Centre, Regional Mountain Centre, Regional Centre for Disaster Risk Reduction, and the Central Asia Institute of Applied Geosciences (CAIAG). GIZ-led "Green Central Asia" program, which focuses on climate adaptation and improving the management of water, land, and natural resources, is another flagship program relevant to the work of the CEPF. GIZ facilitated the elaboration of the regional climate adaptation strategy for Central Asia (2023) and Germany's scientific institutes and experts were instrumental in regional climate and water assessments and modeling.

11. CURRENT CONSERVATION INVESTMENTS

In all countries of Central Asia and China, governmental budget is the main source of regular funding for biodiversity conservation. According to BIOFIN estimates for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, around 60-80% of funding is allocated for the salaries of staff working on biodiversity within government bodies, with the remainder for basic operational expenses. Most of the funding goes to the network of protected areas and forestry.

Because of the economic diversity and variety of stakeholders in the hotspot countries, it is difficult to assess the source or amount of conservation funding. Nonetheless, consultations with stakeholders and analysis of available information suggest that around \$50 per year is allocated to conservation and related topics (e.g., forestry, agro-biodiversity) from sources of domestic, international, and private funding within the hotspot (excluding China). Table 11.1 shows an assessment of the relative level of funding by country and donor with a scale, from greatest to least, of predominant, medium, minor, marginal, and negligible.

Table 11.1. Indicative Proportions of Investments to Biodiversity Conservation in the Hotspot

Country	Domestic Public Sector	International Donors (mainly public funding)	Private Sector (includes state-owned enterprises)
Afghanistan (Wakhan)	Marginal	Negligible	Negligible
China (Xinjiang)	Predominant	Negligible	Marginal
Kazakhstan	Predominant	Moderate	Minor
Kyrgyzstan	Minor	Moderate	Marginal
Tajikistan	Minor	High	Marginal
Turkmenistan	Predominant	Marginal	Negligible
Uzbekistan	Predominant	Moderate	Marginal

The GEF remains one of the main sources of predictable international funding for conservation in the Mountains of Central Asia biodiversity hotspot. It operates through implementing agencies, such as the UNDP, UNEP, FAO, and World Bank, and its main recipients and counterparts are usually governmental institutions. The GCF also supports biodiversity-related actions through carbon sequestration and climate resiliency of forests and pastures (e.g. GCF-FAO project in Kyrgyzstan).

The World Bank RESILAND CA+ project is the largest single project with a conservation focus in the hotspot (working in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan), but numerous sectoral efforts (e.g., power, transportation infrastructure) have clear connections to CEPF-related activities.

Table 11.2 summarizes GEF-8 STAR allocations, most of which had been utilized by 2025, with the exceptions of China and Afghanistan.

Table 11.2. GEF-8 STAR Allocations for Hotspot Countries (USD millions), 2022-2026

Country	Climate Change	Biodiversity	Land Degradation	Total
Afghanistan	2	4	5	11
China	47	43	3	93
Kazakhstan	5.9	4.8	3.8	17.5
Kyrgyzstan	1	3	4.7	8.7
Tajikistan	1	3	5	9
Turkmenistan	3.7	3	2.8	9.5
Uzbekistan	5	3	5	13

Although governments across the hotspot welcome contributions from civil society organizations and their engagement in conservation activities and projects, they rarely provide funding for these organizations or allocate roles for them in international projects (e.g. GEF, GCF, others). While the majority of GEF funds go to government entities, the GEF Small Grants Program (SGP) targets civil society organizations and small entrepreneurs. The SGP provides grants of up to \$50,000.

