

UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

Conservation of Globally Significant Biodiversity in the Landscape of Bulgaria's Rhodope Mountains Project

ATLAS ID 33627 PIMMS-1966



*“Herodotus said that Rhodope is a holy mountain. Now, after the Rhodope Project,
I understand why” – Member of Kardzhali Municipal Focus Group*

Final Report of the Final Evaluation Mission

19th October 2009

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Acknowledgements

The Final Evaluation Team would like to thank all the staff and people interviewed by the Rhodope Project who gave freely of their time and ideas to make the FE process a success - all those listed in Annex II contributed. We would especially like to thank the staff of the PMU and RSCs and the UNDP Bulgaria CO for their excellent logistical skills and hospitality – particularly Mr. Alexander Bardarov (National Project Manager), Daniela Popova (Regional Project Manager, RSC-Kardzhali), Ema Eneva (Regional Project Manager, RSC-Smolyan) and Mr. Pavel Gospodinov (Programme Analyst, UNDP Bulgaria) for their organizational efforts and patience with the requests of the FET. The evaluation process ran very well with no significant problems.

Following completion of the Draft Report on 7th October 2008, review comments were received from the PMU, UNDP CO and Regional Coordination Unit in Bratislava. No review comments were received from the State Forestry Agency. Comments have either been included in the text where these related to factual inaccuracies in the draft, or have been reproduced in full and unedited as footnotes to the appropriate text to ensure a fair hearing to all parties. The FET has commented on these in some cases. We thank each of the reviewers for providing useful and constructive feedback, which helped to strengthen the final version.

The FET has tried to provide a fair and balanced assessment of the Project's achievements and performance and we have made recommendations aimed at helping to improve project delivery and sustainability and replication of project results in the final few months of implementation, as well as to aid in the development and execution of future GEF project. Our sincere apologies if anyone should take anything written to be anything other than constructive criticism.

It should be stated that the Evaluation was greatly facilitated – and made a pleasurable experience – due to the openness, courteousness and sense of humour of all the Project team. Both the members of the FET believed that the Project team has a pool of dedicated and talented personnel whose efforts are not sufficiently recognized (and in the international consultant's opinion they are one of the best UNDP-GEF Project teams he has encountered). Very many thanks to all for a stimulating and very worthwhile assignment.

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19th October 2009

Acronyms and Terms

APR	Annual Progress Report
BBF	Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation
BBI-MATRA	The International Assistance Programme of the Dutch Government
BD1	GEF Strategic Priority Biodiversity 1 – Protected Areas
BD2	GEF Strategic Priority Biodiversity 2 – Mainstreaming
BSBCP	Bulgarian-Swiss Biodiversity Conservation Programme
BSPB	Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds (BirdLife Bulgaria)
CBMS	Common Birds Monitoring Scheme
CD	Compact Disc
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CORINE	Coordinated Information on the European Environment
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
EARBC	East Aegean River Basin Committee
EIA	Environment Impact Assessment
EU	European Union
ExEA	Executive Environment Agency
FSC	Forest Stewardship Council
GEF	Global Environment Facility
GIS	Geographic Information System
GoB	Government of Bulgaria
ha	Hectare(s)
HCVF	High Conservation Value Forest
IA	International Advisor
IE	Initial Evaluation
IUCN	International Union for Nature Conservation
LEADER+	A European Community Initiative for assisting rural communities in improving the quality of life and economic prosperity in their local area
LL	Lessons Learned
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MAF	Ministry of Agriculture and Forests
MAFS	Ministry of Agriculture and Food Supply
METT	Management Effectiveness Tracking Tool
MFG	Municipal Focus Group(s)
MEW	Ministry of Environment and Water
MRDPW	Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works
MTE	Mid-term Evaluation
MTET	Mid-term Evaluation Team
NAEP	National Agri-Environmental Programme
Natura 2000	The network of protected zones of the European Union
NBMS	National Biodiversity Monitoring System
NEN	National Ecological Network
NEX	Nationally Executed Project
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
NPD	National Project Director
NPM	National Project Manager
PA	Protected Area
PAMCC	Protected Area Management Consultative Council
PDF-B	Project Development Facility – Block B

PDP	Programme for Demonstration Projects / Pilot Demonstration Project(s)
PHARE	One of three pre-accession instruments financed by the European Union
PIR	Project Implementation Report
PMC	Project Management Committee
PMU	Project Management Unit
PR	Public Relations
PSC	Project Steering Committee
pSCI	Potential Site of Community Importance
RCP	Rio Conventions Project
REWI	Regional Environment and Water Directorate
RFB	Regional Forest Board
RNP	Rural Network Project (UNDP)
RP	Rhodope Project
RPM	Regional Project Manager
RSC	Regional Support Centre
SAC	Special Area of Conservation
SAPARD	Special Accession Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development
SCP	Species Conservation Plan
SEA	Strategic Environment Assessment
SFA	State Forest Agency
SPA	Specially Protected Area(s)
STAP	Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel
TOR	Terms of Reference
TPR	Tri-partite Review(s)
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
US\$	United States Dollar
WWF	World Wildlife Fund for Nature

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1. Executive Summary

Project evaluation

The FE was conducted over a period of 16 days between 30th August and 14th September 2009 by a team of one international and one national consultant. The FE occurred 3 months before the end of the Project due to the closure of the UNDP CO on 31st December 2009. Key The FE was based on the review of key Project and other related documents and interviews with more than 60 people from various stakeholder groups in Sofia and in the Eastern and Western Rhodope regions and UNDP. The report was finalised on 19 October 2009 after receipt of comments.

Key findings

Overall, the Project was well-managed and well-delivered and is evaluated as *Satisfactory*.

Conceptualisation/design – Project design too complex and too many activities, with mixing of GEF PA and mainstreaming approaches; had insufficient consultation with local stakeholders over establishment of Nature Parks during PDF-B phase, and original risk analysis did not consider likelihood of failure to establish Nature Parks (NPs). Evaluated as *Marginally Satisfactory*

Stakeholder participation/public involvement – Wide stakeholder participation. Good reputation of RP among stakeholders has helped in delivering objectives and outcomes. In some cases, MFGs of limited value, but helped build stakeholder networks and partnerships. Very good (particularly technical) information dissemination. Good use of national experts from NGOs and universities in project activities. Evaluated as *Highly Satisfactory*

Implementation approach – Largely efficient and effective, with a particularly well-organised, highly motivated, very capable and dedicated Project team with good communication and adaptive management skills. Good partnerships in implementation arrangements, but hindered by original logframe poor and project needed major refocusing after MTE moving more towards mainstreaming. Overall, evaluated as *Satisfactory*

Monitoring and Evaluation – Good project monitoring and evaluation, although, again, hampered by poor logframe. Adequate resources (human and financial) for effective M&E. very good reporting (exemplary) but weak annual lesson learning exercise undertaken by external consultants. Evaluated as *Satisfactory*

Sustainability – Some success with integration of biodiversity concerns into municipal planning and programmes (MPPE and support for LEADER strategies), and more with Forestry through identification of HCvFs and FSC certification process. Good individual and institutional capacity built but concern over loss of trained staff (especially after elections). Those MFGs that have not become NGOs or LEADER groups are very unlikely to survive without continued RSC input. The newly formed Rhodope Project NGO is very unlikely to survive without immediate funding after project ends. Project Exit Strategy produced February 2009 functions as the ‘sustainability strategy’ but is not comprehensive and needs to be extended and updating. Evaluated as *Marginally Satisfactory*

Results

Achievement of objectives/outcomes – Many indicator targets met or exceeded and others close to being attained. Project team did well to almost meet original indicator on area under conservation after loss of NPs from project. Overall, evaluated as *Satisfactory*

Objective 1: Landscape-scale conservation is effectively operationalised in Eastern and Western Rhodope – *Satisfactory*. Despite the unsuccessful designation of the NPs, the landscape-scale conservation achieved through establishment/improved management of smaller PAS and Natura 2000 and extensive information supply.

Objective 2: Stakeholders integrate biodiversity into resource management and economic development policy and practice – *Satisfactory*. Integration biodiversity conservation priorities into the forestry sector through FSC certification schemes, and Municipal development planning, but limited gains in agriculture and with river basin management

Outcome 1: Structures for effective landscape-scale conservation established and operational – *Marginally Satisfactory*. Although the two NPs not established, the RP significantly contributed to the PAs network in Rhodope region and Natura 2000 establishment. MFGs established and many later transformed into LEADER Local Action Groups, or NGOs. Good public awareness raising.

Outcome 2: Information baseline established and strengthened as a basis for adaptive management – *Highly Satisfactory*. Huge increase in quantity, quality and availability of baseline environmental data, including surveys, GIS, databases, providing important source for sustainable forestry, municipal planning, organic agriculture and ecotourism in region. Excellent GIS made publicly available through free software and the Internet.

Outcome 3: Sustainable management regimes piloting a landscape-based approach to conservation undertaken within the Rhodope Region – *Satisfactory*. Successful mainstreaming through support of MPPEs in 12 municipalities. Conservation plans for two species developed and implementation of existing ones. Critical habitats identified as part of support in establishing Natura 2000 and some management plan development, although the PA Collaborative Councils not very operational. As NPs not designated, the overall impact from this outcome is limited. Limited success with mainstreaming in river basin management.

Outcome 4: Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) and lessons learned – *Satisfactory*. Monitoring and evaluation very successful, although some indicators not relevant. Annual lessons learned reports not considered very useful.

Outcome 5: Institutional capacity to integrate biodiversity and ecosystem management objectives into productive sector programmes strengthened – *Satisfactory*. As NP directorates were not established the RP re-focused its capacity building activities on other local and regional authorities. Broad portfolio of well-planned, well-executed trainings and consultancy provided by RP to many stakeholders, and feedback was overwhelmingly positive.

Outcome 6: Forestry, tourism and farming practices reoriented to support conservation while improving livelihoods – *Satisfactory*. Successful mainstreaming in forestry practices (e.g. HCVFs, FSC certification) and replication and long-term impacts are likely. 27 MFGs formed and supported. 20 Pilot Demonstration Programme projects executed, but longer term impact and replication unknown. Positive results with mainstreaming into the municipal development planning, but limited success in introducing organic farming (mainly due to the difficult context) and eco-tourism.

Outcome 7: Financing for sustainability of the applied conservation and cross-sector coordination secured – *Marginally Satisfactory*. Ecosystem services survey is innovative but not applied. Training on project formulation helped stakeholders with raising financing (e.g. municipal administrations with LEADER). Institutional sustainability and follow-up not yet achieved, although Rhodope NGO created.

Key achievements/impacts. Quantity, quality and availability of BD and environmental information on the Rhodope region e.g. maps, GIS layers, species and habitat data, significant update on previous incomplete data sets; identification of HCVFs and pilot forest certification achieved and replicated; changes in awareness, attitudes and practices among some key stakeholders, especially Forestry staff, but also municipal authorities; critical contribution to development of MPPEs and LEADER strategies; Pilot Demonstration Programme (PDP) projects, which had local, practical impacts and gave opportunity for local people to realize their own ideas (but needs follow-up M&E to assess sustainability, replication and longer-term impact); raised awareness of biodiversity among public (but

no quantitative data on this -awaiting final survey results); MFGs which encouraged networking between key local stakeholders and the Project to facilitate achievement of project objectives, and creation of LEADER groups in some cases; well-developed and highly appreciated training programmes using specialists to build capacity; contribution to Natura 2000 process and extension of existing PAs and development of management plans for some small protected areas (largely pre MTE work)

Main failings. Inadequate risk analysis in project design with failure to consider the consequences if the Nature Parks were not created; the absence of the two Nature Parks; unclear purpose and sustainability issues regarding some MFGs; limited success with mainstreaming biodiversity into farming and river management; clear dependence by some beneficiaries on project input, likely to negatively impact after project end, especially weaker and more remote municipalities; projects results can be accessed by municipalities but still not able to use and interpret them e.g. GIS data, due to insufficient trained staff, which will impact sustainability; sustainability of human resources expected to be achieved by transformation of RP team into Rhodope Project NGO but very uncertain whether the new NGO will be sustainable

Key issues and recommendations

Improving project dissemination and potential for replication

- Prepare an English summary for all major reports, documents and publications currently in Bulgarian, and Bulgarian summary for those currently only available on English
- Send a set of all biodiversity and GIS data (on DVD) to major international biodiversity conservation centres
- Re-launch website and promote it internationally among target groups and ensure all project information is available for download by end of Project (apart from sensitive data on threatened species)
- Consult with the more remote municipalities to see if there are ways of increasing the availability of information
- Extract results from ecosystem services survey and publicise more widely among politicians and local decision-makers

Increasing awareness of globally important biodiversity

- Assess the level of awareness among stakeholders and among the general public on the importance of the Rhodope region for the conservation of globally important biodiversity, and the linkage between Project activities and achievement of global biodiversity benefits
- Present a clear analysis in the Final Project Briefing on the benefits of the Project to globally important biodiversity and how the Project activities have sought to achieve this

Improving lesson learning

- Undertake a specific lessons learned exercise involving the whole Project team with input from key stakeholders as part of planned Final Project Retreat to capture what has been learned about implementing a large complex multi-stakeholder project

Improving assessment of Project impacts and potential for replication

- Undertake PDP evaluation (and lessons learned) follow-up before end of Project to assess impact, replication value and sustainability of individual projects funded by the RP
- Assess the impact, experiences and lessons learned from the MFG initiative (what worked, what didn't and why) and their contribution to achieving globally important biodiversity benefits
- Undertake post-Project follow-up in 3-4 years time to assess mid- and long-term Project impacts including whether integration of biodiversity of conservation into municipalities is permanent and the success and impact of forest certification in the region and the replication of agricultural schemes/practices promoted by the RP

Ensuring free, long-term access to Project information

- Ensure several channels for dissemination of project information after end of project, including a free or pre-paid for five years hosted website, in addition to SFA website

Reducing potential future threats to Project target species

- Remove detailed location information on Rhodopean Tulip, Rhodopean Lily and Black Poplar from project databases provided for Project dissemination purposes, except for those provided to environmental agencies

Managing expectations and dependence in the Rhodope region

- Update stakeholders in Rhodope region on situation at end of project, including likely delays/risks related to Rhodope Project NGO to manage stakeholder and beneficiary expectations on the future of the RP and the Rhodope Project NGO

Improving the likelihood of initial financing for the Rhodope Project NGO

- Project team to immediately begin developing full project proposals to raise institutional development funds (either directly or through project work) for submission after the Project end
- Arrange a 3-month no-cost project extension (December 2009 – February 2010) to allow key staff to focus on developing full project proposals ready to submit on 1 March 2010

Updating business plan for the Rhodope Project NGO

- Update Rhodope Project NGO business plan to current realities, with a broader more strategic fund-raising document, with a database that includes an up-to-date analysis of current potential consultancy services in the Rhodope region, funding sources relevant for biodiversity conservation in the Rhodope Region, and an analysis of funding opportunities from the business sector and international NGO community, together with a detailed stakeholder analysis
- Convene meeting with potential funding sources to determine opportunities for immediate funding for the Rhodope Project NGO from 1st December 2009, including ARC/Avalon project
- Meet with WWF Bulgaria, Green Balkans and Borrowed Nature to discuss possibilities of support for the Rhodope Project NGO

Lessons learned are listed on page 60.

2. Introduction

2.1 Purpose of the evaluation

1. The Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) policy of UNDP-GEF at the project level has four objectives: (i) to monitor and evaluate results and impacts; (ii) to provide a basis for decision-making on necessary amendments and improvements; (iii) to promote accountability for resource use; and (iv) to document, provide feedback on, and disseminate lessons learned. In accordance with UNDP-GEF M&E policies and procedures, all Full-Sized Projects supported by the GEF should undergo a final evaluation upon completion of implementation. Consequently, the Final Evaluation (FE) of the *Conservation of Globally Significant Biodiversity in the Landscape of Bulgaria's Rhodope Mountains Project* (Rhodope Project (RP)) was initiated by UNDP Bulgaria as the Implementation Agency in order to assess the relevance, performance and success of the Project, identify early signs of potential impact and sustainability of results, including the contribution to capacity development and the achievement of global environmental goals, and to identify/document lessons learned and make recommendations that might improve design and implementation of other UNDP-GEF projects in Bulgaria and elsewhere in the world.

2.2 Key issues addressed

2. Specific objectives of the FE (see TOR in Annex 1 for full details) were to:

- Analyze and evaluate effectiveness of the results and impacts of the Project against the objective, targets and indicators stated in the Project Document;
- Assess effectiveness of the Project work and processes as well as the performance of all the partners involved in the Project's implementation;
- Provide feedback and recommendations for subsequent decision-making and necessary steps that need to be taken to ensure sustainability of the project's outcomes/results;
- Reflect on how effective the use of available resource has been; and,
- Document and provide feedback on lessons learned and project best practices.

3. After discussions on the Terms of Reference (TOR) with the UNDP Bulgaria and UNDP-GEF Bratislava at the start of the evaluation, it was agreed that the Final Evaluation Team (FET) should give special attention to how successful implementation of the project had been, what impacts it had generated, and if project benefits are likely to be sustainable in the long-term, with recommendations to enhance sustainability of the project outcomes/results.

4. Wherever possible, the FET has tried to evaluate issues according to the criteria listed in the *UNDP-GEF Monitoring and Evaluation Policy*, namely:

- **Relevance** – the extent to which the activity is suited to local and national development priorities and organizational policies, including changes over time;
- **Effectiveness** – the extent to which an objective has been achieved or how likely it is to be achieved;
- **Efficiency** – the extent to which results have been delivered with the least costly resources possible;
- **Results** – the positive and negative, and foreseen and unforeseen, changes to, and effects produced by, a development intervention (in GEF terms, results include direct project outputs, short-to medium term outcomes, and longer-term impacts including global environmental benefits, replication effects and other, local effects); and,
- **Sustainability** – the likely ability of an intervention to continue to deliver benefits for an extended period of time after completion. Projects need to be environmentally as well as financially and socially sustainable.

2.3 Structure of the evaluation

5. The FE was conducted over a period of 16 days between 30th August and 14th September 2009 by a team of one International and one National Consultant. Interviews were held with more than 60 people from UNDP Bulgaria, project staff at the Project Management Unit (PMU) and two Regional Support Centers (RSC), relevant government institutions (national and regional offices), Project Management Committee (PMC), Project Steering Committee (PSC), municipal authorities, Municipal Focus Groups (MFG), other key partners including national NGOS, and individual beneficiaries of project activities, as well as UNDP-GEF Bratislava (see Annex II for full list).

6. A brief presentation of the preliminary findings of the FET was given at the UNDP Bulgaria office (meeting attended by the Assistant Resident Representative, UNDP Programme Manager and the National Project Manager) by the FET on 14th September 2009, immediately prior to the departure of the International Consultant from Bulgaria and a copy of the FE's Interim Report presented to the attendees. A draft FE Report was produced by 6th October 2009 and the final report was finalised after receipt of comments from project stakeholders, coordinated by the UNDP Bulgaria Country Office, on 19 October 2009.

2.4 Relationship of FE to other evaluations of RP

7. Unusually, the RP had an Initial Evaluation (IE) as well as a Mid Term Evaluation (MTE). The IE took place between 7th February and 10th April 2006 and the MTE between 14th November and 8th December 2007. The Initial Evaluation focused specifically on a number of issues that had arisen since the Project's initiation in 2004, particularly the non-designation of the Eastern and Western Rhodope Nature Parks that formed a central part of the original project design and the need for extensive revision and simplification of the project logframe. The MTE evaluated the project as *"Satisfactory – but with serious reservations over its future unless changes to its strategic direction are implemented"*. Along with this, the implementation approach and implementation of the Project on the ground were evaluated as *Satisfactory*, as was the outlook for the sustainability of the Project.

8. Like the MTE, the FE has taken the Initial Evaluation as its baseline and has concentrated on evaluating subsequent actions, but it has had to revisit certain key issues because of their fundamental position within the framework of the overall project, particularly related to the original project design.

2.5 Methodology of the evaluation

9. The evaluation approach was determined by the TOR (Annex I), which were closely followed, via the itinerary detailed in Annex III. The evaluation was carried out through a review of relevant project documentation (list given in Annex IV) provided by the PMU, UNDP CO, UNDP-GEF Bratislava and obtained from the internet, and through semi-structured interviews, using questionnaires with key project individuals, partners, stakeholders and project beneficiaries.

10. A participatory approach was adopted by the FET in which interviewees were encouraged to discuss (among other things) their own experiences of the Project and what impact it had made on their own lives and community or organisation. At the end of each interview, interviewees were specifically asked to identify what for them had been the successes, failures, strengths and weaknesses of the RP and what lessons had been learned¹. Throughout the evaluation, particular attention was paid to carefully explaining that the purpose of the evaluation was not to judge performance in order to apportion credit or blame but to determine ways to improve and sustain project outcomes/results and to learn lessons for the wider GEF context. Wherever possible, information collected was cross-

¹Different participants in a project often have very different ideas on what constitutes success and failure, and it was felt important that each beneficiary or stakeholder group should be heard and their views recorded (local people's views are no less important than those of a Minister). In addition, such questioning often reveals less tangible benefits and impacts that are not identified within a standard project M&E system heavily reliant on logframe indicators, but which can nevertheless be important to stakeholders and essential for long-term sustainability.

checked between various sources to ascertain its veracity, especially when it was contentious or information/facts provided contradicted with what others had said, but in some cases time limited this.

11. The evaluation team rated the project achievements, as detailed in the TOR, according to the GEF project review criteria, using the ratings of Highly Satisfactory (HS), Satisfactory (S), Marginally Satisfactory (MS), Marginally Unsatisfactory (MU), Unsatisfactory (U), Highly Unsatisfactory (HU) and Not Applicable (NA).

3. The Project and the context to its development

3.1 Introduction - the Rhodope region

12. The Bulgarian Rhodope Mountains cover more than 12,000 square kilometers and are divided into two distinct sub-regions differentiated by climatic and landscape characteristics: the Western Rhodope (WR) and the Eastern Rhodope (ER). The WR is largely forested, with over 70 % coverage of mostly coniferous species with high mountain meadows and pastures occupying the remaining 30 %. By contrast, the ER is generally lower and only one-third of the ER is forested, primarily by deciduous forest with half of this is in plantation forestry. The remaining two thirds of the ER landscape are comprised of large and diverse grassland, farmland and steppe areas.

13. The total population of the Rhodope region is over 500,000 people, of which between 40-50 % live in city or village centers, and significant areas have a very low level of human habitation. Some 40 municipalities fall either fully or partially within the Rhodope mountain region. The region has relatively high levels of unemployment and low levels of household income and investment compared to the rest of Bulgaria. Although opportunities have improved a little in the last 5 years, improving livelihoods for the general population, particularly rural communities, is still one of the most pressing issues for the region's municipal and district authorities.

14. Traditionally, there are two main sectors within the Rhodope Region - forestry and agriculture. Both sectors have received increased government attention in recent years, particularly in connection with Bulgaria's EU membership. This has politically impacted the region, which is seen as both a rural and a mountainous area, both of which are primary targets for support in the EU. In relation to agriculture, the Rhodope region has received funding through the EU SAPARD programme, which is now being strengthened through the National Agricultural and Rural Development Plan (2007-2013). The forestry sector is gradually reorienting itself towards more sustainable forestry with greater emphasis being given to environment protection and nature conservation. Visible changes are beginning to take place in on-the-ground forest management and forest certification is increasingly high on the agenda. Eco-tourism (properly 'nature-based tourism') is also becoming more important in the Rhodope mountains, and many municipalities see tourism as a third major sector capable of generating jobs and revenue for the region.

3.2 Problems that the Project seeks to address

15. Aside from being a rich cultural region with a variety of ethnic groups and a long and diverse history of land use, the Rhodope Mountains are also one of the most important biodiversity regions within Bulgaria. The mountains possess more than 25 distinct natural habitats, have a very high level of endemism (especially plants and invertebrates) and support large numbers of vertebrate species, including 36 of Europe's 38 raptor species (only one other area of Europe – Extremadura in Spain – has such diversity) and 29 of Europe's 31 bat species. Despite this, the total area within protected areas is less than one quarter of the country's average.

16. As detailed in the Project Document, biological diversity in the Rhodope region is being diminished through the loss and degradation of habitat and the direct exploitation of species. The PDF-B document lists four primary threats to biodiversity in the region:

- *Habitat fragmentation and deterioration of habitat mosaic in the wider environment;*
- *Unsustainable use of natural resources (over harvesting of medicinal plants, inappropriate tourism, seasonal use of fire, illegal logging, use of biodiversity-limiting agricultural methodologies;*
- *Loss of genetic diversity and abandonment of local plant varieties and domestic animal breeds; and*
- *Small, isolated protected areas².*

17. In the three major habitats of the Rhodope (forest, grassland, aquatic/riparian) these threats, along with their myriad root and underlying causes, interact, diminishing the long-term viability of individual species, communities, and habitats.

18. Given the unique natural and anthropogenic mosaic of habitats, species and land uses that form the Eastern and Western Rhodope regions the Project aims to address the above threats and conserve the region's biodiversity through a landscape approach. As the Project Document states: *'The Rhodope is an ancient, European cultural landscape where productive uses of forestry and agriculture predominate and protected areas are small and scattered. The application of landscape-scale conservation practice and perspective to the productive landscape as a whole and protected areas' relationship to it constitutes the project's strategic approach to securing the sustainable long-term conservation of biodiversity in these mountains'*. Activities are focused in areas with sensitive ecosystems and landscape components, such as priority conservation areas, buffer zones and corridors, as well as more general forest, pasture and agricultural lands.

3.3. Project development

19. The RP was designed between December 2001 and June 2003 and submitted under Operational Programme 4 (Mountain Ecosystems), and Strategic Priority BD2 (mainstreaming) of the GEF Business Plan, whose specific objective is to *'integrate biodiversity conservation in agriculture, forestry, fisheries, tourism and other production systems and sectors to secure national and global environmental benefits. Given the broad character of mainstreaming the operational emphasis will be flexible to allow for the development of tailored activities based on understanding of country context, biodiversity conservation problems, opportunities and demand.'*³

20. Strategic Priority BD2 was very new in 2001-2002, and nearly all biodiversity projects had previously focused on protected areas (in one form or another). Indeed the concept was so new that: a) UNDP showcased the Rhodope Project as a flagship mainstreaming example at the STAP workshop *"Mainstreaming Biodiversity in Production Landscapes and Sectors"* held in Cape Town on 20th-24th September 2004, and b) the design unusually incorporated an extra stage of evaluation (the Initial Evaluation) to provide a means of ensuring that the project was on track in its earliest stages.

3.4 Immediate and development objectives and expected results of the project

21. The approved Project Document sets out the following key objectives:

² It should be noted that this last 'threat' is not really a threat but more of a 'barrier' to effective conservation, as small PAs do not directly cause the death of animals and plants – humans do.

³ Original document from 2001/2002 not available. Quote is from 'Biodiversity in the GEF Operational Strategy' (http://www.gefweb.org/Projects/Focal_Areas/bio/bio_ops.html)

- **Goal** - Globally significant biodiversity is protected by conserving the biological and cultural mosaic of habitats, species and land uses that comprise the Eastern and Western Rhodope landscapes
- **Immediate Objective 1** - Landscape-scale conservation is effectively operationalised in Eastern and Western Rhodope Landscape Nature Parks
- **Immediate Objective 2** - Stakeholders integrate biodiversity conservation into resource management and economic development policy and practice in Eastern and Western Rhodope.

22. Therefore, unusually, and confusingly, the Project started with two immediate project objectives, which have been retained. The original Project Documents also listed 8 ‘Outputs’. As reported in the 2006 PIR, further to recommendations from the UNDP/GEF Regional Technical Advisor for Biodiversity, Bratislava upon submission of the 2005 PIR, and following the IE report, an adjustment to the original project log-frame matrix was initiated, in order to adapt the project to the changed context (the effective loss of the Nature Parks from the project, see section 4.1.1) and to align it with the new GEF format. According to the 2006 PIR, *‘The original log-frame had two immediate objectives and eight outputs, but no outcomes, reflecting an old project design practice... as it is not possible to change the project objective and although it is acknowledged that a project should have only one objective, we kept both objectives as it was in the original log-frame’*. In addition, some of the original project outputs looked more like outcomes, so were revised, and/or combined. In the final (revised) log-frame there are 7 outcomes, which are:

- **Outcome 1:** Structures for effective landscape-scale conservation established and operational
- **Outcome 2:** Information baseline established and strengthened as a basis for adaptive management
- **Outcome 3:** Sustainable management regimes piloting a landscape-based approach to conservation undertaken within the Rhodope Region
- **Outcome 4:** Monitoring/Evaluation (M&E) and lessons learned
- **Outcome 5:** Institutional capacity to integrate biodiversity and ecosystem management objectives into productive sector programmes strengthened
- **Outcome 6:** Forestry, tourism and farming practices reoriented to support conservation while improving livelihoods
- **Outcome 7:** Financing for sustainability of the applied conservation and cross-sector coordination secured.

3.5 Project start and its duration

23. The Rhodope Project (RP) entered the GEF Work Programme on 15th May 2003, with the Project Document being signed on 27th May 2004. Full operational status was achieved in July 2004. The Project was expected to be completed by 31 May 2009. However, in early 2009 project partners agreed on 6-month no-cost extension until 30 November 2009, largely in order to ensure full implementation of the recommendations made by the MTE completed late 2007/early 2008.

3.6 Main stakeholders

24. Although the word ‘stakeholder’ is present many times in the Project Document, no specific and detailed stakeholder list and analysis is presented (the usual practice for a GEF project, often given as an annex), even though stakeholder analysis was a key activity in the PDF-B phase⁴. Project partners and groups likely to be important locally are identified but a more detailed analysis was not presented. Specifically, there is a lack of robust analysis of which groups were vulnerable to problems stemming

⁴ Stakeholder analysis was defined as a specific activity during the PDF-B stage (Activity 2: Stakeholder consultations & Surveys conducted to define the “Baseline situation” in the Western and Eastern Rhodopes). The PDF-B document identifies them as *villagers, local and regional governments, NGOs, academia, and the business community*.

from the loss of biodiversity and unsustainable use of natural resources, had existing experience on biodiversity conservation that could contribute to the Project, had sufficient to deal with issues of unsustainable use of natural resources (at all levels), the relative importance of each stakeholder group to the Project, or risks involved in individual stakeholder participation or non-participation. A summary table in the Project Document, showing which stakeholders would benefit from the Project and how, and which stakeholders would not and why, would have been useful but such a table was not presented.

25. Based on the project documents (Project Document, PIFs, quarterly reports), the main stakeholders in the RP are:

- Ministry of Agriculture and Food (formerly the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry) (MAF);
- Ministry of Environment and Water (MEW)
- State Forestry Agency (SFA)
- District agencies of the MEW, SFA and MAF in the Rhodope region
- SFA Units in the Rhodope project area
- Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works (MRDPW)
- Municipal authorities in the Rhodope project area
- Private forest owners and forest cooperative associations in the Rhodope project area
- Land owners and farmers in the Rhodope project area, especially those interested in conversion to organic agriculture
- Tourism agencies and hotels promoting nature-based tourism
- Environment and development NGOs, including WWF Bulgaria, Green Balkans, Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds (BSPB)
- Local chitalista in Rhodope region
- UNDP Bulgaria
- UNDP-GEF Bratislava

4. Findings and Conclusions

4.1 Project Formulation and design

4.1.1 Conceptualization/Design

Project design

26. The project design is judged as **Marginally Satisfactory**. The project formulation process relied heavily on the knowledge and lessons learned of all donors, NGOs and projects working in the Rhodope Region. The project design drew particularly on the results, experiences and lessons learned of the Bulgarian Swiss Biodiversity Conservation Programme (1994-2004), which had activities in the Rhodope region. In addition, the Bulgarian Society for Protection of Birds was one of the most important contributors to project formulation, and was also the official proponent of the Eastern Rhodope Nature Park (see below).

27. Although problem conceptualization is well set out in the Project Document and the selected intervention strategy – a landscape approach to conservation – is appropriate to tackling the root causes and principal threats in the project area, the project design was fundamentally flawed. As pointed out by the MTE, although the project design contains many mainstreaming elements and was submitted to (and approved by) GEF as a Strategic Priority BD2 project, it has a heavily emphasis on protected areas (Strategic Priority BD1). This mixture of elements caused the Project considerable difficulties given the failure to designate the two Nature Parks up until the MTE when the MTE team strongly recommended that project activities related to protected areas be terminated. Project partners

including UNDP Bulgaria and the UNDP-GEF regional office in Bratislava, and the Project team responded positively by switching emphasis to mainstreaming activities, ceasing work related to protected areas except for monitoring of previously established activities after the MTE.⁵

28. It was also recognized by the IE and MTE that the original design of the Project was overly complex, which was attributed by the MTE to the newness and unfamiliarity of the mainstreaming concept when the project was designed in 2002/2003. For instance, the IE Report states that:

‘The general impression of the Rhodope Project is that the design is too complex, which leads to difficulties for Project management, and for Project monitoring and evaluation. This has been voiced by UNDP, Project team, and is also the impression of the present evaluation team. Most GEF projects have 3-4 (rarely 5) project components or outputs, while the RP has 8. At the same time, the RP also has 65 indicators – that all need to be monitored for Project M&E – and 110 activities.’

and attributes this complexity as being:

‘...primarily due to provision of too much detail (i.e. at activity/indicator level), and splitting of outputs into various closely linked outputs that should have logically been combined.’

29. The FET completely agrees with the findings of the IE and MTE teams on this issue. The sheer number of activities to be carried out in such a large project area, including the creation of two new very large Nature Parks, as well as a large set of mainstreaming initiatives across various sectors, would have challenged any project staff. During interviews members of the Project team stated that trying to communicate such a large, complex and disparate set of activities to local stakeholders had been particularly difficult, and indeed one of the senior management team stated that it had taken her over a month to understand the Project Document. Monitoring and reporting on the original logframe (65 indicators) was a particular challenge and generally left to the National Project Manager (NPM) in Sofia. In addition, it was not clear how to implement many of the activities described in the Project Document, which again created difficulties for the Project team, especially at the beginning. What is puzzling is why the project design was not simplified at an early, review stage. As the MTE points out that:

‘While the designers may have been partly at fault with this, the MTET finds it hard to understand how a) a project of this complexity passed through the STAP and other reviews at the time, and b) why it did not become simplified by the GEF secretariat and Council itself.’

Risk identification in original project design

30. Another major weakness in the project design was the identification and suggested mitigation of risk. One of the key risks listed in Annex N in the Project Document is that *‘The Government of Bulgaria will stop or decrease their support to nature conservation efforts within the country either financially or politically’*, and the response in the Project Document was *‘Based on Bulgaria’s keen interest in joining the EU it is very unlikely that the Government of Bulgaria will decrease its current support to Nature conservation’*. This was clearly too simple an analysis and conclusion.

31. The FET believes that the main failure in project design was that the original project design team did not consider the likelihood of the failure to establish the Nature Parks, or ask the question “What

⁵ The PMU comments that ‘The comment below has also been made to MTE by GEF – Bratislava and while relevant it is repeated here: “The project was approved in the GEF pipeline as a concept in May 2001, when the BD Strategic Priorities were not implemented. It was considered highly innovative at that stage as it was not the typical PA approach and was bordering mainstreaming, before this became a requirement. As the SPs became compulsory, most of the BD projects in the region which were not so straightforward have been retrofitted, but as it happens in these cases, they all maintain some remnants of the old design and the evaluation should keep this in mind.”’ The FET felt that it was necessary to cover this issue again (even though raised by the MTE) because it was important to detail some of the history of the development of the project as many of the problems that have developed during the Project’s life can be traced back to flaws in the original project design, and were not a result of actions taken by the project team who had to implement the project.

would be the consequences for the project if the Nature Parks are not created?”, and unfortunately no alternative strategy was devised for the scenario with an absence of the Nature Parks. It seems to have been assumed that because the Government of Bulgaria said the Nature Parks would be created, they would. It should be noted that neither of the two MoEW endorsement/co-financing letters included in Annex 2B of the Project Document specifically mention a GoB commitment to establish two Nature Parks, although the letter from the MoAF does offer to ‘cover the running costs of two Nature Park Directorates’.

32. Around there same time (so during the project development phase), in 2002-2003, there appears to have been a change in Government’s strategy for protected areas in the Rhodope, with a move away from Nature Parks towards the establishment of the National Ecological Network with Natura 2000 sites, due expected future commitments following EU membership (however, UNDP and the RP were officially informed about the changed Government strategy only in April 2006). Interviews by the FET with current and ex-government staff who were involved in the discussions that took place in the MEW and MAF at that time revealed that government staff felt that they were not in a position to turn down potential projects (and the RP was one of the largest donor-funded environmental projects being developed in Bulgaria during that period) and that the general attitude was to ‘sign up now and we’ll sort it out later’. In other words, the GoB’s commitment to the project – in terms of establishing two new, very large, Nature Parks – was questionable, even in 2003. When the Project was submitted to GEF. Furthermore, there was significant local opposition to the creation of the Nature Parks, especially in Western Rhodope, even during the PDF-B stage, which made their designation problematic, but this does not seem to have been adequately identified or recorded by the PDF-B team, at least not in the Project Document (see section 4.1.2).

33. As the MTE points out, it is unlikely that anyone could have foreseen the ‘perverse incentives to nature conservation’ associated with the massive EU funding for Natura 2000 sites leading to the GoB’s shift away from work on the existing/proposed protected area system outside of the Natura 2000 network. However, the MTE also notes that:

‘...it should have been possible to explore the risks of already-stretched government agencies being unable to cope with the work likely to be required to align the Bulgarian protected area system with the requirements of Natura 2000 – an obligation for EU membership – simultaneously with the work necessary to designate what would become not one but the two biggest Nature Parks in the country.’

34. Also, given GEF’s long experience with protected area projects around the world, it is puzzling why this risk was not identified by the STAP review, GEF Secretariat, GEF Council or other reviewers, during the review process. From the point of view of achieving the targets for the original project objectives, the Project should not have begun without the Nature Parks already official gazetted, and this should have been a specific condition for the release of GEF funding.

4.1.2 Stakeholder participation in project design

35. Information dissemination, consultation, and “stakeholder” participation during the project design stage is rated as **Marginally Satisfactory**. The Project Document states that: ‘*The GEF project development has been almost exclusively stakeholder driven*’. The original concept for the Rhodope Project was developed from proposals by two Bulgarian NGOs for the designation of two Nature Parks, one for Eastern and the other for Western Rhodope regions. Previous work by the Bulgarian-Swiss Biodiversity Conservation Programme had led to a number of new small protected areas being established primarily for bird protection in the Eastern Rhodope Mountains, and from that the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds (BSPB) developed an idea for a much larger Nature Park (c.2,500 km²) to cover much of the Eastern Rhodope Mountains. Concurrently, the Bulgarian NGO ‘Green Balkans’ was working towards, and lobbying for, the designation of an even larger Nature Park (c.4,000 km²) covering much of the Western Rhodope Mountains. Both of these ideas were forwarded as GEF project proposals in response to a call for proposals from UNDP-GEF. Given their similar

nature and obvious synergy, the various parties agreed (although some, e.g. Green Balkans, reported to the FET that they had reservations at the time) to combine the two proposals and develop the current project that was submitted to GEF for funding.

36. According to the Project Document:

‘Public involvement continued into the implementation of the PDF B project where four different NGO’s were subcontracted to conduct fieldwork needed for GEF Project Brief formulation. During this work more than 60 people were involved in the formulation process and more than 1,900 people from the Rhodope region were queried in a socio-economic survey. Valuable input from stakeholders to the project formulation process was also solicited on the project’s objectives, possible outputs, and strategic approach during the nine meetings held in the Rhodope Region over the course of the Block B period.’