Table 11.3. Overview of Conservation-Related Investments by Bilateral Agencies

Donor	Countries	Areas of support
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China	Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan	Research and training, environmental monitoring, infrastructure (Belt and Road)
European Union / European Commission	All countries of the hotspot	Regional environmental cooperation, water management, disaster risk reduction, forest and pasture improvements, river basin management (Zeravshan Basin in Tajikistan), clean-up of the hazardous waste and toxic legacies, education
Switzerland (SDC)	Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan	Water reforms, mountain development, disaster risk reduction, health and sanitation, waste management, education
Germany (BMZ, BMUB via GIZ + KfW)	Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan	Sustainable pasture, land, forest and wildlife management, education, health, energy, basic infrastructure
Russia	Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan	Uranium waste rehabilitation, education, capacity building
Japan (JICA)	China, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan	Sustainable natural resource use, disaster risk reduction
Korea	Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan	Botanical research, forestry projects

In 2020-2025, Germany (IKI, Green Central Asia) and the European Union (WECOOP, SWITCH, country grant programs, Larger Than Tigers strategy, other instruments) were the main sources of bilateral funding and policy attention to biodiversity conservation and monitoring, wildlife management, and sustainable pasture and forest use in Central Asia. The full version of the ecosystem profile as well as BIOFIN country reviews provide more detailed overview of conservation funding, sources and actors.

12. CEPF NICHE FOR INVESTMENT

CEPF's investment niche for the hotspot is defined by the KBA methodology, with prioritization of KBAs that are in trans-border areas, those that allow for resilience to climate change, and those that allow for linkages across productive landscapes. The niche is also defined by the operational environment for grant making in hotspot each country, considering political realities and issues of peace and stability. Furthermore, the niche allows for purposeful synergies with possible future funders, as well as adaptive responses to emerging threats. Finally, the niche is designed to ensure that biodiversity conservation fully supports local and national economic development agendas.

13. CEPF INVESTMENT STRATEGY

Priority Species

National consultations and the stakeholder survey provided the basis for prioritization of the species outcomes. The list of priorities focuses on species for which CEPF is the main or only source of investment, selected species with rapidly declining populations as well as selected CR and EN species. Several high-profile species, such as the snow leopard (VU), have received significant attention and funding in the past five to ten years, and their situation is stable or improving. While CEPF focuses on globally threatened species, the consultations suggested some taxa in need of conservation attention that are currently not assessed as globally threatened. Some are close to the criteria for globally threatened (NT), and some are geographically distinct populations, where Red Books recommend conservation actions.

If any of these taxa are recognized as globally threatened on the IUCN Red List, they can be added to the list of species outcomes and will be candidates on the list of priority species.

A total of 22 species outcomes are selected as priorities for CEPF investment (Table 13.1). They include 3 mammals, 6 birds, one reptile, one amphibian, and 11 plants (most of which are valuable as genetic resources of crop wild relatives). This list does not include any fish species as well as many CR and EN plant species. Considering the lessons from phase one and certain limitations (e.g., science expertise needed, accessibility of sites, conservation approaches), it is recommended that CEPF grantees focus on key habitats and KBAs as conservation targets rather than species outcomes for these groups (including many red-listed tulips, endemic reptiles and fish). Priority species list creates opportunities for CSOs to engage in species-focused conservation actions within and beyond KBAs.

Table 13.1. Priority species for CEPF investment

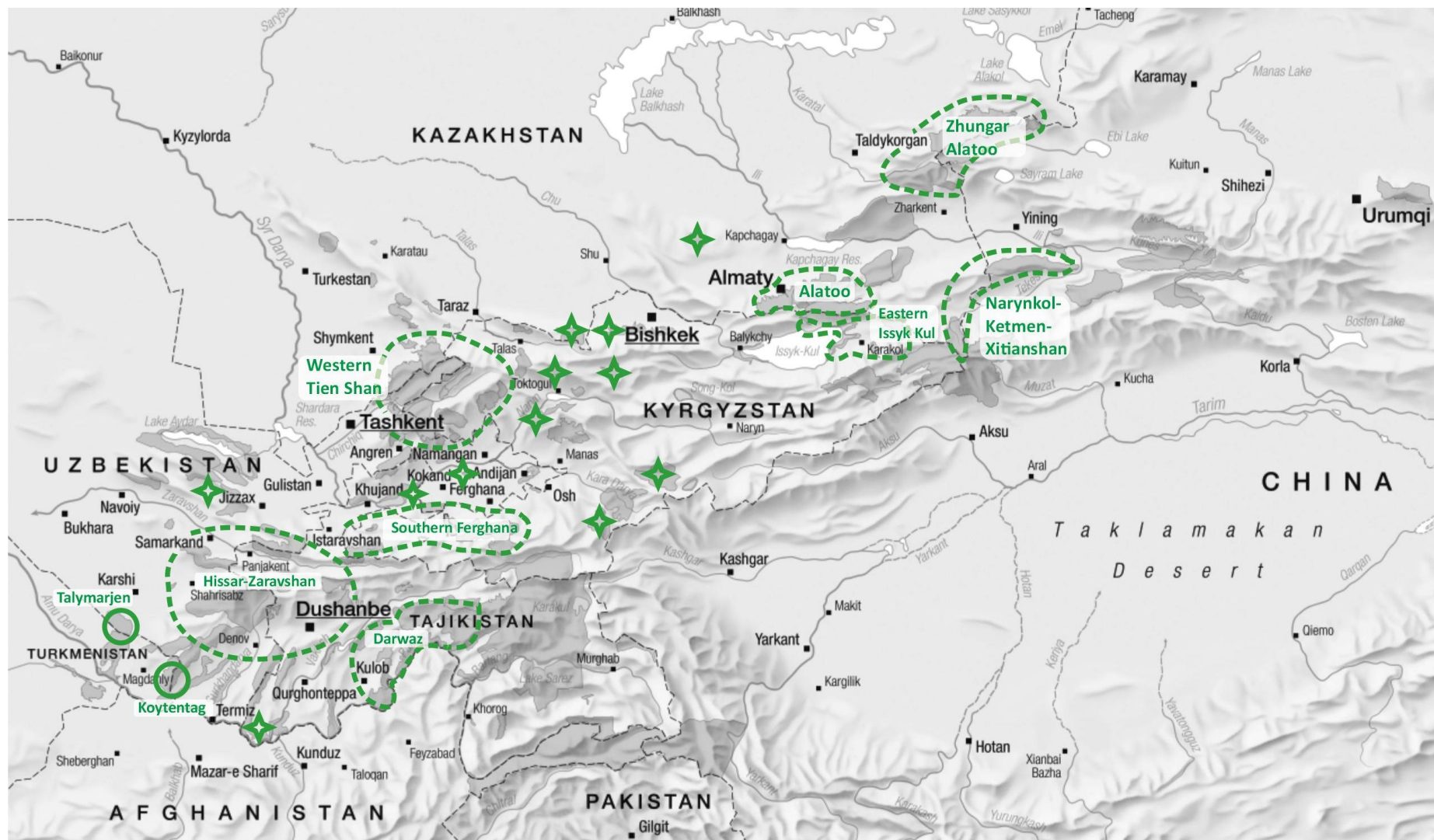
Ct.	Group	Latin name	Common name	IUCN status
1	Mammals	<i>Gazella subgutturosa</i>	Goitered Gazelle	VU
2	Mammals	<i>Marmota menzbieri</i>	Menzbier's Marmot	VU
3	Mammals	<i>Panthera pardus ssp. tulliana</i>	Persian Leopard	EN
4	Birds	<i>Aquila nipalensis</i>	Steppe Eagle	EN
5	Birds	<i>Falco cherrug</i>	Saker Falcon	EN
6	Birds	<i>Leucogeranus leucogeranus</i>	Siberian Crane	CR
7	Birds	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>	Egyptian Vulture	EN
8	Birds	<i>Otis tarda</i>	Great Bustard	EN
9	Birds	<i>Vanellus gregarius</i>	Sociable Lapwing	CR
10	Reptiles	<i>Testudo horsfieldii</i>	Central Asian tortoise	VU
11	Amphibians	<i>Ranodon sibiricus</i>	Semirechensk Salamander	EN
12	Plants	<i>Armeniaca vulgaris</i>	Wild Apricot	EN
13	Plants	<i>Crataegus darvasica</i>	hawthorn species	CR
14	Plants	<i>Crataegus knorringiana</i>	hawthorn species	CR
15	Plants	<i>Malus niedzwetzkyana</i>	wild apple species	EN
16	Plants	<i>Malus sieversii</i>	wild apple species	VU
17	Plants	<i>Pyrus korshinskyi</i>	wild pear species	CR
18	Plants	<i>Pyrus tadshikistanica</i>	wild pear species	CR
19	Plants	<i>Prunus tadzhikistanica</i>	wild prune species	EN
20	Plants	<i>Ribes malvifolium</i>	currant species	CR
21	Plants	<i>Sibiraea tianschanica</i>	rose species	CR
22	Plants	<i>Swida darvasica</i>	dogwood species	CR