Consequently, it seems that there was good stakeholder participation and ownership at the design stage. However, it was clear from interviews with individuals and groups during the FE field mission that there was substantial opposition to the idea of creating two Nature Parks from the very beginning, with local groups, especially in Western Rhodope, viewing these protected areas as restricting their livelihoods and economic activities. According to interviewees, the PDF-B team did not adequately take the views of local stakeholders into consideration and both the two NGOs involved – BSPB and Green Balkans – as well as the project design team were considered ‘outsiders’ and did not appreciate the local situation or views. Indeed, some interviewees were quite critical of the level of consultation of local stakeholders and that information on the proposed the two NPs and the consequences of their designation during the design phase, again especially for the Western Rhodope region, was not well presented by the MEW. As a result, the Project team, particularly the RSC in Smolyan, spent a good part of the first year of the project trying to promote the Nature Parks to local stakeholders.

4.1.3 Country-ownership/Driveness and Relevance

37. Country ownership and driveness, and the relevance of the project are considered **Satisfactory**. As pointed out above (section 4.1.2), the original project concept was largely proposed by two national NGOs (BSPB and Green Balkans) and was further developed within input from the MEW, MAF and SFA, academia and other national NGOs, so can be considered to have had high national ownership. However, the elements of the local population, especially in Western Rhodope, were hostile to the creation of the Nature Parks, which they saw as a potential threat to livelihoods, but the local perception of the RP changed significantly during project implementation, especially after it was clear that the Nature Parks would not be created and the RP started to demonstrate on-the-ground activities that benefited local stakeholders, such as the Pilot Demonstration Projects (PDPs) and training workshops. Interviews conducted by the FET revealed that some municipal authorities and SFA Units viewed the RP as an ‘extension’ of their own services⁶, and that many of the project outputs, e.g. biodiversity and GIS data, were used and highly valued by key local stakeholders, e.g. forestry. In addition, the good use of experts from NGOs and universities in project activities (usually as consultants) has also helped build better ownership of project results. Consequently the RP can be viewed as having high local ownership.

Relevance to national environmental and development objectives

38. The Rhodope Mountains were rated as a high priority for conservation activities in Bulgaria’s National Biological Diversity Conservation Strategy (NBDCS) published in 1996. The NBDCS stresses the need to ‘better integrate the management of land, water and biological resources in order to protect and renew the ecological processes on which biodiversity depends’. The RP’s landscape approach (based on the CBD’s ecosystem approach) has sought to address this need directly. Whilst there has been no major revision of the NBDCS since (only a minor updating in 2005), interviews with

⁶ A representative of the municipal authorities in Ivaylovgrad stated that they had no environmental expert and relied heavily on the RP to provide this support for the Municipality.

government and NGO stakeholders by the FET revealed that the Rhodope Mountains are still considered as one of the most important areas for biodiversity conservation and sustainable use of natural resources in the country. Indeed, given its very high levels of endemism and species diversity the Rhodope Mountains can be considered as a biodiversity ‘hotspot’ both within Bulgaria and Europe for some groups of species, especially raptors and bats. According to SFA officials interviewed, protection and sustainable management of the forests of the Rhodope region are also rated as a priority in various national and district level forestry policies and plans (although these documents were not available to the FET and could not be checked).

39. The RP has also furthered the objectives of the *National Agriculture and Rural Development Plan 2000-2006*, and the subsequent *National Strategy Plan for Rural Development (2007-2013)* and *Rural Development Programme (RDP) 2007-2013*, which have three objectives namely to: (1) develop a competitive and innovative agriculture, forestry and food processing industry; (2) protect the natural resources and environment of rural areas; and (3) improve the quality of life and diversify job opportunities in rural areas. In addition, the RDP has 4 axes of intervention, and Axis 2 is directly relevant to the RP. Axis 2 is associated with the development of agricultural methods consistent with the protection and preservation of the environment, and on compensating the producers in the mountainous and other less favoured areas for keeping their land in good condition, and preventing the abandonment of land in these areas. Axis 2 has an indicative budget of Euro 777 million that includes Euro 637 million from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). More than 56% of this budget is to be spent on agri-environmental payments (under the *National Agri-Environmental Programme (NAEP) 2007-2013*)⁷ and a further 30% to be spent on ‘natural handicap payments to farmers in mountain areas’. The RP has helped promote the aims of these initiatives through its promotion of the sustainable use of land and natural resources, particularly organic agriculture, including provision of information on these schemes to local farmers in the project area and support with accessing funding from these schemes, through training workshops, help with developing business plans, and proposal writing and submission. In addition, the RP promotion of organic farming represents a contribution to the *National Plan for Development of Organic Farming in Bulgaria 2006-2013*. The RP has also promoted the LEADER approach under the Axis 4 of the RDP through a series of training courses and seminars and direct support for the transformation of the Project’s Municipal Focus Groups into LEADER Local Action Groups. Specifically, it has sought to promote livelihoods and farming practices alternative to tobacco and potato growing which have negative effect on biodiversity.

Relevance to UNDP objectives in Bulgaria

40. The RP is also relevant to the objectives of UNDP Country Programme for Bulgaria (2006-2009), the primary objective of which is to support Bulgaria to use the opportunity of EU membership to meet the 2015 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and to reach the 2010 Lisbon Agenda targets reflected in the Joint Inclusion Memorandum with the EU. The third thematic area of the Programme supports sustainable management of natural resources, environmental protection and sustainable energy initiatives through interventions aimed at helping Bulgaria to meet its international commitments, thus generating global, national and local environmental benefits. The programme demonstrates environmentally sustainable field models, promotes policy shifts for better compliance with EU environmental standards and strengthens national institutional capacity to integrate the objectives of the three Rio conventions into the development planning process at all levels. Work focuses at the local and regional levels, particularly in areas with incomes below the national average and in rural areas, which includes the Rhodope region (Eastern Rhodope is one of the poorest, least developed regions of Bulgaria).

Relevance to beneficiaries

⁷ The NAEP is a national policy instrument that defines the framework within which agri-environmental payments should be made to support the sustainable development of rural areas and to respond to the growing demand for environmental services, and it helps guide the implementation of measures aimed at the sustainable use of agriculture lands.

41. The RP has been highly relevant to the project beneficiaries who can be divided into two main groups: (1) national government ministries and agencies, such as the MEW, MAF and SFA and their local agencies, municipal authorities and national NGOs, such as WWF Bulgaria, BSPB and Green Balkans; and (2) local land and natural resource users and owners, such as foresters, farmers, and businesses concerned with nature-based tourism. The former group have mandates that include biodiversity conservation, environmental protection and/or sustainable use of natural resources, e.g. forests, and the RP has provided significant capacity building to these stakeholders, especially in the form of information and training, which, as reported during FE interviews, have been highly valued. Support to the latter group has mostly taken the form of grants to enable resource users to develop small-scale demonstration projects to show-case opportunities for sustainable use of natural resources, more sustainable agriculture, or preservation of agro-biodiversity through the Project's PDP, and capacity building to enable natural resources users to access more effectively external sources of funding, e.g. the Rural Development Programme and NAEP payments.

4.1.4 Replication approach and Project dissemination

42. Replication of Project results has been **Satisfactory**, and has the potential to be even better. The Project's strategy to replicating results and ensuring effective dissemination of lessons and experiences coming out of the project is described under **Outcome 4 Monitoring/evaluation applied as tool for capacity building of stakeholders**. The main approaches are that '*lessons learned will be disseminated to a learning portfolio of projects of a similar nature or with similar strategic challenges*' and that '*the project will use M&E outputs and project reports as inputs to larger cross-project learning and capacity building exercises*'.

4.2 Project Implementation Approach

43. Overall, the project implementation approach is evaluated as **Satisfactory**. Implementation of the Project has been largely efficient and effective, with a particularly well-organised, highly motivated and very capable Project team. In spite of the considerable difficulties faced by the team in implementing such a large and complex project, together with many changing circumstances, they have responded admirably in achieving many of their targets (in some cases achieving the end-of-project indicators by the mid-term). The FET was particularly impressed by the way the team managed to adapt to a major change of direction after the MTE (move away from protected areas to more mainstreaming activities), and by the widespread trust and respect built with the stakeholders, especially between the two RSCs and local groups.

4.2.1 Participating agencies and project oversight

44. UNDP was the GEF implementing agency, and the Project has been executed under UNDP requirements for the National Execution (NEX) modality by the Government of Bulgaria (GoB) initially through the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF) as the Implementing Partner and then from late 2007 by the State Forestry Agency (following the splitting of the MAF into the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Supply (MAFS) and the establishment of the State Forestry Agency). However, UNDP was authorized by MAF to enter into contractual arrangements with physical and legal persons on its behalf, and UNDP makes direct payments on behalf of the MAF against all categories of the project budget (essentially a Direct Execution modality). In addition, the management of project funds, including budget planning, monitoring, revisions, disbursements, record keeping, reporting and auditing all observe UNDP rules.

45. At the strategic level, project oversight has been undertaken by a Project Steering Committee (PSC) comprising 23 members from various ministries, agencies and NGOs (see Annex V for list) chaired by the Deputy Minister of Agriculture and Forestry – Forestry, with the Project Manager acting as the Secretary for the Committee. The PSC has met solely as a PSC only twice (30th June 2004 and 19th July 2006), but has also met three times in a combined meeting with all stakeholders

(20th April 2006, 30th May 2007 and 30th May 2008). Judging from the minutes of the meetings, the PSC does not appear to have had a significant coordination role, and interviewees suggested that it was not used more strategically to lobby relevant agencies represented on the PSC for landscape-level conservation, although, according to one interviewee, having the Deputy Minister chair the Committee did at least mean that the Project was promoted within the MAF and made the connection with the SFA stronger. According to interviews, the Project 'lost' some members of the PSC at the beginning of the Project because of the complexity of the project and some people weren't interested and didn't see any personal value in participating (a common attitude in the experience of the FET). Instead a General Stakeholder Meeting has been held approximately once a year to increase transparency in decision-making on the Project, promote information dissemination, and act as a communication channel between the national and local stakeholders. It has also had a limited project oversight role (provided suggestions for activities, e.g. the Pilot Demonstration Programme).

46. At the operational level, oversight has been through a Project Management Committee (PMC), initially comprising three or four members each of MAF, UNDP and the Project, but after the MTE expanded to include representatives from the MRDPW and the UNDP-GEF Rio Conventions Project. The PMC has met infrequently (16th September 2004, 24th February 2005, 23rd March 2006, 8th April 2008 and 28th February 2009), although has given valuable advice and taken important decisions regarding project operation, such as approval of a refocusing of the Project towards more mainstreaming activities following the MTE recommendations, endorsement of the Project's Exit Strategy and approval of a 6-month, no-cost extension to the Project.

47. Overall direction of the project has been the responsibility of the National Project Director (NPD), a part-time position held by Georgi Tinchev, Senior Expert in Protected Area Management, Department of Protected Areas, State Forest Agency. He has spent around 10% of his time with the Project, although at times this has been almost a full-time input (especially at the beginning but much less in 2008 and 2009). The NPD reports to the Deputy Minister MAF – Forests and is responsible for overseeing the execution of the Project on behalf of the MAF and for achieving the Project's objectives. He represents the Implementing Partner for the purposes of project execution and is accountable to the GoB and UNDP for the use of Project resources.

4.2.2 Project Management

48. A Project Management Unit (PMU) located in Sofia, comprising a full-time National Project Manager (NPM) and a range of staff, is responsible for day-to-day project implementation. The PMU is in charge of Project's central and local-level activities, including: preparation of yearly and quarterly reports and work plans; drafting of specifications for equipment and goods, and collection of offers; identification of consultants, preparation of contracts; coordination of consultants and sub-contractors; duty travel and organization of workshops. The NPM assumes overall responsibility for the successful implementation of the Rhodope Project activities at the national/regional/district/local level, and for achievement of the planned Rhodope Project outputs. He coordinates project activities with the NPD and reports to UNDP. The position of NPM has been held by Mr. Alexander Bardarov throughout. During the first two years of the Project, there was a full-time International Advisor (IA) – Mr. Carsten Germer – who in the first year bore overall responsibility for the implementation of the project and the achievement of the planned project outputs, which were then handed over to the NPM in the second year while the IA reverted to an advisory role providing technical and strategic support and was employed by UNDP as a Programme Analyst. Other PMU staff include a Senior Administrator; Protected Area and Community Involvement Portfolio Manager, Landscape Planning Portfolio Manager, Public Relations and Information Officer and Administrator.

49. There are two Regional Support Centres (RSC), one based in Smolyan covering the Western Rhodope Mountains, and one in Kardzhali covering the East Rhodope Mountains. Each is staffed by a Regional Project Manager (RPM) plus four (Smolyan) and two (previously three) (Kardzhali) technical and support personnel. The RSCs are responsible for project operations at the

regional/district/local levels, and liaise on a daily basis with the PMU, as well as with the Project's stakeholders at the regional/district/local levels. Communication between the three offices is largely by electronic means (extensive use is made of email and skype) and telephone/text, and the RPMs visit the PMU once a month for coordination and planning purposes at which project progress and review of monthly activities is discussed and agreed, allowing the team to build comprehensive and realistic work plans. These monthly meetings, along with the near daily communication between the PMU and two RSCs, are considered to be one of the reasons why the senior management members have such a good working relationship with each other ('problems are not given time to become problems'), and have helped build a good adaptive management approach and a shared project vision among the team. Project management mechanisms were revised in late 2005 to bring in a broader range of assignments to the RSC staff and to increase their independence, responsibility and ownership of the ideas generated, which has strengthened relationships within the team. In late 2006, the RSCs developed their own visions for the future, followed in October 2007 by business plans for each RSC, which were intended as the framework for how the RSCs could achieve sustainability after the project finishes. However, they have not been revised. The annual budget and annual work plan for the Project are developed in consultation between the Project team, MAF and UNDP and subsequently endorsed by UNDP.

4.2.3 Project Management Team

50. The RP has an excellent management team. Stakeholders interviewed by the FET were near universal in their praise of the team (very rare in the International Consultant's experience) - "A good team", "dedicated", "very reliable", "can be trusted", "very professional" and "skilled and capable" were among the many compliments paid by interviewees, and it is clear that the team has built a very good reputation among both national Government agencies and NGOs and also, particularly important, with municipal authorities, SFA Units and local resource users in the Rhodope region. Furthermore, the excellent delivery by the team and the strong partnerships and relationships they have built has helped generate much goodwill and interest in biodiversity conservation throughout the Rhodope region. As stated by one interviewee from a national NGO "The Rhodope Project has helped lay the foundation for future biodiversity conservation activities in the region and made our work much easier".

51. Although there is a clear hierarchy within the project team, staff stated in interviews that they are all able to freely express their views, are listened to, and decisions will be altered if they have a good case (an indicator of an environment conducive to adaptive management). Consequently the staff feel they are able to make a direct contribution to project decision-making. This has led to the development of a high level of trust between the team members, so that, for instance, the NPM can delegate tasks and know that what is asked will be done, enabling him to focus on other things. As a result the team works very efficiently.

52. In terms of technical support capacity, the project team is relatively small, although they do have significant capacity, able to deliver high quality products particularly GIS, biodiversity conservation, and rural development/alternative livelihoods. Consequently, rather than employing additional staff (a costly and risky strategy), the RP approach has been to use a large number of short-term consultants (unusually, all national, except for the IE, MTE and FE and some consultants international certification companies involved in the forest certification process) to deliver many project activities, such as biodiversity surveys and monitoring, technical training workshops, and production of awareness-raising and educational materials, with the project staff supervising delivery of contracts (although also taking the opportunity to participate where possible). This has meant that the overall quality of the technical assistance provided by the RP has been consistently very high. The RP team has deliberately sought the best experts, groups, or institutions to carry out the contracts and contracted many of national NGOs and universities to undertake the work, which has helped to build good partnerships and a strong network to promote the RP results more widely. Overall, the quality of technical assistance used and provided by the project is rated as ***Highly Satisfactory***.

53. The Project team has had to work with a conceptual design that was complex, confused and out-of-date and had to adapt to radically altered circumstances from what was envisaged in the original design, especially after the ‘loss’ of the Nature Parks from the Project. Nevertheless, the PMU and two RSCs have worked around these challenges with imagination and determination and have delivered a Project more or less on track. The high achievements and strengths of the project are due in a large part to the quality and dedication of the whole project team. The NPM and two RSC managers - who have all been employed for the whole duration of the project - are to be particularly commended on delivering such a large and complex project, despite the difficulties that they have encountered.

4.2.4 Use of logical framework as a management tool

54. The Project was implemented using a Results-Based-Management (RBM) approach. The Project Document included a results-based log-frame, the project management team implemented the Project on the basis of results to be achieved, and the progress reporting (PIRs, Quarterly Reports, etc) included comparison of expected versus achieved results.

55. The Project team has used the logframe as a management tool throughout implementation. However, this has not been straightforward. The difficulties presented by the Project’s design (see section 4.1.1) were apparent to the PMU from the very beginning (and noted in the first PIR of 2005), which were then compounded by the difficulties encountered as a result of the non-designation of the Nature Parks. As noted earlier, the number of indicators was overly large, and according to the PIR 2005 *‘half of them are either repetitive or not relevant for monitoring the progress; or are “yes” or “no” indicators or are too expensive and complicated to measure’*. In other words, there were too many indicators and too many of them were not SMART⁸. In response to the first PIR of July 2005, the Regional UNDP/GEF Coordination Unit in Bratislava stated that:

‘... the original project logical framework should be revised and simplified, as it envisages two instead of one immediate project objectives, which is against the established GEF practice, and 65 log-frame indicators, which are too many and too cumbersome for reporting.’

56. As a result, the TOR for the Initial Evaluation of the Project prioritised the need *“to provide constructive recommendations to the ongoing process of re-formulating of the Project’s log-frame”*. The result was the recommendation for a radical restructuring of the Project, reducing the original eight outputs, 110 activities, and 65 indicators to four outputs and 23 indicators. This was ultimately deemed too much of a re-design that would almost certainly have required re-submission of the Project to the GEF Council leading to significant disruption and delay, and with the risk of rejection (a real possibility in 2006 due to changes within the GEF).

57. Following the IE, a revision to the project logframe was made in 2006 through a complex process which involved stakeholder workshops at all levels, including the UNDP/GEF Regional Center in Bratislava, MAF and MEW, and many of the original indicators were replaced or reformulated with more quantitative impact and threat-reduction indicators. Eventually, the current logframe (see Annex VI) with 7 Outcomes⁹, 88 activities, and 26 indicators, but retaining the Project’s two Immediate Objectives, was developed. This revised logframe was discussed at the First General Meeting of Rhodope Project Stakeholders (April 2006), and formally agreed and officially endorsed at the PSC meeting held on 19th July 2006, and has been used by the project team ever since. It should be noted that, although simpler and smaller, the revised logframe was still demanding in terms of M&E and reporting requirements. In addition, some of the new indicators were still not SMART and are not good indicators for their outcome or objective (see Table 4).

⁸ SMART = Specific, Measureable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-bound. See section 3.2 of the GEF’s “Monitoring and Evaluation Policies and Procedures”, available at <http://www.undp.org/gef/05/monitoring/policies.html>.

⁹ GEF having formalised its terminology so that in the current case *Outputs* had to be replaced with *Outcomes*.

4.2.5 Use/establishment of electronic information technologies

58. The MTE expressed concerns about the backing up of Project data and risk to those data from a possible catastrophic fire in the PMU office, and hence recommended that the PMU purchase an additional hard-drive and alter its back-up regime to always have one drive in the fire-proof safe at all times. This was done and as a rule the Project's computers have been backed up twice a week onto an external hard drive. In addition, the project server is backed-up externally by the service provider. Unfortunately, the PMU's server suffered hacker attacks and technical failures over the Christmas holiday period 2008, and valuable information and documents were lost. The Project website was badly affected with the result that many documents previously sited on the website could not be accessed which has reduced effective dissemination of Project results. Disappointingly, as of 14 September 2009, nearly 9 months later, the Project website was still not fully operational.

4.2.6 Risk identification and management

59. The identification and management of risks and mitigation measures is rated as ***Marginally Satisfactory***. An initial list of project assumptions and the associated risks was identified at the design phase and included in the Annex N of the Project Document. This lists 17 risks (a lot by GEF project standards), all in the 'Low' (6), Low-Medium' (10) or 'Medium' (1) categories. These were revised and entered into the UNDP Atlas Risk Module (which forms the basis of the UNDP/GEF Risk Management System) and have been reported on each year in the PIR since 2006 (in the 2005 PIR they were not presented in Atlas format), including a rating of their critical status. However, the most recent detailed Atlas Risk listings available to the FET team (2008) only documents 12 risks. One of these is no longer considered valid and an additional risk not given in the Project Document (*'exchange rate losses due to the value of the USD against the Bulgaria Leva'*) has been added¹⁰. All the risks listed in the 2008 PIR are shown as 'not critical'. The Quarterly Reports also give a 'Risk Log', presenting the original risks identified in the Project Document and an analysis of mitigation measures taken over the previous 3 months.

60. Three comments can be made on the original list of risks and the Atlas list:

1. The first risk listed in the Project Document - 'The Government of Bulgaria will stop or decrease their support to nature conservation efforts within the country either financially or politically' - was given a 'Low' rating, yet the GoB was not able to deliver on its commitment to establish the two Nature Parks. As pointed out in section 4.1.1, consideration should have been given to the possibility that one or both of the Nature Parks would not be created. This risk should have been added to the Atlas list in 2006.
2. In the original list, the Low-Medium risk 'Incorporating conservation objectives into development planning will proceed with marked resistance' was not included in the Atlas list. It is not clear why this was omitted as this relates to the likelihood of success of mainstreaming which formed a major component of the Project, especially after the MTE.
3. The Project document did not include the risk associated with currency fluctuations (Dollar-Levi). However, although there were significant fluctuations during the lifetime of the Project, these did not impact of the number of activities implemented and it does not appear to have negatively impacted project success.

61. Interviews revealed that the members of the Project team had not received any specific training or guidance in risk analysis and mitigation or scenario development ("What if..."), although they undertook these in an informal, semi-structured way during monthly senior management meetings and annual project retreats while work planning. Training in risk and scenario analysis is something that UNDP-GEF should provide to all its GEF project teams.

¹⁰ Risks can be added to the Atlas Module but not deleted, even if no longer valid.

4.3 Replication approach and Project dissemination

62. Replication of Project results has been *Satisfactory*, and has the potential to be even better. The Project's strategy to replicating results and ensuring effective dissemination of lessons and experiences coming out of the project is described under ***Outcome 4 Monitoring/evaluation applied as tool for capacity building of stakeholders***. The main approaches are that '*lessons learned will be disseminated to a learning portfolio of projects of a similar nature or with similar strategic challenges*' and that '*the project will use M&E outputs and project reports as inputs to larger cross-project learning and capacity building exercises*'.

63. The opportunities for knowledge transfer, and therefore potential project replication, through dissemination of project results, training workshops, information exchange, and the RP's web presence have been high, and many documents are free and easily available (although there have been problems with access to website for last 10 months after the server went down in late December 2008). However, it is not clear to what extent project results have been replicated or scaled up in the design and implementation of other government-, donor-, or NGO-driven projects (this has not been specifically monitored by the RP). Overall, information dissemination by the Project, particularly technical, e.g. BD and GIS, has been very good indeed and should be seen as a model for Bulgaria and other GEF projects in the region.

64. The most successful replication appears to be related to the Project's success with Forestry Stewardship Council (FSC) forest certification of forest lands managed by SFA Units (carried out in collaboration with WWF and GTZ). This was the first case of forest certification in Bulgaria, serves as a model for the rest of the country, and has been copied in other forested areas in Bulgaria (and Project staff have given presentations to SFA Units in other parts of Bulgaria to help promote this). In addition, some project products and information was reported to have been directly used by national NGOs for development of their own programmes, e.g. for information displays, maps for tourists trails, and other awareness raising materials by 'Borrowed Nature' based on the DVD containing the project's biodiversity data and maps.

65. Some of the 20 Pilot Demonstration Programme (PDP) projects supported by the Project (which aimed to demonstrate locally how biodiversity conservation and sustainable land use measures could help deliver improved livelihoods and offer business opportunities emphasizing local stakeholders involvement, particularly land and natural resource users¹¹) have high replication potential, notably the ecotourism projects, and the PDP has clearly generated much interest among locals and the NGO community. However, the extent of replication by others is not known as there has been no follow-up monitoring since the PDP finished in March 2008. There was anecdotal evidence, provided through interviews with the FET, that some local farmers were interested in copying the activities of the PDP grant recipients, particularly in relation to bee-keeping and switching to organic crops and livestock, but so far this appears to have been very limited because of non-project barriers (notably high start-up costs and poor, unreliable support from the state agricultural services).

66. The Project had developed strong links with the UNOPS-managed GEF Small Grants Programme (SGP), and influenced them to place more emphasis on funding biodiversity conservation projects, with the result that three project proposals put forward by proponents in the Rhodope region and which were priority areas for the RP were funded (a project on Otters, another one on Karakachan sheep, and a third on forestry management) were financed by the SGP.

67. Some of the RSC Kardzhali staff met with members of the ARC/Avalon project during visits to the Eastern Rhodope region, and provided information on the Rhodope Project to the ARC/Avalon group in 2005. Analysis of the draft ARC/Avalon proposal (no title) by the FET suggest that it was heavily

¹¹ Funding was provided in the ratio of 90% PDP ; 10% co-financing. By contrast, the GEF SGP requires 50% SGP: 50% co-financing.

based on the Rhodope Project, which offers another example of replication and uptake of Project ideas and achievements.

68. In addition, according to the NPM, in an attempt to increase both the replication and sustainability of project results the RP undertook a pilot a ‘training of trainers’ approach, by encouraging some municipal staff who had received training through project workshops to train their own staff, but this was not a success. This approach was first tested in 2005 with the basic GIS training where the Rhodope Project hoped to avoid loss of trained staff due to staff turnover or after elections. Further attempts of the project to train trainers, related to the work with MFG (2005-6) where the project initially tried to build the capacity of selected local leaders who afterwards had to train the rest of the MFG, but this attempt proved again to be a failure. The FET considers that it would be valuable if the Project could carry out a brief analysis of why this approach failed (since it works in other places) and include the results with lessons learned in the final Project Report.

4.4 Linkages between projects and other interventions within the sector

69. The RP has had strong links and synergies with several programmes and projects operating in the Rhodope region and Bulgaria. Among these are the UNDP/GEF project *‘Integrating Global Environmental Issues into Bulgaria’s Regional Development Process’* (the so-called Rio Conventions Project) is also implemented by UNDP. It started in mid-2006 and will terminate mid-2010 and has a total budget of USD1.5million, including a GEF contribution of USD 500,000. The project strategy is to promote integration of global environmental issues into the process of regional and local development, as well as spatial planning, both of which are managed by the MRDPW. The RP provided administrative assistance to the Rio Project, helped them develop their training modules and afterwards the Rio Project included people from the Rhodope Region in their courses as suggested by the Rhodope Project. The RP also provided support with integrating the Rio Conventions into municipal policy, legislation and planning. RP surveys helped the Rio Project develop their training modules and afterwards the Rio Project included people from the Rhodope Region in their courses as suggested by the Rhodope Project.

70. As mentioned above, the Project developed particularly close links with the GEF SGP with which it shared an office for a while. The RP’s Pilot Demonstration Programme was heavily influenced by the SGP for Bulgaria and adopted a modified version of its application forms and processes, and the NPM has acted as an informal advisor/reviewer for SGP proposals relevant to the Rhodope region. The Project also forged good links with the GTZ *Promotion of agro-forestry structures in the Rhodope mountain region*, oriented to support non-state entities and structures in the Rhodope Mountain, where common initiatives (LEADER, forestry) were discussed regularly, and some of the Project’s training activities were undertaken jointly with the GTZ project in the Rhodope region. The Project also contributed to the PHARE-funded Greece-Bulgaria cross-boundary project 2004/016-782.01.03 *“Promotion of nature protection actions and sustainable development across the border”*, principally through provision of environmental information, and facilitating networking between stakeholders.

4.5 Monitoring and evaluation

71. Overall, the Project has demonstrated good project monitoring and evaluation, in line with UNDP and GEF procedures, although it has been hampered by a poor original logframe with too many and ineffective indicators (see above), and is rated as **Satisfactory**.

4.5.1 Monitoring and reporting of project progress and implementation and impact

72. In addition to the Initial and Mid-Term evaluations carried out in 2006 and 2007, the Project team has carried out extensive, formalised, and detailed monitoring and evaluation of Project activities. Project progress has been monitored through Quarterly Reports (QR) and Annual Project Reports (APR), compiled by the NPM, detailing quantitative (achievement versus target) as well as qualitative

assessment of progress made, and they present a clear summary of work-in-progress, both in terms of describing project implementation activities and in measuring performance against the corresponding set of progress indicators, and provide information on the problems and issues encountered by the Project over the reporting period. These reports have been submitted to UNDP (CO and Bratislava Regional Coordination Unit) and to the MAF, and the QRs form the basis for the preparation of the 150-word fixed-format UNDP report forwarded to GEF. The major findings and observations of these reports are given in the annual Project Implementation Report (PIR), which covers the period from July to June, and is submitted to UNDP for review and comment, followed by final submission to GEF.

73. The Project team also undertakes its own internal activity monitoring. Every 6 months, the team identifies targets and activities for the forthcoming year with quarterly benchmarks for each activity, which means that the Project always has 6 months of known activities and benchmarks. In addition, the Project also produces monthly workplans and benchmarks (reviewed and discussed at the monthly senior management meetings in Sofia) and reports to UNDP at the end of each month on the progress achieved against these benchmarks (through a monthly report, which also acts as an aid to communication within the team). This advanced reporting system has been one of the strengths of the Project and helped them deliver activities on time and to identify and adapt to risks and threats to project delivery. All of these reports are forwarded to the NPD by the NPM. Once a year the UNDP Programme Operational Group undertakes a formal check of documents and procedures as part of its monitoring programme, and the Project also has an external audit as part of UNDP's annual external audit by a certified international accounting company (KPMG).

74. In terms of monitoring Project impact indicators (based on the impact indicators in the logframe) information is collated from Ministry or NGO sources by the PMU and from the municipalities through the RSCs for inclusion in the PIRs and GEF Tracking Tools. Surveys and monitoring of other globally important species, including Alpine newt, cave bats, Mouse-tailed dormouse and Marbled polecat are also carried out. The Project has also supported voluntary monitoring of common birds in the Rhodope Mountains through BSPB, and through schools for other indicators such as Spur-thighed and Hermann's tortoises and of European Souslik, and pays experts to monitor Maidenhair Fern, Rhodope lily and Griffon vulture. Data has been provided to the National Biodiversity Monitoring Programme. Additionally, consultants undertook social attitude surveys annually (except the first year). Most training workshop and seminars activities have also included a feedback questionnaire on the participants' opinion of the workshop/seminar.

75. All the Project reporting documents reviewed by the FET were detailed and well-presented and written in clear English, and adequate resources (human and financial) have clearly been budgeted for effective M&E. Indeed, the FET believes that one of the reasons for the excellent reporting is due to the Project having sufficient staff, who were well briefed on what and how to report.

4.5.2 Monitoring and reporting by UNDP

76. In the period between the IE and MTE, UNDP monitored the Project through six field visits (5-7th April 2006, 24-25th June 2006, 20th September 2006, 10-12th October 2006, 12th March 2007, and 30th May 2007); after the MTE there was only two official field visits by UNDP, one on 4 December 2008 (to the Smolyan RSC) and another soon after on 18 December 2008. Management input by the UNDP-GEF office in Bratislava was good and timely – they clearly made an effort to solve issues quickly – and annual visits have been made by the UNDP-GEF Regional Technical Advisor to Bulgaria for project review. In addition to this UNDP Programme Analyst holds weekly meetings with NPM. He has also participated in some of the monthly managers' meetings (29 July and 9 October 2008, 23 January and 1 April 2009). The PIR form for 2009 is now in Excel format. This is not very user-friendly and extracting and printing information is not as easy as in the previous Word format. The NPM commented that he wrote the draft for 2009 first in the old Word form then cut-and-pasted it

into the new Excel form which therefore required increased time. The FET suspects that the new form is for the benefit of UNDP HQ than the UNDP COs or UNDP-GEF projects.

77. The Project was also fortunate in having the PDF-B manager (Carsten Germer) act as the IA for the first two years of implementation and then become the UNDP Officer with responsibility for the Project. This undoubtedly helped effective implementation, especially at the beginning of the Project when the Project Document needed to be ‘interpreted’ as the Project team, were relatively inexperienced in donor-project management and most had not been involved with PDF-B stage activities. In addition, one of the later UNDP Project Officers, Maxim Vergeichik, later became the UNDP-GEF Regional Technical Advisor for the Project. Again, this familiarity and continuity of key senior staff with the Project over a long period helped maintain close informal progress monitoring and support.

4.6 Stakeholder participation

4.6.1 Participation by stakeholders and partnerships

78. Stakeholder participation during implementation is rated as *Highly Satisfactory*. Interviews by the FET revealed wide and meaningful stakeholder participation in the Project’s implementation and decision-making. The Project has worked closely with, and through, a large number of local stakeholders, notably the Regional State Forest Boards, State Forest Agency Units (to a lesser extent private forest cooperatives), local government including a number of Districts and Municipalities, and grassroots organisations including national, regional and local NGOs, as well as individuals. It has highlighted local participation as a priority since the beginning, worked hard to ensure transparency and developed a reputation for this, and provided a number of benefits to stakeholders and has tried to ensure sustainability of these. The Project’s activities aimed at capacity building were much appreciated and indeed FET interviews demonstrated a high demand for more. Many of the Project activities were delivered through partnerships with relevant institutions, based on short-term contracts, which appear to have been arranged and managed very effectively, with few problems with delivery. The high stakeholder participation has also led to good local and national ownership of the Project.

79. Although, relatively few local stakeholders are represented on the PSC (only the municipal authorities) and not at all on the PMC, representatives do attend General Stakeholders Meetings which are held each year in the Rhodope region or close by, and the RSC staff in particular have actively sought opinions and feedback from local stakeholders on planned project activities, to increase the likelihood of more successful implementation, ownership and sustainability. Forestry Units, for instance, were given annual feedback forms on Project activities to complete and asked for their opinions on annual work plans.

80. One key stakeholder vehicle established by the Project was the Municipal Focus Group (MFG), which have been established in 27 of 43 Municipalities covered by the Project (all by the mid-term point). The FET was able to meet with 5 MFGs, but it was clear from interviews that there is a wide variation in terms of vision, function, organization and capacity, and most were dominated by the municipal administration and disorganized. Some interviewees seemed confused about the purpose of the MFGs and didn’t seem to know how often they met or how many members they have, which didn’t leave a good impression with the FET. Similar failings were highlighted by the MTE team and the MTE recommended that the Project should devote more time and resources to revitalising the MFG programme particularly to provide the weaker groups with the tools and knowledge necessary to become self-sufficient. However, it was not clear to the FET to what extent this has happened. Assistance has been given to those MFGs which expressed a wish to become LEADER groups, as this was seen as a road to sustainability but others, e.g. the Kurdjai MFG, are clearly floundering and very unlikely to continue after the Project ends. The major advantage of MFGs reported by their members was that it provided an increased network of contacts, helped build partnerships that were useful in their own work, and in some cases directly helped them with support for their own environmental

initiatives. From the point of view of the RP, the MFGs have provided ‘Champions’ within stakeholder groups who could promote (champion) the Project’s initiatives in their respective organizations. Even if some of the MFGs dissolve following Project closure, the informal networks created within the MFGs are likely to continue to have an impact on biodiversity conservation and environmental management in the Rhodope region for years to come.

4.6.2 Production and dissemination of information generated by the project

81. As stated earlier, the RP has produced an enormous number of reports, publications, educational, training and awareness-raising materials (most listed in the annual PIRs) and other documents, and dissemination of these has been excellent. Most of these have been uploaded to the project website, and copies of key reports sent to stakeholders.

4.7 Financial Planning and management

82. The management procedures to procure Project assets and equipment and to recruit short-term consultants followed the existing UNDP rules and procedures to be applied to project using the NEX modality. All project transactions appear to have been promptly recorded and properly classified, showing good internal controls mechanisms to manage and control project resources.

83. Unusually, requests for direct payments (and travel authorisation) were initially certified by the International Advisor rather than the National Project Manager (NPM)¹². The FET feels that this displays a certain lack of trust toward the NPM by UNDP initially, which could have created a very difficult working relationship between the NPM and the IA, but it is testament to the interpersonal skills of the NPM that this did not develop into a serious issue. However, this arrangement should not be promoted generally by UNDP as a model across their projects, as it is likely to be unworkable.

4.7.1 GEF funding

84. According to figures provided to the FET by the PMU, total disbursement of GEF funds to the Project up until 31st August 2009 (the start of the FE) amounted to US\$ 3,344,313, which represents 89.1% of the projected total spending by this date, taking the 6-month no-cost extension into account (see Table 1). However, it should be noted that the total GEF budget given (US\$3,754,516) is higher than that identified in the Project Document (US\$3,545,460)¹³. It is expected that, given the remaining activities that still need to be delivered before 30 November 2009, payments for remaining contracts and salaries will bring the overall spend to close to 100%, although the NPM expects there to be US\$10,000-15,000 remaining.

¹² The IA later left to take up his position as Project Analyst with UNDP Bulgaria (but responsible for the Rhodope Project).

¹³ The PMU comments that ‘The budget of the project is as in the Project Document - US\$3,545,460. The data provided to FET is correct but does not allow interpretation and analysis based on summing up figures per outcomes; it does so only for the years. This comes from the fact that budget revisions were made at certain points in time. Consequently, if in a certain year delivery is lower than budgeted, outstanding funds are transferred to the following years and figures under planned (budgeted) increase.’

Table 1: Total disbursement of GEF funds by Outcome to 31st August 2009 (US\$) (figures rounded)

Outcome	Budget (US\$)	% Total	Total disbursement (US\$)	% of budget
1	1,691,836	45.06	1,621,363	95.83
2	371,642	9.90	324,131	87.22
3	646,627	17.22	581,951	90.00
4	224,334	5.98	136,117	60.68
5	172,847	4.60	127,440	73.73
6	590,948	15.74	522,717	88.45
7	56,282	1.50	30,594	54.36
Total	3,754,516	100	3,344,313	89.07

Source: PMU

85. For financial purposes, all project management, staff salaries, and similar expenses are included into Outcome 1. Outcomes 4 and 7 currently shows an under-spend (60.1% and 54.4% respectively), although the low spending on Outcome 7 is somewhat artificial in that it has a small budget with expensive sub-contracts, and Outcome 4, which is concerned with monitoring and evaluation, does not include the expenditure for the FE or the annual 'lessons learning' exercise for 2009.

86. Outcome spending has varied quite considerably between years (Table 2). The serious under-spend in 2004 and 2005 in Outcome 5 (Table 2) is related to the training in collaborative management that was supposed to be given to the staff of the two Nature Park Directorates but which in their absence could not occur. Some of the variance between actual and budget expenditures is likely to be due to exchange rate fluctuations. Salaries, for instance, are set and contracted in BGN, while the budget is stated in USD. One area where the original budget was reportedly underestimated was salaries. However, the budget for training was overestimated (especially travel expenses) which has allowed the Project to transfer some funds to salaries, under the pretext that the project staff would also be directly involved in the capacity building of local stakeholders. The total training budget amounted to US\$157,600¹⁴.

¹⁴ This figure comprises only those training activities undertaken through external consultants and subcontractors plus logistics expenses (hotels, travel, etc.) and does not include training (for example in GIS) provided by the Project staff so the total training expenditure is likely to be even higher.