Priority Sites

The prioritization of KBAs is a collaborative effort involving stakeholder consultation inputs (meetings, surveys) and consideration of tangible results and the need for follow-up action from the previous grant phase (2019-2025). The factors considered in prioritization were biological importance of KBAs, site-level threats, opportunities for synergies with other initiatives, and the feasibility of implementation including remoteness, restrictions, availability and interest of CSOs in taking actions, intensity and focus of other related

projects funded by donors. The shortlist of priority sites is a compromise between availability and distribution of CEPF funding allocated by strategic directions.

Figure 13.1. Map of priority sites for CEPF investment in the Mountains of Central Asia Hotspot



The individual KBAs and KBA clusters for CEPF actions are highlighted in color.

Participants of the ecosystem profile update consultations in 2025 and desk review pre-selected and identified about 60 prioritized KBAs. Considering the anticipated scale of CEPF investment in KBAs, this number was reduced to 40 sites as a basic target.

Priority was given to:

- KBAs important for highly threatened and narrowly endemic species, unique communities and/or crop wild relatives (that are threatened and/or narrowly endemic).
- Un-protected KBAs, or those in the buffer zones of protected areas, were preferred to strictly protected KBAs that already benefit from state-funded efforts or funding from other donors.
- Several new KBAs identified in the process of the ecosystem profile update based on new data; KBAs facing significant threats; those in the transition zone "lowlands-mountains" and edges of the hotspot; those serving as biodiversity "refuges;" those with high endemism; and those allowing for ecological connectivity.
- KBAs where Phase I grants provide the basis for relatively low-cost follow-up action and KBAs that allow for synergy with GEF and other donor-funded biodiversity projects.

As Figure 13.1 and Table 13.2 show, 40 KBAs have been prioritized [recalling that grants in Phase I improved at least parts of 55 KBAs.] This represents 3.8 million hectares – about 22 percent of the total hectares of KBA in the hotspot and about 4.5 percent of the total hotspot area. There are no prioritized KBAs in Afghanistan or China, given the current political conditions, although the CEPF Secretariat will reassess this periodically. Turkmenistan remains with two priority KBAs, recognizing that there will be synergy with the GEF small grants program, covering the entire country, beginning in 2026.

Note that 28 of the 40 prioritized KBAs fall within nine geographic "clusters." This reflects experience from Phase I and other CEPF hotspots, where grantees, typically working with government administrative districts or within geographic areas, address multiple KBAs in the same general region. Thus, it makes sense to think of Phase II as working in 12 KBAs and 9 KBA clusters. The clusters themselves have roughly 20+ additional KBAs in them, which, while not prioritized, could see eventual grant activity.

Table 13.2. Priority sites for CEPF investment

Ct.	Cluster/Name	KBA Code	Area (HA)
Kazakhstan			
	<u>Western Tian Shan Cluster (KAZ)</u>		
1	Ugam	KAZ5	138,000
2	Tolebi	KAZ6	18,000
3	Aksu-Zhabagly	KAZ8	121,000
	<u>Alatoo Cluster</u>		
4	Aksay	KAZ12	100,000
5	Issyk	KAZ14	85,000
6	Kolsai	KAZ16	161,000
	<u>Zhungar Alatoo Cluster</u>		
7	Upper Koksu	KAZ22	266,000
8	Zhongar-Alatau	KAZ23	395,000
9	Narynkol	KAZ18	100,000
10	Merke	KAZ11	65,000
11	Chu-Ili Mountains	KAZ24	38,000