Table 2: Project spending by Outcome and year

	2004			2005			2006			2007			2008			2009		
Outcome	Planned	Spent	%	Planned	Spent	%	Planned	Spent	%	Planned	Spent	%	Planned	Spent	%	Planned	Spent until 31.08.2009	%
1	229754	258175	112.37	322313	311345	96.60	313585	316764	101.01	306903	304731	99.29	299000	287123	96.03	220281	143225	65.02
2	77992	64102	82.19	96850	87974	90.84	70700	64961	91.88	52100	52495	100.76	55500	41514	74.80	18500	13085	70.73
3	25606	28068	109.61	42429	24837	58.54	116457	122027	104.78	173726	173227	99.71	166700	138574	83.13	121709	95218	78.23
4	17928	10837	60.45	41953	11493	27.39	41814	41550	99.37	24079	23947	99.45	41260	34690	84.08	57300	13600	23.73
5	0	0		12100	881	7.28	11500	11726	101.97	67647	67342	99.55	48100	29976	62.32	33500	17515	52.28
6	11500	9804	85.25	52800	47558	90.07	58320	57753	99.03	263024	249930	95.02	143730	122828	85.46	61574	34844	56.59
7	8248	5892	71.44	13200	6157	46.64	6100	3845	63.04	10837	9440	87.11	10864	3997	36.79	7033	1263	17.96
TOTAL	371028	376878	101.58	581645	490245	84.29	618476	61862	100.02	898316	881112	98.08	765154	658702	86.09	519897	318750	61.31

4.7.2 Project co-financing and leveraged funds

87. The capacity of the project to leverage funds to co-finance project activities is rated by the FET as **Satisfactory**. The Project Document sets out project co-financing contributions as follows: Ministry of Agriculture and Forests - US\$11,276,750; Ministry of Environment and Water - US\$970,000; UNDP – US\$2,336,496; and PDF-B co-financing contributions from GEF - US\$232,000. There was also associate financing provided by the Swiss Government of US\$73,000. Altogether, committed co-financing totaled US\$18.625 million.

88. As of 31st August 2009, combined disbursement from the State Forest Agency and the MEW totalled US\$5,408,723 against a budget of US\$6,997,000, or 77.3% of their budget (Table 3). However, funds from the EU SAPARD scheme via the Ministry of Agriculture were greater than expected (121%) and when these are included, the government contribution totals US\$11,818,723 out of a combined original budget of US\$12,273,750, or 96.29%.

Table 3: Disbursement of main co-funding by Outcome to 31st August 2009 (US\$) (figures rounded)

Outcome	State Forest Agency			MoEW			Ministry of Agriculture through SAPARD		
	Budget	Total disbursement	% budget	Budget	Total disbursement	% budget	Budget	Total disbursement	% of budget
1	1,140,000	370000	32.46						
2	90,000	80000	88.89						
3	1,404,235	1224935	87.23	997,000	803,023	80.54			
4	0	0							
5	137,000	112000	81.75						
6	3,228,765	2818765	87.30				5,276,750	6,410,000	121.48
7	0	0							
Total	6,000,000	4,605,700	76.76	997,000	803,023	80.54	5,276,750	0	0%

Source: PMU

89. An additional US\$110,000 was committed by the MRDPW after document signature (the FET had no information on how these funds were to be spent, or had been spent).

90. In addition to these co-financing and leveraged funds, the project has also help to raise a substantial amount of money for biodiversity conservation and sustainable use of natural resources for its stakeholder groups in the Rhodope region through provision of support and expertise to develop project proposals including business plans and information, particularly in relation to applications to the Rural Development Programme, EU PHARE Bulgaria-Greece Cross-Border Cooperation Programme, the EU LEADER Programme and the GEF Small Grants Programme. The PMU estimates that the Project has helped raise around Euro 3,284,000 in Western Rhodope and Euro 3,379,000 in Eastern Rhodope (see Annex VII), which is a considerable achievement, and again, is one of the reasons the RP is held in such high regard by local stakeholders in the region.

4.7.3 Audit and independent assessment of internal controls

91. The Project has been audited annually by an independent auditor (KPMG). The last audit covered the financial year ending 2008 and was delivered in May 2009, which stated that the Project's financial schedules presented fairly the expenditures of the Project and in accordance with the accounting instructions of UNDP. The audit also reviewed the procedures for the selection of service contractors and recruitment of project personnel and both were stated to have been performed

according to UNDP rules and procedures. Accounting records maintained in the financial reporting software ATLAS by the executing agency UNDP were considered complete and reliable. The final audit report for the Project, for 2009, will not be available until April 2010.

4.7.4 Cost-effectiveness

92. Cost-effective is rated as *Satisfactory*. The Project completed most of the planned activities and met or exceeded most of expected outcomes, and within budget, although it has required a 6-month no-cost extension¹⁵ after MTE due to the need to refocus towards a more mainstreaming approach. The Project made good use of national consultants (minimal use of international consultants) which helped keep costs low, and all bids were put out to competitive tender (minimum three bids except in exceptional circumstances), following UNDP rules and procedures. In addition, according to interviewees at UNDP Bulgaria, the Project has required less management time required from UNDP CO than many other UNDP-managed projects, due to PMU staff being very well qualified and having already several years of experience with the project. As noted above co-financing was secured, and there were additional leveraged funds. In the FET view, compared with other similar GEF projects, and especially when compared with EU-funded and World Bank funded biodiversity projects, the Rhodope Project has delivered its results cheaply and been very cost-effective.

4.8 Execution and implementation modalities

4.8.1 Quantity, quality and timeliness of input by UNDP

93. As the GEF implementing agency of the Project, the efficiency of the UNDP-CO in supporting the implementation of the RP is rated as *Satisfactory*. It provided project management support to the PMU, including financial management and overseeing of expenditures to ensure proper use of GEF resources, project evaluation, reporting and results-based project monitoring. The UNDP CO provided support in efficiently disbursing the project resources, as well as in the selection, recruitment, assignment of experts, consultants and national counterpart staff members and in the definition of tasks and responsibilities, following UNDP rules and procedures. As mentioned earlier, the fact that IA later became Project Analyst with UNDP Bulgaria with responsibility for the Rhodope Project, clearly helped ensure close communication between the UNDP CO and the PMU during critical stages of project implementation. Wisely, in the opinion of the FET, the current UNDP CO Project Manager has trusted the PMU and RSCs to adapt Project activities to changing local environment and actual local needs, in accordance with what the Project team feels will best deliver the Project's objectives, outcomes and results (applying an adaptive management approach). Changes in work plans and activities could be made if the Project team provided a cogent argument. UNDP's flexibility in allowing the Project team to interpret the Project Document was said by several of the interviewees to be one of the key elements for the success of the Project.

94. The FET was disappointed that there was no formal professional development opportunities directly offered to the Project team, e.g. qualifications in project management (the two RSC managers had to learn by doing, which carried a risk).¹⁶ Whilst the UNDP CO was happy to encourage staff to

¹⁵ Project extensions are common on GEF projects, as in the project design phase it is often difficult to predict exactly how long will be required to complete project activities, and the political, economic and financial contexts of most projects change during implementation, sometimes with negative impacts of project delivery. Consequently, the 6-month no-cost project extension agreed for the Rhodope Project in February 2009 in order to fully implement the recommendations of the MTE should not be seen as a sign of poor performance or failure by the Project team, but rather as a realistic, practical solution to a changed situation (in other words a sensible adaptive management response).

¹⁶ UNDP comments that 'It should be noted that UNDP has already encouraged project staff to participate in training events, seminars and study tours.' Whilst this is recognised, the FET feels that as a general policy, UNDP (globally, not just UNDP Bulgaria) needs to examine whether it should fund (build into project budgets at the design stage) professional development

pursue courses, staff complained that they were expected to meet the cost themselves, which meant, realistically, there were very limited opportunities¹⁷. Some training was provided through the Project, mostly on UNDP project administration or management, and staff took the opportunity to participate in training courses organized by the Project for the stakeholders, but, unlike most international private sector institutions and NGOs, the Project and UNDP CO did not provide professional development as part of the employment package offered to staff. When salaries are not very competitive, one of the key reasons why staff remain with an organization is the opportunity for professional development, which is most commonly offered through training courses. The FET believes that this is something UNDP should consider for all its GEF projects in future.

95. The MTE raised the issue of UNDP bureaucracy and low morale among Project staff due to lack of trust between the UNDP CO and the Project team (especially with the two RSCs), problems with DSAs, and low salaries and the inflexibility of UNDP rules and procedures¹⁸, and the MTE made recommendations that these should be addressed as a priority as it had the potential to negatively impact staff retention, and project performance and delivery. The FET again heard complaints about inflexible UNDP bureaucracy¹⁹ but most of the other issues seem to have either been addressed or are now of less importance to staff (possibly because the Project is coming to an end). However, the creation of the new Rhodope Project NGO, the manner in which it was established and perceived restrictions placed on Project staff in terms of what support they can give to the NGO have generated some negativity between some of the Project team and the UNDP CO²⁰ in the 12-18 months. The FET was informed that the NGO had been created and registered in Smolyan by the Project team on 2 October 2008 without informing the UNDP CO. It appears that the PMU underestimated the legal consequences and a potential risk of conflict of interest for UNDP, but this risk was clarified by UNDP during the project staff retreat in December 2008. The UNDP CO also asked all the project staff to sign a declaration²¹ in January 2009 stating that they would treat project information as confidential, not make it public and not undertake any other work that uses the materials/products from the Project while working for the Project, as well as agreeing to other restrictions (in order to avoid any conflict of interest). After this risk of conflict of interest had been addressed, UNDP initiated a series of discussions with the PMU about how the NGO could also be recognized as a “successor” of the project by the national/local institutions and how it could be supported in the framework of the existing project. The latter was reflected in the Project’s Exit strategy, approved by the PMC in February 2009, which clarifies and sets out in its Annex V (*Institutional Support to the*

schemes as part of the employed package offered to staff if it wants to attract and retain the best people, especially if salaries are not competitive.

¹⁷ The two RSCs, for instance, felt they would have benefited from English language lessons, but could not afford them. Given that much of the project documentation and communication is in English it is difficult to see why this was not offered.

¹⁸ The time taken to process request was cited several times as an issue, and it can be critical e.g. in the case of requests for consultants to carry out surveys of animals and plants during their breeding or flowering seasons which can be very short, and which won’t wait for UNDP approval.

¹⁹ In the FET’s experience this is common to UNDP worldwide, and whilst UNDP sometimes acknowledges that it can negatively impact projects, as an organisation UNDP does not seem to be able to address this. Unfortunately, it is seen by many (especially in the NGO community) as one of the ‘comparative disadvantages’ of working with UNDP. It would be a valuable lesson learning exercise if UNDP Headquarters undertook an analysis of its rules and procedures for GEF project administration with existing UNDP-GEF project teams in order to help create happier project teams since this is likely to deliver better results in the long run.

²⁰ The FET recorded levels of negativity and some friction over this specific issue, but this cannot be said to characterize the overall relationship between the UNDP CO and the Project term which in the FET’s view was generally very good and productive

²¹ This was viewed by the FET and is apparently a standard element of most UNDP project staff contracts but was not given to the staff at the beginning of their employment. The PMU commented that ‘*Most of the text of the declaration is part of the provisions of the Service Contract signed by each project member and it was present since the date of employment.*’ The UNDP CO further commented that ‘*The official document is the Service Contract between UNDP and the Project Staff member, where all obligations/restrictions for the employees are included and described. Since the National Executing Agency (SAF) and the UNDP CO had not been informed prior to the formal registration of the NGO in order to address the risk of potential conflict of interest due to the parallel existence of a legally registered NGO and an on-going UNDP project with the same name, the advice of the UNDP CO Legal Adviser was that an additional declarations had to be signed by the project staff for purely legal purposes. The content of the declaration is similar to the corresponding text from the Service Contracts but it refers to the concrete NGO.*’

NGO “Rhodope Project”) a list of what UNDP will allow the RP staff to undertake in relation to the new NGO (under ‘Provision of support to the preparatory phase – till 30 November 2009’). These are:

- *Elaboration of the rules and procedures of the newly established NGO “Rhodope project”;*
- *Elaboration of a fund-mobilization strategy of the NGO;*
- *Development of a Business Plan for the NGO;*
- *Preparation of advertising materials – texts and brochure designs;*
- *Development of a “Future and potential partners” database;*
- *Preparation of initial list of project ideas and concepts which could be further developed in project proposals.*

96. UNDP CO stated to the FET that they could provide support in the form of letters of support to funding bodies and legal advice and for the transfer of equipment, information and databases from the Project to the NGO, but no direct funding or allow the Project staff to fund-raise for the NGO using Project resources or while employed by the Project. However, the UNDP CO also said that UNDP does not seem to have a clear corporate policy on this situation – establishing an NGO as a follow-up to a UNDP-funded project²².

97. It was recognized during early discussions on the NGO in 2007 that the critical issue for the NGO would be financing (the FET fully agrees that without some immediate financing once the NGO becomes operational on 1 December 2009, it is unlikely to survive – see section 4.9.5 point ii). However, because of potential conflicts of interest under UNDP rules and procedures (as per the provisions of the Service Contract between UNDP and the project staff), the Project team has not been allowed to submit proposals to raise funds for the new NGO, and because of the statement in the Exit Strategy ‘Preparation of initial list of project ideas and concepts which could be further developed in project proposals’ the team did not believe they could develop more than 1-2 page concept papers while they were still employed by the Project (there seems to have been some confusion over this because UNDP staff interviewed stated that proposals could be developed but not submitted). Again, this has caused some tension because the Project team believes that although UNDP have supported the idea of creating an NGO as a follow-up to the Rhodope Project since the initial discussions (although with some reservations due to the rather mixed results of other donor-funded projects which have taken the same path in Bulgaria), UNDP have placed heavy restrictions on what the team can do to ensure financial sustainability of the new NGO. Interviews with both UNDP staff and Project staff indicated that there has clearly been some confusion and misunderstanding, probably on both sides, over what could and could not be undertaken in support of the NGO while staff are working for the Rhodope Project, and this needs to be clarified. In the FET’s opinion, there is no good argument against the Project team developing concepts into full proposals before 30 November 2009 ready for submission once the Project ends and recommends that this should be encouraged by the UNDP CO team²³.

²² The PMU commented that ‘UNDP has supported the establishment of the Rhodope Project NGO right from the birth of the idea. Even more so, the idea was firstly proposed by Carsten Germer who at that time had already taken a position at UNDP. And although this was cautiously taken by the RP staff members at the beginning, along the discussions, it gradually became well appreciated by all staff members. UNDP provided further backing in terms of shaping the “visions for the future of the RSC” which served as a basis for business plan development – again discussed and approved by UNDP. Indeed the actual legal act of registration of the NGO was made without explicitly notifying UNDP, but here the project rather underestimated the situation that a conflict of interest may be created’ and ‘Of course, some project staff members did not fully appreciate the restriction to work for the NGO (outside what stated in the Exit Strategy) within the project timeframe, but at the same time everyone knows that UNDP rules and procedures are there to be respected’. The point the FET is making is that these ‘rules and procedures’ were not clearly communicated to the Project team at the time or understood by them (the potential for conflict of interest was seen as a problem by UNDP which this was not communicated effectively to the Project team or they would have understood and not established the NGO without informing UNDP), and, as the UNDP staff stated in FE interviews, the general UNDP guidance on establishing NGOs is not very clear anyway.

²³ The UNDP CO comments that ‘The NGO was not allowed to apply officially for funding or to respond officially to call for proposals while the UNDP/GEF/SFA project with the same name is on-going and all NGO members are actually UNDP project staff.’ The FET understands this, but does not see a reason why a set of generic proposals cannot be developed before 30 November to be submitted afterwards. Developing major proposals is very time consuming and developing a set of

98. Some of the interviewees interviewed at the national level mentioned UNDP's comparative advantage in delivering technical assistance, its strong focus on capacity development, and promotion of participatory and transparent decision-making, and one interviewee commented that UNDP was seen as 'not corrupt' which was viewed as important in Bulgaria. UNDP 'soft assistance'²⁴ in support of the Project, while difficult to quantify, appears to have been significant during the lifetime of the Project. The UNDP Country Office has very good working relationships with both the MEW and MAF as well as the MRDPW and other ministries and has freely discussed the Project with key parties, and has facilitated high-level (Deputy Minister or Minister) cross-ministerial communication on project issues. The former Resident Representative - Niel Buhne - took a particular interest in the Rhodope Project. However, UNDP has in the past been criticized for its apparent reluctance to push for the creation of the Nature Parks at the beginning of the Project, and the UNDP 'soft assistance' did not appear to extend to the highest (Ministerial and above) level with regards the Rhodope Project (and so was less effective than perhaps it could have been). The FET heard the same complaint again from the NGO community during interviews, and it is clear that some parties do not understand the limits of UNDP influence on governments (it is there at their invitation) and it's need to remain impartial and objective. The Project had four UNDP Bulgaria Project managers during its lifetime, and of these, the first – Ogniana Glavoussanova – was particularly praised by interviewees from the PMU, SFA, MAF and UNDP-Bratislava, because of the critical role she played in the first 12 months to ensure that the Project delivered results quickly.

4.8.2 Input by GoB and other parties responsible for providing inputs to the project

99. Overall, apart from one issue, there do not appear to have been any significant problems with inputs from the GoB, and delays over delivery of co-financing have not had a significant impact on implementation or sustainability of the Project. The one issue where the GoB has failed to deliver has been on its commitment to establish the Nature Parks. The MTE documents the history behind the failure to create the Nature Parks in some detail, but to summarise and based on further interviews by the FET, the reasons for the failure appear to have been because of:

- Technical/legislative factors that required all the landowners within the proposed Nature Parks to be part of a Commission involved in designating the protected area (getting consensus of thousands of landowners was never likely, even assuming that every person required to attend to make it legal actually turned up);
- The move towards Bulgaria's accession to the EU and the sheer weight of legislation that this involved both before and after, meant that the MEW had refocused on the requirements of the Natura 2000 Network, obligatory under EU accession rules, and the idea of creating large Nature Parks was no longer seen as a priority (confirmed by FET interviews); and
- The original proposals for the two nature Parks were simply too ambitious in the first place and did not have good local stakeholder ownership or interest (particularly for the Western Rhodope Nature Park, it might have been more feasible to have created the Eastern Rhodope Nature Park if the two proposals had not been merged into one, as it was less contentious).

100. In the end, the area covered by the Natura 2000 sites agreed by the GoB that are within the Rhodope Mountains cover much of the area initially identified for designation by the two Nature Parks, at least in the east, see Annex VIII – the total area of the SPAs and pSCIs being 685,073 ha²⁵ compared with approximately 650,000 ha under the two Nature Parks. The level of protection afforded by these sites is greater and more flexible in its zonation than that given by the Nature Park designation.

generic proposals which could be easily modified or are ready for submission after 1 December 2009 would significantly shorten the period that the new NGO is likely to be without funds and hence increase its likely survival.

²⁴ Defined by the UNDP's *Handbook on Monitoring and Evaluation for Results* as 'Advocacy, policy advice/dialogue, and facilitation/brokerage of information, partnerships or political compromise.'

²⁵ The final adoption of areas by the GoB took place on 30th November 2007 during the MTE.

4.9 Results

101. This Section presents an overview of the key results achieved by the project, an assessment of the impact the Project, the contribution the Project has made to upgrading skills of the national staff, and Project sustainability, including a discussion of the extent to which benefits are likely to continue, within or outside the Project domain after GEF assistance/external assistance has come to an end.

4.9.1 Achievement of Objectives

102. This section discusses progress made toward the achievement of the Project Objectives and the likelihood that the Project achievements will have a long-term impact on biodiversity conservation and sustainable use of biological resources in Bulgaria. A review of Project achievements versus expected targets presented in the PIR 2009 (latest information available to FET) indicates that the Project has met – and sometimes exceeded – most its set of expected project targets (underlined figures in Table 4). Consequently, the progress made by the project to achieve its Objectives is excellent and it is rated as *Satisfactory*.

Table 4: Objectives evaluation matrix (taken from PIR 2009)

Indicator from logframe		Baseline Level (2004)	Target Level at end of project	Level at 30 June 2009	Comments
Objective 1: Landscape-scale conservation is effectively operationalized in the Eastern and Western Rhodope					
1. Reduction of the levels of threat to landscape biodiversity in the Rhodope Region (as proportion of maximum score, using the "Rapid Assessment and Prioritization of Protected Areas Management" method)	forests	100/288	90/288 - 100/288	<u>109/288</u>	This indicator is based on RAPPAM ²⁶ and expert opinion. Trend in numbers more important than actual values. Not considered a very cost-effective indicator as requires expensive meeting of experts, and assessments are subjective
	grass-land/open spaces	115/288	103/288 - 115/288	<u>116/288</u>	
	inland waters and wetlands	72/240	64/240 - 72/240	<u>71/240</u>	
	agricultural lands	146/288	131/288 - 146/288	122/288	
2. Land Cover (CORINE) within the Rhodope remains stable (measured by level of fragmentation, ha/km)	broadleaved forests	25	25	<u>25</u>	Good indicator but expensive as based on the CORINE land cover survey. Data set provided by Environmental Executing Agency (MEW) and Project has no control over access to the data.
	coniferous forests	29	29	<u>29</u>	
	mixed forests	19	19	<u>20</u>	
	agricultural land	14	14	<u>14</u>	
	natural grasslands	15	15	<u>15</u>	
	pastures	15	15	<u>15</u>	
	woodlands/shrub	14	14	<u>14</u>	
3. Populations of selected landscape species maintained at baseline level or increase	- Griffon vulture, # of pairs;	31	31 - 36	<u>45</u>	Considered cost-effective indicator as data provided from population censuses that other organisations, e.g. BSPB, are already undertaken, but this introduces risk as not directly
	- Egyptian vulture, # of pairs	33	33 - 39	20	
	- Capercaillie, #	1,482	1,482 – 1,704	<u>1,738</u>	

²⁶ *Rapid Assessment and Prioritization of Protected Areas Management (RAPPAM)* methodology of the World Bank/World Wildlife Fund (WWF)

Indicator from logframe		Baseline Level (2004)	Target Level at end of project	Level at 30 June 2009	Comments
	- Brown bear, #	300	300 - 345	<u>371</u>	controlled by the Project. This indicator probably should have include assessments of the populations of all the raptor species (as top predators) in the Rhodope region as it would have given a better indication of the overall state of the landscape ²⁷ .
	- Red deer, #	1,519	1,519 – 1,747	<u>1,667</u>	
	- Wild boar, #	4,036	4,036 – 4,641	<u>5,447</u>	
4. Increased management effectiveness of protected areas - METT score points	Eastern Rhodope	33	40	36	Considered cost-effective indicator. The Project has grouped together results for several PAs (10 in Western Rhodope, 11 in Eastern Rhodope) to make a ‘mean’ for the region.
	Western Rhodope	26	38	36	
OBJECTIVE 2: Stakeholders integrate biodiversity into resource management and economic development policy and practice [the remaining indicators fall under this objective]					
5. Declining incidence of destructive forestry practices	illegally logged timber (m3/year)	8000	6800	<u>3167</u>	Considered a cost-effective indicator, as data provided by others (SFA) but accuracy of data is questionable.
	clear cut area (ha)	1008	700	<u>207</u>	
6. Increased level of integrating biodiversity conservation into municipality planning and resource management (as percentage of baseline)		100	130	<u>130</u>	The level of this indicator was measured through the use of questionnaire distributed among planners and the reported figure is an average value for the different groups, and to a certain extent is subjective. A good tool in measuring this indicator proved to be the project-developed scorecard system for municipality planning, which was tested on the project developed PPEs. The difficulty in applying only this tool is that many municipalities do not have the full set of legally required planning documents.
7. Area (ha) with mainstreamed biodiversity into productive sectors		0	900,500	820,856	More costly to gather than most other indicators, but delivers quantitative data (area figures), which are more robust.

- All but one of the populations of selected landscape species have increased (indicator 3). Project surveys and blood samples taken from Egyptian vultures revealed that the possible reasons for this are likely to originate from outside Bulgaria. These are thought to be mainly associated with the use of pesticides and drugs in animal husbandry in the wintering areas of the species in Africa.
- Management effectiveness of protected areas (METT score points) have increased (indicator 4), although the Project has not met its end-of-project targets. However, this is not surprising given the loss of the two Nature Parks from the Project. Although the Project ceased its work on PAs after the MTE, scores for the Western Rhodope improved by 2 points due to activities undertaken by the Project partners relating to the improved capacity of the responsible institutions, the implementation of specific activities from PA management plans (including those developed by the Project) and activities targeting critical ecosystems.

²⁷ The PMU review of the draft FE report commented that 'Good recommendation but currently there is no capacity to do this, especially within the NGO sector'

- The incidence of destructive forestry practices has declined (indicator 5). However, although the official figures show less illegal logging, how much is due to the Project and how much is due to other factors (e.g. current economic situation therefore less demand for illegal timber, and pressure on Forestry Units to show a reduction in illegal logging therefore under-reporting) is unclear. The extent of illegal logging is notoriously difficult to determine accurately. However, although official statistics need to be taken cautiously, there does appear to be a positive trend on both sub-indicators, confirmed independently by interviews by the FET with a number of foresters.
- Level of biodiversity conservation integrated into municipality planning and resource management has increased (indicator 6). These are highest for the forestry sector, while those for municipality planning have also increased by nearly 10 % between 2008-2009 due mainly to the Project's work on the integration of biodiversity concerns into municipality planning documents.
- Area with biodiversity mainstreamed into productive sectors has increased (indicator 7). The figure given (820,856ha) comprises commercial forest land granted FSC certification, as well as areas for which HCVPs have been identified and specific management regimes applied²⁸. In 2009, the project finalized its work on supporting 12 municipalities in developing their Programmes for the Protection of the Environment within which zoning and biodiversity friendly management has been introduced. This figure also includes agricultural lands under sustainable land management regimes, but does not include river zones. The end of project target level (900,500 ha) has not yet been reached but because of the Project's ongoing work on mainstreaming biodiversity into development programmes being prepared by 5 Local Leader Groups it is likely to be reached by 30 November 2009 or soon after. The MTE suggested that the target for this indicator was reduced following the loss of the Nature Parks from the Project, but the team have managed to almost reach the original target (and exceed that suggested by the MTE – 800,000ha) and are to be congratulated.

103. In the case of Objective indicator 1 '*Reduction of the levels of threat to landscape biodiversity in the Rhodope Region (as proportion of maximum score, using the "Rapid Assessment and Prioritization of Protected Areas Management" method)*', most of the targets have been exceeded or are in range and only 'agricultural lands' appears to be below the level set for the end of project. However, the Project does not have figures later than those reported during the MTE held in November 2007, and final values will only be updated by experts at a final workshop in October/November 2009 (although project observations are that changes are unlikely).

104. Similarly for Objective indicator 2 '*Land Cover (CORINE) within the Rhodope remains stable (measured by level of fragmentation, ha/km)*', target levels have been achieved, but the latest data are not recent (from May 2008). Unfortunately, the Project is unlikely to receive more recent data before the end of the Project and consequently this indicator is of limited value (although again project observations are that changes are unlikely).

4.9.2 Attainment of Outcomes

105. The delivery of Project Outcome is presented in Annex VI together with a summary table showing the level of achievements made against the indicators of success contained in the logframe.

²⁸ While providing the opportunity for higher timber prices, forest certification requires application of sustainable forestry practices which are expected to lead to conservation of important species and habitats and maintenance of ecosystem services.

4.9.3 Project impacts

106. As well as the achievement of the Project Objectives indicator targets, the FET also examined broader impacts of the Project, which are outlined below. In addition, individual opinions on what constituted a ‘success’ and ‘failure’ for the Project were collated from FE interviewees and these are given in Annex XI. Many of the successes are similar but given to capture the full range of opinions provided by interviewees. It should be noted that the list of successes is considerably longer than that of the failures.

i. Mainstreaming

107. Four State Forestry Agency Units in the Rhodope Region have become certified under the Forestry Stewardship Council (FSC) scheme by the start of the FE. Three more Forestry Units have started the process and are expected to be certified by the end of 2009. Those certified are required to undergo annual and five-yearly audits, and several others are either in the process of becoming certified or are seriously interested after learning of the experiences of their colleagues (illustrating good replication of project results and activities). Indeed, interviews with senior forestry managers in the Rhodope region by the FET revealed that the forestry administration sees certification as ‘the future’ and designation and management of HCVPs areas as a key part of that (required under the FSC certification). In addition, several foresters interviewed expressed the opinion that the certification process had given them greater interest in biodiversity (“we now see forests as more than just timber”). As an indication of this, foresters interviewed reported that they had incorporated some of the Project’s monitoring of threatened animals and plants, e.g. tortoises, within their own work plans, even though it had not been part of their remit, as they increasingly see themselves as ‘stewards of nature’. Also, they reported that previously they would remove dead free-standing trees but now see them as an important habitat for biodiversity and leave them. In addition, there have been other, less tangible but important, benefits. Interviewed foresters stated that they had increased respect for their work among other foresters and the general public and some reported increased personal ‘pride’ in their work as a result of their involvement with the Project and forest certification, which has clearly increased their levels of motivation. It appears therefore that the Project has had a significant impact on attitudes and practices within the forestry sector in the Rhodope region, with forest certification and sustainable management of forests, including conservation of forest biodiversity, becoming internalized within forestry programmes and practices, and this should be sustainable over the long-term. The Project can also be said to have pioneered forest certification in Bulgaria, as the first certification occurred through the Project in the Rhodope region and other forest owners in Bulgaria (both state and private) are interested in the model (WWF Bulgaria is currently producing a ‘best practice’ guidance document on the experience). Because of the Project’s success, the NPM is also advising on development of the National Forest Certification Standards. The adoption of the GIS system promoted by the Project also seems to be likely to be permanent as previously the SFA Units worked with paper maps or contracted an outside consultancy company which used a format which was essentially unique and incompatible with others, so the Project has given them a standard system that has been adopted globally (GIS software).

108. Municipal authorities in the Rhodope region have been provided with biodiversity data and GIS mapping information which has been used by municipal staff, trained through the Project, for the development of their environmental and spatial plans, particularly the development of Municipal Programme for Protection of the Environment (MPPE), and support for the development of LEADER strategies (municipal authorities take the lead on these). The value of these tools and the biodiversity information provided by the Project is widely recognized and was mentioned as a key success of the Project by staff from the municipal authorities interviewed by the FET. Indeed, the chief architect of Kardzhali Municipal authority attended a GIS training workshop and is reportedly convinced of the need for the municipality to have its own GIS system for their planning work (the FET could not confirm this directly, the report came from a municipal staff member who was interviewed), a sign that, again, Project knowledge, approaches and tools were being internalized within local municipal authority processes and procedures (which will also support long-term sustainability). However, the

municipal authorities interviewed by the FET still appear to have a rather limited view of the power and usefulness of these tools and the opportunities that they offer, which are currently employed more for the development of EU funding proposals than for planning and decision-making (e.g. for zoning, or EIAs). Indeed, they still appear to view the Municipal Environmental Programme and Municipal Development Plans as tools to attract EU funds rather than they need them to protect and better manage the local environment. It was also clear from interviews with some representatives of some municipal authorities that there is still a perceived incompatibility between biodiversity conservation and economic development. Although MFGs, as a model for partnerships between local stakeholders, has had mixed results, MFGs may be suitable as ‘caretakers’ for Natura 2000 sites.

109. In the area of tourism again the impact was limited. The Project helped develop an *Ethic Charter for Sustainable Development of Ecotourism in the Rhodope Region* (local participants at a workshop came up with the principals so ownership is high) which is seen as a model for other areas of Bulgaria, and the Project undertook an analysis of types of tourism certification schemes which could be suitable for the Rhodope region, but the Project was constricted in the support it could offer to ecotourism businesses due to UNDP rules and procedures.

110. The Project Document gives the RP a role in river basin management, but the Project has not been able to pursue this to the extent it has been able to with other activities. It should be mentioned that there are no specific indicators relating to rivers in the logframe, and no targets are given in the Tracking Tool. Early activities included surveys in high conservation value areas as a step towards PA designation, work on the EARBC, and work with NGOs and the private sector on improving management and mitigating the environmental risks associated with some infrastructure in river beds, such as mini-hydropower plants and flood defenses. However, overall, the Project also had a limited impact for reasons outside the control of the Project (see section Annex VI, paragraph 20 for full explanation).

111. The Project’s linkage with and influencing of the business sector was perhaps its least successful element, although it was never intended to be a major focus group (although the threat analysis in the Project Document would suggest that they should have been, as the Rhodope region was, and continues to be, threatened by uncontrolled development from small-scale hydro-energy, mining and hotel interests). Attempts were made early in implementation to engage some companies that had operations in the region with a view to sponsorship and discussions on corporate and social responsibility (CSR) and to explore opportunities to mainstream environmental management into their businesses, but these meetings were not successful – the companies were simply not interested and saw no financial advantage to themselves. In the opinion of one NGO interviewed by the FET, such an approach is more likely to be successful with small or medium sized businesses in Bulgaria with strong local contacts, rather than the large corporates, and though if these are international, they are likely to have a CSR policy imposed on them by their parent company/headquarters if this is based in the developed world. In relation to this, the Project commissioned a study on the ecosystem services²⁹ provided by the Rhodope region (total economic valuation puts the contribution of the four major ecosystems in the Rhodope Region at an estimated value of 2.42 billion Bulgarian Lev per year³⁰, equivalent to around US\$ 1.8 billion/year, but this does not appear to have been used as a tool to persuade politicians, business leaders and other decision makers of the economic case for biodiversity conservation and sustainable management of natural resources. Perhaps the most significant impact of this study has been that it has introduced the terminology (“what is an ecosystem service”) although few stakeholders interviewed were either aware of the study or understood the importance of ecosystem services. According to one interviewee, local people are away of the need for clean air and water and see the forest as valuable but do not understand the word ‘biodiversity’.

²⁹ *Review of Ecosystem Services and the values they provide*. Dated February 2007, but no author given.

³⁰ Provisioning services make up about 18.4% of this. Forests provide the biggest contribution by far, 1.9 billion BGN/y, or 77.8% of the total value, due in part to the quality and quantity of the indirect ecosystem services (regulating, cultural and supporting services) provided by forests, and also because forest covers almost half (48.9%) of the Rhodope Region. Agriculture is the second largest contributor, accounting for 11.5% of the overall value (279 million BGN/y), which is mainly because of the value of the crops in this area, as well as their large land cover (29.1%).

112. The Project's mainstreaming was probably most successful with Forestry in part because it is a single organization that has a simple hierarchy/structure (less so with municipal authorities) and the senior managers saw a comparative advantage and future in forest certification for the Rhodope region. Indeed, the pilot forest certification schemes undertaken by the Project have led to the National Forest Board proposing that 30% of the state-owned forests nationally should be certified within the next five years (however, at the time of the FET it was not clear what policy the new Government would adopt on forest certification, although it was expected that this figure would be adopted, but the NPD commented that this is only likely to happen if there is a clear economic incentive). If this were to be achieved, this would mark a remarkable project success in replication. It should be noted that the SFA is expected to bring in income through timber sales, but demand for timber has been reduced due to the economic crisis so has been looking for alternative opportunities, so certification has 'come at the right time'.

113. By contrast, the Project had only a limited opportunity to influence the Municipal Development Plans many of these were developed during the early stages of implementation before the Project had collected much biodiversity data or was in a position to give significant support³¹. The next round of Municipal Development Plans will be developed in 2013 but current ones are likely to be reviewed in 2010 which offers an opportunity for Project results to be included (and would be an important task for the Rhodope Project NGO). Similarly, there were limited opportunities for engagement with the tourism sector and river management authorities.

ii. Protected areas

114. Although the two Nature Parks were not created (and the Project was essentially a mainstreaming project), the Project has had a significant impact on the development of the Natura 2000 network in the Rhodope region through the identification of potential sites, provision of biodiversity information and mapping datasets to the NGO Green Balkans, which was responsible for managing the identification of the Natura 2000 sites under the Habitats Directive. The SFA Units currently face the challenge of integrating Natura 2000 areas and requirements into their forestry plans, and the Rhodope Project NGO could certainly play a significant role in helping the Units achieve this. The MEW is currently focused on developing the Natura 2000 network and appears less interested in Project achievements related to mainstreaming.

iii. Potential impacts on livelihoods and other socio-economic issues

115. The integration of the Project objectives into local development plans (MDPs and forestry management plans, as well as certification), should also impact indirectly the local socio-economic conditions by improving the living conditions of people in rural areas. Therefore, it is expected that through better agricultural practices, the living conditions of local land users should improve over time and have a positive on the local socio-economic situation.

4.9.4 Contribution of Project to upgrading skills of national staff

116. Capacity development - measured as the acquisition of skills and knowledge for individuals, and improvements of institutional structures, mechanisms and procedures – has been significantly strengthened in the Rhodope region, and is rated as ***Highly Satisfactory***. The Project involved a large number of training workshops and seminars (greater than originally planned due to a clear need and high demand from stakeholders), mostly using experts contracted and managed by the Project, as well as significant informal mentoring and direct support to individuals and groups by the Project team

³¹ This is may also have been one of the reasons why the MFGs were not very effective at promoting the mainstreaming of biodiversity conservation into municipal plans.

themselves³². Institutions involved with the training included staff from many of the SFA Units in the region, the Regional Inspectorate of Environment and Water (RIEW) and other agencies related to MEW and MAFS, and municipal authorities, particularly staff with environment and education remits, as well as individuals and local groups such as some of the ‘chitalista’³³.

117. A total of 26 training modules were developed (see Annex X) on (among other things) GIS, biodiversity monitoring, preparation of project proposals, and agri-environmental measures, and an estimated 1,700 people attended these courses (some more than one course), which is a very substantial number considering the size and budget of the Project. GIS training was particularly highlighted to the FET as changed working practices “Now we have the skills and tools to process forest maps” (helps greatly with forest management plans and Natura 2000 sites). Although capacity was not assessed directly (no indicator in logframe), interviewees believed that their organization has a better capacity now to ensure that financial and technical resources be allocated to issues related to biodiversity conservation and sustainable management of natural resource than before the Project. Some interviewees commented that training also brought people together which was valued.

4.9.5 Project sustainability

118. The FET evaluates the likely sustainability of the Project as *Marginally Satisfactory*. Some elements of the Project are likely to have high sustainability but there is a significant issue relating to institutional sustainability.

i. Sustainability in project design

119. The original project design placed high importance on achieving sustainability of project results and outcomes, evidenced through the inclusion of a specific Outcome 7 (originally Output 8 – Secured financing for sustainability of applied conservation and cross-sectoral coordination). Two assumptions underlay the Project’s approach to securing sustainability: 1) that the project’s outputs and activities are largely (though not entirely) achievable with existing institutions, financial resources and personnel; and 2) that EU financing of sustainable development programs will be maintained and even increased in Bulgaria’s future. These seem to have been reasonable, however, the project Document lacked a detailed strategy; there is a brief section on sustainability but it focuses on institutional and financial sustainability, and human, socio-political and environmental sustainability are missing, as is a detailed presentation of options and risks.

120. The Project has produced an ‘Exit Strategy’ that functions as the ‘sustainability strategy’, which includes sections on institutional sustainability, sustainability of specific project outputs and activities (notably the MFGs, Protected Areas Management Consultative Councils, voluntary monitoring scheme, Municipal Programmes for the Protection of the Environment), transfer of project assets, project finalisation and public events, with an Action Plan for implementation of the Strategy. It was produced in February 2009. However, it lacks a proper risk analysis and needs to be updated. Also, FE interviews revealed that there is still uncertainty about the arrangement/agreements with the MAFS and MEW following the appointment of the new government over the transfer of the Project’s assets (vehicles, computers and GIS, office furniture and intellectual property rights).