Kyrgyzstan			
	<u>Western Tien Shan Cluster (KGZ)</u>		
12	Besh Aral	KGZ1	124,000
13	Kassan Sai	KGZ4	83,000
14	Aflatun-Padyshata	KGZ5	68,000
15	Sumsar	KGZ13	15,000
	<u>Fergana Valley Cluster</u>		
16	Isfairam- Shakhimardan River Basins	KGZ16	271,000
17	Ravat	KGZ17	7,000
18	Eastern Issyk Kul	KGZ31	75,000
19	Torkent	KGZ11	18,000
20	Suusamyr	KGZ12	39,000
21	Kara-Suu	KGZ14	64,000
22	Bulolu-Koksuu	KGZ21	89,000
23	Kyrgyz Ala-Too	KBZ34	117,000
Tajikistan			
	<u>Western Tien Shan Cluster (TJK)</u>		
24	Upper Asht and Aktash	TJK1	15,000
25	Adrasman	TJK2	25,000
	<u>Hissar Zaravshan Cluster</u>		
26	Turkestan Mountains Southern Slope	TJK4	55,000
27	Yagnob National Park	TJK6	64,000
28	Sarikhadang and Iskanderkul Lake	TJK9	20,000
29	Shirkent	TJK11	8,000
30	Karoni	TJK12	6,000
	<u>Darwaz Cluster</u>		
31	Dashtijum	TJK23	44,000
32	Darvaz	TJK24	102,000
33	Kamarou	TJK25	18,000
34	Shokh-Kurjalakum	TJK37	11,000
Turkmenistan			
35	Koytendag	TKM1	124,000
36	Tallymerjen	TKM2	168,000
Uzbekistan			
	<u>Western Tien Shan Cluster (UZB)</u>		
37	Pskem River Basin	UZB1	283,000
38	Angren Plateau	UZB7	70,000
	<u>Hissar Cluster</u>		
39	Western Zeravshan	UZB28	128,000
40	Uzbek Babatag	UZB36	107,000
41	Northern Slope of the Turkestan Mountains	UZB20	148,000
42	Talimarjan Reservoir	UZB30	86,000
Total			3,939,000

Priority Corridors

Priority conservation corridors and landscapes are relatively large areas. In view of the expected level of CEPF funding and the application of additional criteria, such as synergy with investments by other funders, and opportunity to engage civil society, 10 corridors prioritized (Table 13.3, Figure 13.2). These areas, which cover 192,000 km², are based on biological considerations and socio-economic development trends and pressures and cover both terrestrial and freshwater ecosystems. These priority corridors provide opportunities for civil society to engage in landscape-scale conservation efforts.

Table 13.3. Priority Corridors for CEPF investment

Code	Conservation corridor name	Area (ha)	Countries	Main concerns / opportunities
4	Koytendag and Hissar Mountains	2,880,000	TKM, UZB, TJK	Unsustainable tourism, infrastructure development, overgrazing, overharvesting, transboundary issues
5	Central Tajikistan	1,530,000	TJK	Overgrazing, overharvesting, community engagement
6	Upper and middle Zeravhan River Basin	480,000	TJK, UZB	Tourism and infrastructure development, transboundary issues, integration of biodiversity into river management
7	Turkestan and Alai Mountains	2,430,000	KGZ, TJK, UZB	Overgrazing, transboundary issues
8	Aidarkul Lake and Nuratau Mountains	1,800,000	UZB	Infrastructure development, monitoring, safeguards, ecological connectivity
9	Western Tien Shan	3,530,000	KAZ, UZB, KGZ, TJK	Unsustainable tourism, infrastructure development, overgrazing, overharvesting, transboundary issues
10	Kazakh Karatau Mountains	1,270,000	KAZ	Infrastructure development, overgrazing, monitoring, safeguards, connectivity
16	Central Tien Shan	3,370,000	KYR, CHI	Infrastructure development, overgrazing, monitoring, safeguards, connectivity
19	Chu Ili Divide	1,710,000	KAZ, KGZ	Extractive industries, overgrazing, potential large wind and solar energy, monitoring, safeguards
26	Riverine ecosystems and waterways in the Pamir and Tien Shan Mountains (Syr Darya, Zaravshan, Talas, Naryn)	200,000	KAZ, UZB, KGZ, TJK	Small hydropower, irrigation, tourism and mining in riverine zones

CEPF Strategic Directions and Investment Priorities

During the 2025 update process of the ecosystem profile, stakeholders reviewed the strategic directions of the initial ecosystem profile (2017) and the CEPF grant program (2019-2025) as part of in-person consultations and an online survey. No major changes to

the original strategic directions were proposed, through some modifications were introduced to investment priorities.

Table 13.4. Strategic Directions and Investment Priorities

CEPF Strategic Directions	CEPF Investment Priorities
1. Address threats to priority species	1.1. Improve enforcement and develop incentives and alternatives for nature users 1.2. Promote improved regulations for collecting, grazing, hunting, fishing and local-level conservation 1.3. Support the development and implementation of species-focused micro reserves and species conservation plans 1.4. Prevent and reduce human-wildlife conflict by addressing retaliatory killing and trapping 1.5. Maintain populations of priority species by improving and applying science and monitoring data to local conservation actions and to national and international biodiversity goals
2. Improve management of priority sites with and without official protection status	2.1. Facilitate effective collaboration among CSOs, local communities, and park management units to enhance KBAs with protected area status 2.2. Develop and implement management approaches to sustainable use in KBAs outside protected areas 2.3. Build support and develop capacity for identification, recognition and application of KBAs
3. Support sustainable management and biodiversity conservation within priority corridors	3.1. Support ecological restoration and efforts to promote connectivity of KBAs at the landscape scale 3.2. Evaluate and integrate values of biodiversity into land use and development planning 3.3. Support civil society efforts to analyze development plans and programs, evaluate their impact on biodiversity, and propose alternative scenarios and appropriate measures
4. Engage communities of interest and economic actors in the improved management of production landscapes and conservation	4.1. Engage hunting associations, tourism operators, mining companies, and the information technology sector in conservation management and in improving accessibility of biodiversity information 4.2. Promote mainstreaming of conservation into livestock and farm management practices 4.3. Engage with the government and private sector to integrate biodiversity safeguards into infrastructure development 4.4. Popularize biodiversity science and use the media to raise awareness of threatened and unique species and KBAs, and to inform public debate on conservation issues

CEPF Strategic Directions	CEPF Investment Priorities
5. Facilitate the development of a robust and resilient community of conservation civil society organizations	5.1 Ensure that CEPF grantees have the technical capacity to plan, implement and sustain effective conservation projects 5.2 Provide support to targeted conservation CSOs engaged in a process of organizational development 5.3 Enhance the collective strength and ability of conservation CSOs
6. Provide strategic leadership and effective coordination of conservation investment through a Regional Implementation Team	6.1. Support a broad constituency of civil society groups working across institutional and political boundaries towards achieving the shared conservation goals described in the ecosystem profile

Strategic Direction 1: Address threats to priority species

Overexploitation can devastate a species even when its habitat is protected. Species with reduced populations are at increased risk of disease, less resilient to habitat disturbance, and less able to compete with invasives. Some species may be able to withstand limited exploitation, and this may be an effective conservation strategy where exploitation rights can be defined, managed and policed. Where a species or product is important for local livelihoods and economies, it may be possible to find alternatives or to incentivize behavioral change. For many species, however, legal protection and enforcement of bans on exploitation are required. Enforcement of regulations, national red lists (Red Books), quotas and species-focused action plans may be complex and often depends on the cooperation of local stakeholders. This strategic direction may complement governmental actions on threatened species by engaging civil society to achieve national and global biodiversity targets and contribute to regional conservation initiatives under the Convention on Migratory Species and others.

Strategic Direction 2: Improve management of priority sites with and without official protection status

Protected areas are a critical part of the overall effort for the conservation of KBAs and are likely to become more so as pressure from land-use increasingly affects them. CEPF will support the improved management of protected areas, which are the backbone of conservation in the hotspot.

At the same time, not all KBAs are within protected areas. Some KBAs are on public land that offer some degree of protection. CEPF will support actions that maintain the conservation value of these KBAs by working with regulations, incentives and technical support to encourage land users and stakeholders to incorporate biodiversity into their management practices.