121. Project sustainability was considered in some detail by the MTE, and recommendations were made particularly in terms of identifying an institutional mechanism through which the Project’s agricultural activities could be channeled for better long-term sustainability.

³²Although it is difficult to quantify the effects and importance of informal mentoring, it is clear that this time-intensive, personal approach has delivered dividends for the Project, including helping to generate the very good working relationships and reputation for support that the Project has among local stakeholders.

³³ The *Chitalishta* are a unique to Bulgaria. They are traditional, independent culture-educational units, operating at local level. Chitalishta are registered as non-governmental organizations under a specific Chitalishta Law.

ii. Institutional and human sustainability

122. One of the Project's original objectives was to create two Nature Parks and the Project Document lists the need to address the sustainability of 'institutional Nature Park management-related activities'. The Project Document states that: *'With respect to institutional sustainability of the Nature Parks, the GoB is committed to funding the operating/management costs of each nature park. Included in this project brief is a letter from the Ministry of Agriculture confirming US\$1 million in additional funds as to cover NP management costs. This kind of commitment ensures the sustainability of NP management and provides the sustainable institutional basis for supporting the long-term application of changed practices.'* The Nature Parks were not created and thus the issue of their sustainability has not been relevant.

123. In terms of other issues related to institutional sustainability, the Project has had considerable success with mainstreaming Project activities into state forestry agencies and municipal authorities (see above), both of which have strong, long-term institutional identities, which should help ensure sustainability. However, it should be noted, while the human capacity within key partner and stakeholder organizations has been significantly increased by the RP, there is still insufficient capacity within at least some of the municipal authorities to be able to fully use the tools, knowledge and training provided by the RP due to staff turnover, especially after local elections. Furthermore, this capacity will decline in the coming years unless further training and learning opportunities can be offered due to staff moving to other jobs and retirements. Unfortunately, a 'train the trainers' approach, which aimed to ensure several staff were trained in GIS and biodiversity data manipulation by those that had received training through the Project, was not successful, and unless training opportunities continue to be offered to staff over the coming years, loss of human capacity of the municipal authorities built by the Project is likely to occur.

124. In relation to the agriculture sector, there appears to be no effective institutional arrangement in place for follow-up of the Project's work. Implementation of this aspect of the Project has been weaker and success limited, in part because it has largely focused on individual private smallholders and small farmers³⁴. Also, there is a specific Government body/ies that provide advice to farmers - the National and Regional Agriculture Advisory Services (N/RAAS). However, these are under-funded and lacking in resources and, according to farmers interviewed by the FET, 'not helpful' and 'provide confusing advice'. As a result, and particularly after the MTE³⁵, the RP has taken on the role as a bridge between the target farmers and the local offices of the AAS, essentially doing much of the work of the Advisory Services, which is clearly not sustainable and was never the intention of the RP. Without further, significant support from the N/RAAS it seems unlikely that the RP's promotion of organic agriculture will be sustained, although there are other similar initiatives being proposed for the region e.g. ARC/Avalon project, and funding is certainly available for sustainable farming practices through the RDP and its agri-environment payments.

Municipal Focus Groups

125. As far as sustainability of the MFGs is concerned, the original hope was that they would be able to function independently with their own resources after the Project had been completed. However, from the start it was not expected that all the MFGs would be able to function independently after the project end. This is reflected in Indicator 8 from the logframe, where the end target is to have only 15 MGF formalized. Many of the MFGs have been transformed into NGOs, or have become, or are becoming, LEADER groups³⁶. However, those that have not, such as the MFGs in Kardzhali and Smolyan, have been heavily reliant on the RSCs, who organize the meetings and provide topics for

³⁴ The PMU commented that *'Unlike other parts of Bulgaria, farming in the Rhodope is done by small farmers due to the fact agricultural land are small and scattered.'*

³⁵ Prior to the MTE, the Project had worked with the N/RAAS but because of the existence of the UNDP/GEF Sustainable Land Management (SLM) project, which had been working closely with N/RAAS (and with which the RP had been coordinating), the RP initially did not work that closely with N/RAAS so as to avoid overlap and demand for cooperation.

³⁶ Local Action Groups (LAGs) are established as executive decision-making bodies of the EU LEADER + programme, which is part of Axis 4 of the Rural Development Programme in Bulgaria. LAGs are led by municipal authorities. They elaborate local development strategies, then apply for funding from LEADER + for their implementation.

discussion. Consequently, once the Project ends it is extremely unlikely that these MFGs will continue (some of individuals may stay in contact but not in any formal arrangement). Indeed, it has been expected that MFGs would fail without RP support and so the Project's strategy has been to provide support to those MFGs that wish to become LEADER groups with their application process. Once they become LEADER groups they can apply for funding from RDP - currently for the period up until 2013, so are likely to survive at least the next 3-4 years. However, it should be noted that the original vision of the MFGs was that they would represent a wide range of stakeholders, which is what has generally happened, but the LEADER groups are essentially municipal structures, where 51% of the membership is held by the municipal authority and 49% by other stakeholders. Consequently, they should be viewed as very different entities to the MFGs and the decision-making is held by the municipal authorities, and there is the potential for politically biased decisions to be made, which may not necessarily benefit biodiversity conservation or promote the objectives of the RP in the long-term. Given this, the FET believes that it is important that the fate, function and performance of all the MFGs is re-assessed five years after the Project ends to determine whether this innovative approach has been successful in the long-term.

Rhodope Project NGO

126. The idea of establishing an NGO – the Rhodope Project NGO - as a legal form for continuation of the UNDP/GEF/SFA “Rhodope” Project was discussed for the first time in 2006 during the IE³⁷. Following further discussions among stakeholders and analyses and consultancies conducted in the period 2006-2008, the Project made a recommendation to establish an NGO as a successor and promoter of the UNDP/GEF/SFA “Rhodope” project. The establishment of the NGO is set out in the document ‘Establishment of an NGO – a strategy for successful continuation of the UNDP/GEF/SFA “Rhodope” project’ which forms Annex IV of the Project's Exit Strategy and includes an analysis of the ‘future work’ of the NGO. The NGO was registered in Smolyan and formally established on 2 October 2008.

127. FE interviews confirmed a high continuing demand for Rhodope Project activities, and there is clearly a ‘market’ in the Rhodope region for the NGO. FE interviews also revealed that some of the SFA Units and municipal authorities have become dependent on the support from the Project, and see the RSCs as ‘extensions’ of their own organizations - one representative of a municipal authority stated that the Project had essentially fulfilled the role of their environment department, and also provided important environmental education services to local schools that the municipal authority did not have the resources to provide. Interviewees stated that the termination of the Project would negatively impact their work. For instance, some SFA Units said they were at a critical stage with either the certification process and further support with implementation of certification was essential, and they also needed support in the integration of Natura 2000 requirements into their forestry plans. Similarly representatives of some municipal authorities told the FET that they would find it difficult to complete their LEADER strategies, or update spatial data for future municipal planning without the Project. In addition, there are no other environmental NGOs covering the whole Rhodope region (some of the national NGOs e.g. Green Balkans, have projects/interest but no local office or strong record of working in the area), and there are few effective local NGOs and the more remote municipalities are not well covered.

128. The Project team will have their project contracts terminated at the end of the project (30 November 2009) following UNDP and GOB guidelines. Sustainability of human resources expected to be achieved by transformation of RP team into Rhodope Project NGO but, as pointed out above, there are no certainties. Many of the Project team (both at the PMU and especially the RSCs) expressed a strong desire to the FET to work for the new Rhodope Project NGO, if the opportunity arises. Indeed, many are willing to work unpaid for a short period to help launch the NGO and ensure

³⁷ The initial Project concept was that at the end of the Project, the two RSCs would morph into the Nature Park Directorates to strengthen them and provide additional resources and experience. However, once it was accepted that the two Nature parks would not be created during the lifetime of the Project, and so neither would the two Directorates, alternative solutions were sought.

its sustainability. This shows serious dedication to the ideas of the Rhodope Project and the value the staff place in what the Project has try to achieve. It is highly commendable. However, the FET does not consider this realistic. Interviews revealed that most staff could survive for 2-3 months before they need to find paid employment elsewhere (presumably this is based on the assumption that after that period there would be sufficient funding raised to employ them, which under the current circumstances seems unlikely to happen in the first 6 months of the life of the NGO). In addition, the team members are all highly talented, skilled, capable people, now with important experience of working with a major UN-funded project, and as such are likely to be extremely employable and could be head-hunted by prospective employers. Indeed, most of the team revealed in interviews to the FET that they had at least one offer of a job after the Project ends, and one individual had four! It seems unlikely therefore that the team will stay together unless immediate funding can be found to establish the NGO.

129. Unfortunately, the Rhodope Project NGO has no immediate funding and Project staff have not been in a position to fund-raise to any meaningful extent (limited to developing 1-2 page concept papers)³⁸ before the end of the Project on 30 November because of the potential conflict of interest it would create with their employer, UNDP (see section 4.6.1). This lack of a proper transition period has resulted in a serious risk to the new organization and it is the opinion of the FET, without immediate funding after project ends that will allow a core staff to focus on institutional development and fund-raising, the newly formed Rhodope Project NGO is very unlikely to survive, and this situation needs to be resolved very quickly.

130. Another issue if that the Exit Strategy did not consider the need to decouple the Rhodope Project from municipalities and Forestry units in the final year of the Project as the assumption was that the Project would continue as the Rhodope Project NGO. The sudden withdrawal of support when the RP ends (if no immediate funding) is likely to leave some of these groups with much reduced abilities (and confidence) to continue with certification (some SFA Units) and environmental planning in some municipalities and may impact on the delivery of LEADER strategies (some municipal authorities).

iii. Financial Sustainability

131. The long-term financial sustainability of this project appears to be generally good. The link between biodiversity conservation/sustainable use of natural resources and economic returns is more apparent within the forestry and tourism sectors as a result of Project activities, but has yet to be fully established within the agricultural sector (see above).

132. For forestry, the Project has involved both the state and, to a lesser extent, private sectors in piloting FSC forest certification schemes, which promise premium payments for certified timber. Interviews suggested that demand within Bulgaria amongst timber processors for wood from certified forests is growing, driven by the requirements of export markets, with a number of western European companies are looking to source certified wood from Bulgaria, including IKEA. The market is really to continue to grow, although the current global economic crisis may lower demand in the short-term causing these markets to grow very slowly in the next few years.

133. For agriculture, the Project has not been able to make the economic (and hence a self-sustaining) case for organic agriculture, in part because markets are not sufficiently developed or promoted in Bulgaria. In addition, start-up costs for conversion to organic agriculture are high according to interviewees and beyond the poorer farmers. One interviewee stated that premiums for organic produce were too low and he was using the profits from his conventional farming to subsidise his

³⁸ There are previous examples of establishing NGOs from donor-funded projects in Bulgaria. For instance, the former Bulgarian Swiss Biodiversity Conservation Programme transformed into the NGO 'Balkans Biodiversity Foundation' after it was completed and is an important non-governmental player in the environmental sector in Bulgaria. However, in this case there was a clear transition period with the NGO supported financially by the Swiss for the first three years (although funding was tapered off to zero by end of year three). Unfortunately, no such arrangement is available to the Rhodope Project.

‘experiment’ with organic arable farming from which he had yet to make a profit. However, the Project has also aimed to take advantage of the EU-funded agri-environment schemes that help to protect the environment and maintain traditional landscapes such as the Rhodope region³⁹. Related to this, it has given significant support, in terms of provision of information, training and seminars, and direct help with applications, to local farmers through the two RSC offices. As mentioned out above, this should be the responsibility of the Agricultural Advisory Services, which, at least in the regions visited by the FET, are not providing effective support to farmers.

134. In terms of the tourism sector, a number of financial mechanisms are available through the EU and organisations sponsoring environmental tourism through certification schemes. Again the Project has helped stakeholders to access these as well as helping to promote tourism to the Rhodopes focused on biodiversity attractions through presentations at trade fairs and other project dissemination activities (the Project made two documentaries, on Eastern and Western Rhodope, to help promote the region for tourism). However, the Project’s activities with this sector have been limited because, as an UNDP-funded project, the Project cannot financially support business enterprises.

135. In terms of financing for pure biodiversity conservation activities as a follow up from the RP, the PMU estimates that the project team has helped others raise significant amounts of funding through the EU Phare Transboundary Programme, including Euro 200,000 for a project entitled ‘Brown bear conservation in the Devin Municipality’ in Western Rhodope and Euro 200,000 for the ‘Biodiversity and wild river conservation for the Ivaylovgrad municipality’ project in Eastern Rhodope (see Annex VIII), and there are opportunities through the Bulgarian Operational Programme for the Environment. Bulgaria’s Parks Trust Fund, which was originally seen as an important financing mechanism to sustain project results if the Nature Parks had been created, was not established and is no longer relevant.

iv. Social Sustainability

136. The prospects for social sustainability of the Project’s achievements also appear to be very good. The Project’s engagement with civil society has undoubtedly been one of its major successes, a measure of which is the creation of MFGs in two-thirds of the municipalities within the Project area. Awareness of, and unusually respect for, the Project’s aims was found to be high among local stakeholder interviewees, and bodes well for long-term Project aims.

137. Although the Project’s 2009 social survey of communities and key stakeholder groups in the Rhodope region, which includes analysis of changes in awareness, had not been completed by the time of the FET, all those interviewed by the FET claimed that there was much greater awareness of biodiversity and the need for its conservation. Of course, it is, impossible to say exactly how much of this was due to the RP and how much due to other factors, such as increased attention on environmental issues in the media generally and the influence of the arrival of EU funding for nature conservation and sustainable land use practices (there are now many EU-funded projects in the Rhodope region for instance), but many interviewees (admittedly a biased sample) were clear that the RP has made a big influence.

v. Ecological Sustainability

138. Although the Project seeks to promote the conservation of globally important biodiversity and has achieved many substantial environmental gains, such as improved forest management practices, environmentally friendly agriculture in places, and contributed to new protected areas and management of existing ones, the FET has a concern over the future fate of some of the species targeted by the Project for increased conservation efforts. The Project made available very detailed

³⁹ The PMU calculated that the RP has already helped others raise an estimated Euros 1,1187,000 for projects in Western Rhodope and Euros 375,000 for projects in Eastern Rhodope, through the Rural Development Programme (see Annex VII)

data on the location of several endemic or threatened species, through one of its principal data DVDs and its website, which could become possible targets for collectors. The species of most concern are the Rhodopean Tulip⁴⁰ and Rhodopean Lily, as well as the local race of the Black Poplar. This may pose a threat to these species and could undermine the future flow of project global biodiversity benefits from the Project.

139. Construction of mini hydroelectric generating plants sited along rivers in the Rhodope Mountains has been identified as a major threat to the region's biodiversity, particularly aquatic species. The Project has had limited impact on river basin management (see section X.X) and this remains a threat to the sustainability of conservation measures promoted by the Project.

140. The Project also sought to promote nature based tourism to the region, although with limited apparent success. However, there appear to have been very few studies on the carrying capacity of the environment in the Rhodopes so promoting tourism may be premature (one small study is being undertaken through GEF SGP funding looking at disturbance from tourists to nesting birds managed by the BSPB vulture centre).

5. Summary of Evaluation Findings

141. The Final Evaluation Team evaluates the project "Conservation of Globally Significant Biodiversity in the Landscape of Bulgaria's Rhodope Mountains" overall as ***Satisfactory***. The project has been extremely well managed, implemented and delivered, with some important products (information, planning tools, training for capacity building) and significant positive impacts (changes in forestry practices, and uptake and integration of biodiversity information and planning tools by municipal authorities) in the target area. The Project has or will achieve most of its expected results, although not the creation of the two Nature Parks, but this was the result of factors beyond the control of the Project team. The failure to create the two Nature Parks largely rests with the GoB, which made a commitment to designate the two Parks as a major contribution to the Project but was unable to deliver, which appears to be due to a combination of lack of appreciation of the difficulty of setting up such large protected areas with multiple landowners and interest groups and a lack of real political will from the beginning for the creation of new protected areas perceived as outside the Natura 2000 network. The project review process was also at fault as the risk and consequences of non-establishment of the two Nature Parks were not identified or properly considered, and in that respect those involved in the review process (the GEF Secretariat, STAP Reviewer, GEF Council members and UNDP-GEF) also failed the Project. However, as pointed out by the MTE, this Project has always been a mainstreaming project and the Project, including the Government partners, has delivered very well on its mainstreaming activities, especially once it abandoned protected area activities after the MTE and many of the Project's achievements relating to mainstreaming are likely to be sustainable. A summary of the evaluation of the Project Objectives and Outcomes is given in Table 5.

⁴⁰ Given the enormous value of the sale in tulips worldwide it is quite possible that the Rhodopean Tulip is considered as a particularly likely target by plant collectors.

Table 5: Evaluation of the Expected End of Project Situation as per the Revised Logframe

Project component		Rating*					
		HS	S	MS	MU	U	HU
Objective 1	Landscape-scale conservation is effectively operationalised in Eastern and Western Rhodope						
Objective 2	Stakeholders integrate biodiversity into resource management and economic development policy and practice						
Outcome 1	Structures for effective landscape-scale conservation established and operational						
Outcome 2	Information baseline established and strengthened as a basis for adaptive management						
Outcome 3	Sustainable management regimes piloting a landscape-based approach to conservation undertaken within the Rhodope Region						
Outcome 4	Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) and lessons learned						
Outcome 5	Institutional capacity to integrate biodiversity and ecosystem management objectives into productive sector programmes strengthened						
Outcome 6	Forestry, tourism and farming practices reoriented to support conservation while improving livelihoods						
Outcome 7	Financing for sustainability of the applied conservation and cross-sector coordination secured						

* HS = Highly satisfactory; S = Satisfactory; MS = Marginally satisfactory; MU= Marginally unsatisfactory; U = Unsatisfactory; HU = Highly unsatisfactory.

142. Key Project achievements identified by the FET include:

- Improved quantity, quality and availability of biodiversity and environmental information on the Rhodope region, e.g. maps, GIS layers, species and habitat data, significant update on previous incomplete data sets (**Highly Satisfactory!**)
- Critical contribution to development of MPPEs and local LEADER strategies
- Pilot Demonstration Programme (PDP) projects which had local, practical impacts and gave opportunity for local people to realize their own ideas, which are also of high demonstration value (but needs follow-up monitoring and evaluation to assess sustainability, replication and impact, and few individuals directly benefited due to limited financing for scheme)
- Contribution to Natura 2000 process and extension of existing PAs and development of management plans for some small protected areas (largely from before the MTE)
- Raised awareness of biodiversity among public (and the Project “created baseline for future projects”) however no quantitative data on this (awaiting final survey results) although other indications corroborate this
- Positive changes in awareness and attitudes towards biodiversity and need for its conservation among some key stakeholders, especially Forestry staff (“broadened my horizons”, “forests are not only timber”, and increased pride in the job), but also municipal authorities
- Changes in forestry practices, especially among state forest services (less so with private sector), towards more biodiversity conservation and environmental protection e.g. FSC certification (also of important demonstration value), identification of HCVFs, replanting with native species, uptake of tools for integrating biodiversity conservation into forestry planning and programme (especially important being the project’s GIS and BD database), and increased monitoring of threatened species (such as tortoise) not previously carried out and built into work planning
- Similar but more limited success with municipal authorities on environmental management planning (still not fully integrated across sectors and into key decision-making)

- MFGs established as a tool for networking between key local stakeholders and Project to facilitate achievement of Project objectives, some of which have achieved potential 'sustainability' by creation of LEADER groups for period, 2007-2013
- High degree of stakeholder engagement during implementation, e.g by municipal councils, SFA Units, some schools, chitalsita
- Targeted, well-designed and highly appreciated training programmes, e.g. GIS, monitoring, preparation of project proposals, agri-environmental measures, business development, and training offered to diverse groups, which also brought people together
- Good networking and partnerships - one forester commented that Project gave him the opportunity to work with and better understand NGOs (previously he saw them as the enemy!).