Pressure from unsustainable local natural resource use is a challenge for KBAs across the hotspot. Models of sustainable, community-based management in a variety of situations are important to convince government and local stakeholders that such approaches are possible. Likely activities include identification of links between livelihoods and resources, strengthening of local institutions for management, creating links to markets and economic opportunities that give sustainable management greater value, and building networks of support for community-based initiatives.

CEPF will encourage grants that promote more robust and systematic KBA approach at the national level, which involves collaboration between diverse stakeholder groups and training

in application of KBAs, KBA updates and provision of new data, assisting local and national level policymakers in understanding the KBA concept.

Strategic Direction 3: Support sustainable management and biodiversity conservation within priority corridors

The priority corridors include forest areas that are home to genetic resources, areas important for the movement of species and KBAs connectivity. CEPF will support CSOs that integrate with larger-scale efforts, contribute to establishing or strengthening ecological links between KBAs. Land-use and development planning usually incorporate environmental considerations, but often fail to identify and address KBAs, endemic species, and complex biodiversity threats. CEPF can support projects that promote evaluation and integration of biodiversity into planning, CSO efforts to analyze development plans and programs, evaluate their impact on biodiversity, and propose alternative scenarios.

Strategic Direction 4: Engage communities of interest and economic actors in the improved management of production landscapes and conservation

A production landscape could be as small as an individual farm and a mining site or as large and openly managed as a mountain grazing area or as controlled as a private hunting estate. The water reserves created by dams and even wastewater retention ponds around large cities within the hotspot – such as Almaty, Dushanbe, Tashkent, and Bishkek – are production landscapes to some extent.

This strategic direction will support activities that show that economic activities need not be in conflict with sustainable management and local socio-economic development. Work will take place in priority KBAs, in areas that affect priority KBAs, or in the arena of decision making about productive practice, and could include discussions of agricultural lands (pasture and crop and plantations); forested areas (non-timber forest products); concession lands (hunting, mining, tourism); lands set aside for infrastructure development (roads, irrigation canals, water reservoirs, rail, power transmission lines, pipelines, urban expansion) and even wastewater ponds, which may transform into important habitats for birds. Work will have a direct impact on priority species, sites, and corridors.

Strategic Direction 5: Facilitate the development of a robust and resilient community of conservation civil society organizations

This strategic direction reflects a commitment by CEPF to engage more deeply in the issue of long-term sustainability of CSOs in the Mountains of Central Asia Hotspot. It addresses the need to ensure that all CEPF grantees have access to support for the design, management, evaluation and reporting of the projects they implement with CEPF support. It supports CEPF's commitment to invest in the organizational development of a smaller group of strategic partners with high potential to deliver transformative impacts and on the strengthening of networks and collaborative action.

Funding for all types of capacity building and organizational development may be awarded: to a specialist service provider, to support one or several beneficiary CSOs; directly to the beneficiary CSO as part of a larger conservation project grant; or directly to the beneficiary CSO as a dedicated capacity development grant. The decision on the most appropriate approach in each case will be influenced by the capacity development approach being supported. The RIT will have a key role in planning and coordinating the efficient and effective delivery of capacity building and organizational development, using the range of capacity development approaches and funding modalities available. The RIT is expected to

involve dedicated CSO capacity development organizations to assist them in this role, as well as in the design and delivery of appropriate support that addresses needs identified by CSOs.

Strategic Direction 6: Support a broad constituency of civil society groups working across institutional and political boundaries towards achieving the shared conservation goals described in the ecosystem profile

CEPF Regional Implementation Teams (RITs) support comprehensive and integrated portfolios covering larger anchor projects, smaller grassroots activities, policy initiatives, governmental collaboration, relations with regionally present donors, and financing. RITs use the Ecosystem Profile to develop a cohesive portfolio of grants.

The RIT provides strategic leadership and knowledge for building a constituency of civil society groups working across institutional and political boundaries toward achieving the conservation goals described in the Ecosystem Profile. The RIT also plays a key role supporting the consolidation of CSOs and identifying funding opportunities to leverage and complement CEPF's investment. The RIT will design calls for proposals and work with applicants so that they address constraints to participation by women and other vulnerable groups, ensure gender equitable access to information, promote gender equitable distribution of resources and improve gender equity within CSO organizational structures.