143. The main project failings, highlighted by the FET are as follows:

- The absence of the two Nature Parks, compensated to some extent by contribution to Natura 2000 development and extension of existing PAs, and development of management plans for protected areas
- Unclear purpose and sustainability issues regarding some MFGs, and some not so relevant to needs of local stakeholders (MFGs were not a locally generated idea), and also problems with turnover of members in some cases
- Limited success with mainstreaming biodiversity into farming (one farmer using profit from non-organic to subsidize his organic venture), ecotourism (raised awareness and possibilities but not much beyond this) and river management (river authority not particularly interested in possible benefits from RP)
- Clear dependence by some beneficiaries on project input, likely to negatively impact after project end, especially weaker and more remote municipalities, and Exit Strategy did not consider the need to decouple RP from municipalities and forestry as assumption was the Project would continue as the Rhodope Project NGO
- Weak formal lesson learning (annual study largely waste of funds, no methodology section) with no formal mechanism for incorporation of lessons learned back into project implementation and management
- Lack of formal professional training programmes for the staff as part of job
- Sustainability of human resources expected to be achieved by transformation of RP team into Rhodope Project NGO but very uncertain whether the new NGO will be sustainable (and certainly not without immediate funding)
- Projects results can be accessed by municipalities but still not able to use and interpret them e.g. GIS data, due to insufficient trained staff, which will impact sustainability
- Inadequate risk analysis in project design with failure to consider the consequences if the Nature Parks were not created

6. Key issues and recommendations

144. This section concentrates on the key issues that in the FET's opinion that need corrective actions in order to retain and strengthen achieved results, follow up or reinforce initial benefits from the Project, or have consequences for the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of future GEF-supported projects, and sets out recommendations to address these (responsibility for action and timeframe are given in square parentheses). Given that, unusually, the FE is taking place before the official end of the Project (due to closure of the UNDP Bulgaria Programme on 31 December 2009), this section includes recommendations relevant to the remaining 2 months of the Project. It is important that the reader keeps in mind that this section is not intended to show this good Project in a poor light, rather to improve it further in the short time before the Project officially closes and especially to aid in achieving maximum sustainability of Project achievements

6.1 Recommendations relating to the Rhodope Project and UNDP Bulgaria CO

6.1.1 Improving project dissemination and potential for replication

145. The Project has produced many important documents, particularly with regard to new and valuable biodiversity data for the Rhodope region (the most complete available source and greatly expanding previous information). Much of this would be valuable to regional and international conservation organizations. However, although most of the information has been made available either through the Project's website, as hard copies or on CD/DVD, many of the reports are only available in Bulgaria and are in Bulgarian some without English summaries, and the Project's website has not been fully function since late 2008. In addition, representatives from some of the more remote municipal authorities interviews claimed they had problems accessing information from the Project and did not feel receive the same level of information support as other municipalities.

146. The FET also feels that the Project has not communicated all of its many achievements as fully as it could through the reports sent to stakeholders. In part this is because M&E focuses on reporting achievement of targets on the indicators in the logframe, while the Project has delivered a number of qualitative, less defined benefits that are nevertheless important (see section X.X). Greater promotion of the Project's achievements and impacts would also benefit the image of the new NGO and help maintain key relationships developed by the Project (so aid sustainability).

Recommendations

- Prepare an English summary for all major reports, documents and publications currently in Bulgarian, and Bulgarian summary for those currently only available on English, and make sure all publications have a date on them, an authorship is clearly indicated [PMU, October-November 2009]
- Send a set of all biodiversity and GIS data (on DVD) to major international biodiversity conservation centres such as the UNEP-World Conservation Monitoring Centre (UNEP-WCMC), Cambridge, UK (they host some of the world's most important database on protected areas and threatened species), IUCN (regional office in Serbia and international headquarters in Switzerland), WWF-International (Switzerland) and Conservation International (Washington USA) [PMU, October-November 2009]
- Re-launch website and promote it internationally among target groups⁴¹ and ensure that all project information is available for download by end of Project (apart from sensitive data on threatened species – see below) [PMU; October-November 2009]

⁴¹ One way this could be achieved is by producing a postcard (with attractive picture of Rhodope region) with the address of the website on, for distribution to key local, national, regional and international bodies. A similar approach was adopted by BirdLife International to advertise their World Bird Database and found to be effective.

- Consult with the more remote municipalities to see if there are ways of increasing the availability of information (a direct request from Rudozem MFG) [RSC; October-November 2009]
- Extract results from ecosystem services survey and publicise more widely among politicians and local decision-makers, including list of ecosystem services provided by natural environments in Rhodope region and rough cost-benefit analysis of their conservation and/or loss for wealth and well-being of local populations [PMU; October-November 2009]
- Capture, analyse and disseminate full range of project achievements (qualitative as well as quantitative) and best practices and present in the final Project Report [PMU, RSCs, UNDP CO; November 2009]

6.1.2 Increasing awareness of globally important biodiversity and recognition of GEF funding

147. Interviews by the FET revealed that the degree of awareness of the importance of the Rhodope region for the conservation of globally important biodiversity (the reason for GEF involvement), or of the linkage between Project activities and achievement of global biodiversity benefits, was relatively low among local stakeholders, issues which had been highlighted by the MTE. The Management Response to the MTE (last updated 15 February 2008) stated that a *‘strategic concept as to how best to ensure a clear link between project activities and the global biodiversity issue’* would be developed⁴². The status of this is not clear (*‘partially completed April 2009’*), and the FET had a concern during an interview with one of the RSC managers when she stated that her priority was ‘helping local communities’ (rather than benefiting global biodiversity). Generally project activities have been promoted as delivering general conservation or social development gains rather stressing the globally important component. This is particularly the case with the Pilot Demonstration Programme projects, almost all of which were focused on alternative livelihood or social development issues, e.g. ecotourism, organic farming, where the emphasis seemed to be on bringing benefits to the stakeholders *per se*, rather than on bringing benefits to people because that in turn brings conservation benefits, and even further to conservation benefits of globally-important species.

148. In addition, as the MTE points out, although the Project has *‘at all times stressed the fact that the project is a UNDP/GEF project and this is also listed in all publications, on the web-site and in all presentations that the project makes’* there still seems little recognition that the Project was funded by GEF among stakeholders and beneficiaries, and even less understanding of what GEF is and what it’s aims are. GEF projects are different in that the international community is funding the incremental costs associated with the extra efforts needed to manage and conserve globally-important biodiversity, but the FET found no evidence that this was widely appreciated.

Recommendations

- Assess the level of awareness among stakeholders and among the general public on the importance of the Rhodope region for the conservation of globally important biodiversity, and the linkage between Project activities and achievement of global biodiversity benefits, and the awareness on the aims of GEF and its role in the Project [PMU, ‘social survey’ consultants; November 2009]
- Assess whether the level of coverage by the media (indicators could include the number of newspaper articles, TV programmes) on biodiversity of the Rhodope region and its importance has increased in the last 5.5 years [PMU, ‘social survey’ consultants; November 2009]⁴³

⁴² Additionally, a comment on the MTE stated that *‘now is the time to place full emphasis on the global biodiversity dimension’*.

⁴³ The two assessments suggested in this and the last recommendation could possibly be done by the same consultants who are currently undertaken the ‘social attitudes and awareness’ surveys as an addition to their contracts.

- Present a clear analysis in the Final Project Briefing on the benefits of the Project to globally important biodiversity and how the Project activities have sought to achieve this [PMU, RSCs; November 2009]

6.1.3 Learning lessons

149. Although the Project team did discuss their experiences at annual project retreats and the monthly senior management meetings were an opportunity to talk over problems and find potential solutions, formal lesson learning undertaken by the Rhodope Project was not considered very effective by the FET. The annual ‘lessons learned’ study is considered weak – the three studies (2005, 2006 and 2008) reviewed by the FET had no methodology section, didn’t involve staff at the RSCs in any meaningful way (they were not visited or interviewed face-to-face) and there was no formal mechanism for incorporation of lessons learned back into project implementation and management by the Project team. Also, according to the NPM, there has never been any significant feedback to these reports from any of the Project partners or stakeholders.

150. In addition, given that the Project has undertaken a large amount of training, and this is often a significant feature in GEF projects, it would also be useful if the team undertook a review of the success of these courses and seminars.

Recommendations

- Undertake a specific lessons learned exercise involving the whole Project team with input from key stakeholders as part of planned Final Project Retreat to capture what has been learned about implementing a large complex multi-stakeholder project⁴⁴ [PMU, RSCs, UNDP CO, stakeholders, November 2009]
- Carry out a review to identify successes and failures and lessons learned from the Project’s training courses [PMU, RSCs, consultants, participants of training workshops; October-November 2009]

6.1.4 Improving assessment of Project impacts and potential for replication

151. The Project has achieved some important impacts within the lifetime of the Project (summarized in section 5). However, it is difficult to evaluate the (existing or potential) impacts of some Project activities as they have not been monitored since completion, some Project activities have only been delivered in the last two years, and some are likely to only have mid- or long-term impacts. One area where the FET feels that the Project needs to undertake a specific impact assessment is the PDP, which has not been assessed since the scheme came to an end in March 2008 and it was unclear from interviews with recipients of the PDP grants whether the benefits will continue or to what extent there has been replication of these demonstration projects. For instance, infrastructure funded through the PDP, e.g. information boards or construction of ‘ecotrails’, is supposed to be maintained by the recipients, but it will be important to know whether this has been done and these structures are still in existence in 3-4 years (if not, the investment can be said to have had only temporary benefit). In addition, in the FET’s view there are concerns whether integration of biodiversity conservation into municipalities is permanent and has spread to general practice of staff, as interviews revealed that biodiversity information and GIS training provided by the Project is seen more as a tool for supporting fund-raising than land-use planning, and there is a significant rate of turnover of trained staff in municipal authorities. Also, despite their value as networks, it is not clear what direct contribution MFGs have made to achieving global biodiversity benefits (it is not recorded or analysed in project reports).

⁴⁴ Such an exercise would also help increase the effectiveness of Rhodope Project NGO if Project staff become staff, and therefore help promote institutional sustainability of the Project.

Recommendations

- Undertake PDP evaluation (and lessons learned) follow-up before end of Project to assess impact, replication value and sustainability of individual projects funded by the RP [RSCs; October-November 2009]
- Assess the impact, experiences and lessons learned from the MFG initiative (what worked, what didn't and why) and their contribution to achieving globally important biodiversity benefits [PMU, RSCs; November 2009]
- Undertake post-Project follow-up in 3-4 years time to assess mid- and long-term Project impacts including whether integration of biodiversity of conservation into municipalities is permanent and the success and impact of forest certification in the region and the replication of agricultural schemes/practices promoted by the RP [UNDP, UNDP-GEF; during 2012]

6.1.5. Improving mainstreaming of Project results into agriculture sector

152. Although the Project has had some success with mainstreaming, especially within the forestry sector, it has still not made a major impact within the agricultural sector. Some interviewees highlighted that communication with agricultural sector authorities was not considered very successful (surprising since Project was sited within the MAF) and agricultural sector considered less 'accessible' than forestry'. The RP has to some extent managed to integrate project philosophy and priorities into the RDP and NAEP (project staff participated in the working groups developing the RDP and NAEP) but may be worth examining whether any additional measures are needed before the Project closes. Unfortunately, any amendments to the RDP and NAEP are unlikely, as the mid-term phase of the 2007-2013 planning period for the RDP and NAEP has past. However, in the short time remaining, the Project should examine whether there are still other routes to better integrate relevant Project's results and experiences into agriculture sector planning and processes to promote biodiversity conservation, which could be included as part of the Final Project brief. One area that perhaps needs some detail thinking is how to better promote environmentally friendly agriculture for the Rhodope region given the constraints of the Agricultural Advisory Services (this would also be useful for the new NGO as this is an area it is expected to operate).

Recommendations

- Prepare 2-3 page strategy paper detailing how to more effectively integrate Project priorities and results into the agriculture sector, followed by meetings with relevant government agencies (national, district and local) to explore how to get the strategy paper recommendations adopted to promote more sustainable agriculture across the Rhodope region following end of Project [PMU, RSC, UNDP CO; October-November 2009]

6.1.6 Improving sustainability and replication

i. Ensuring free, long-term access to Project information

153. According to the Project's Exit Strategy, there is a proposal to host the Project's data on the SFA website after the Project ends. However, the FE believes that there should be several channels for dissemination of project information after the Project ends. Apart from providing a backup in case the SFA website suffers a similar fate as that of the Project's server and website in December 2008, access to information should not be dependent only on the government.

Recommendations

- Ensure several channels for dissemination of project information after end of project, including a free or pre-paid for five years hosted website, in addition to SFA website [PMU, November 2009]

ii. Reducing potential future threats to Project target species

154. As part of its biodiversity survey work, the Project collected information on several important endemic and threatened species and subspecies of plants and animals. Unfortunately, several of these species, notably the Rhodopean Tulip, Rhodopean Lily and Black Poplar are likely to be of interest to plant collectors for their horticultural value and details of their locations has been made available through project documents which could enable collectors to locate them. The Project needs to restrict public access to the detailed information, which should only be held by the Project (until it ends) and the relevant environmental authorities (MEW and MAF, SFA, municipal authorities after that).

Recommendations

- Remove detailed location information on Rhodopean Tulip, Rhodopean Lily and Black Poplar from project databases provided for Project dissemination purposes, except for those provided to environmental agencies. [PMU, RSC, end October 2009]

iii. Managing expectations and dependence in the Rhodope region

155. It was clear from interviews that many of the stakeholder and beneficiary groups in the Rhodope region have not been fully apprised of the situation regarding the closure of the Project. Although many had been told directly by RSC staff, or heard indirectly, that the Project was due to close on 30 November 2009, most had little more information than that. Most seemed to expect that the Project would continue in some fashion and some were aware of the new Rhodope Project NGO and its suggested role. However, virtually none of them appeared to be aware that there were no funds to continue beyond 30 November and that the NGO wasn't simply going to continue as of 1 December. The issue here is that the Project has built exemplary relationships with local groups in the Rhodope region, and the FET believes that in order not to damage these, it is important that these groups are informed of the real situation – that the NGO has no immediate funding and, despite the keen interest of the Project team, that it is going to take time to establish a functioning properly resourced NGO (so probably won't be able to provide support for some time until sufficiently funded), and there is no guarantee that it will succeed (see section X.X). This is judged particularly important as it was clear from the interviews that several of the beneficiary groups have become dependent (to varying extents) on the support provided by the RP, and there are high expectations that this support will continue. These expectations need to be managed.

Recommendations

- Update stakeholders in Rhodope region on situation at end of project (through targeted meetings including the General Stakeholders Meeting in early November 2009⁴⁵, and a project brief), including likely delays/risks related to Rhodope Project NGO to manage stakeholder and beneficiary expectations on the future of the RP and the Rhodope Project NGO [RSCs with PMU; October - November 2009]

iv. Transfer of project assets

156. The Project's Exit Strategy of February 2009 sets out the plan for disposal of the project's assets at the end of the Project, most of which were to be (at least initially) be passed to the State Forestry Agency, under a Memorandum of Agreement to be developed in October or November 2009.

⁴⁵ This would also help achieve better stakeholder consensus/ownership on future priorities that would be the focus for the new NGO and offer an opportunity to discuss potential opportunities for support (financial and other wise) from stakeholders. Failure to do fully inform the stakeholders and beneficiaries could risk damaging the very good relationships the Project has built with the local stakeholders (and its future clients) and by extension with the new NGO.

However, there was a change of Government in Bulgaria in July 2009 and it was not clear at the time if the FE whether the SFA would continue as an independent Agency or be incorporated back into the MAFS. An interview with the NPD revealed that the former arrangement for transfer of assets may need to be rethought. The idea floated by the NPD to the FET is that the SFA will ‘loan’ the equipment to the Rhodope Project NGO rather than give it to them in order that they continue to provide services to the SFA and that the SFA would retain some ‘control’ over the group. A similar arrangement has been proposed by the municipalities in Smolyan and Kardzhali, which have offered office space to the RSCs (fledgling NGO) after the end of the project in return for ‘services’. In the FET’s opinion this could put the new NGO in a very difficult position, each office dependent upon their benefactor and essentially a semi-autonomous ‘service’ for the SFA and two municipal authorities.

Recommendations

- Meet (as soon as possible) with the SFA to clarify and negotiate the terms of the transfer of Project assets to the Project and similarly with the Kardzhali and Smolyan municipal authorities to determine the conditions for use of their office space [PMU, UNDP CO, RSC; October 2009]

v. Update of Exit Strategy

157. The Project’s ‘Exit Strategy’, with an annex (Annex IV) titled ‘Establishment of a NGO – a strategy for successful continuation of the UNDP/GEF/SFA “Rhodope” Project’, which provides a justification for choosing the establishment of a NGO as a legal form for continuation of the Project, was approved at a PMC meeting in February 2009 (see section X.X). Whilst the Exit Strategy covers a lot of issues, it would benefit from a more detailed analysis of institutional (systems, structures, staff, expertise, etc), socio-political (including extent of, and barriers, to mainstreaming project activities into community production activities), environmental (risk from development) and individual (e.g. recipients of training in proposal development) sustainability. It should also include a detailed risk analysis (likelihood and impact of risk). It also doesn’t consider need to decouple RP from municipalities and forestry (create independence) – some have become dependent on the Project and the sustainability of some project achievements could be threatened if NGO fails. It would also benefit from a new and more detailed stakeholder analysis

Recommendations

- Update the Exit Strategy and its Annex IV to include a more detailed analysis of Project sustainability and options and risk analysis [PMU and RSCs with support from UNDP CO, October, November 2009]

vi. Improving the likelihood of initial financing for the Rhodope Project NGO

158. As noted earlier (section 4.6.1), there has been some confusion and misunderstanding over what activities the Project team, can carry out in relation to raising funds for the Rhodope Project NGO. The outcome has been that the Project does not have any funding secured for the NGO when the Project comes to an end on 30 November, and it is unlikely that any fully developed funding proposals will be ready to submit to the EU and other potential donors on 1 December 2009 (the Project team have a large number of activities to complete in October and November 2009 and it is very unlikely they have the required time to develop proposals). Given the length of time it takes to develop comprehensive proposals (depending obviously of the funding source requirements) and that most have specific submission dates it is likely to be several months (probably 6-18 months) before the NGO team will have secured significant funding. It is likely that in this period the team members who had decided to continue the Project’s work through the NGO will be forced to abandon the venture because of the need to earn a living, although if they can be kept together as a team it would add significant value to

the NGO and help ensure better sustainability. The likelihood of institutional sustainability of the Project has been damaged by this situation, and the FET considers the lack of specific funding available for start-up of NGO a critical threat to sustainability.

Recommendations

- Project team to immediately begin developing full project proposals to raise institutional development funds (either directly or through project work) for submission after the Project ends, although it is recognized that the team is likely to have very little time for this before 30 November due to heavy work load [PMU, RSC with support from UNDP CO; October-November 2009]
- Given that there will be a small amount of unused funds left at the end of the Project, arrange a 3-month no-cost project extension (December 2009 – February 2010) to allow key staff to focus on developing full project proposals ready to submit on 1 March 2010 [PMU and UNDP CO with UNDP-GEF Bratislava, and GoB Ministry of Foreign Affairs; December 2009-February 2010]

159. It is suggested that the core team members are employed under the extension to produce 1-2 generic proposals and a suite of generic project proposals that can be submitted after 1 March. The RP team should also explore partnership opportunities with regional and local authorities, NGOs and business in Rhodope area, as well as with potential Greek partners on issues cross-border relevance with regard to potential future joint projects. There is no guarantee that the NGO will receive funding for any of these but it would substantially increase the likelihood of its survival. It should be noted that the FET is recommending that the core team should not undertake any other tasks during the extension so UNDP management input would need to be minimal.

vii. Updating business plan for the Rhodope Project NGO

160. The Project produced a business plan for the Rhodope Project NGO in November 2007, but the local situation and political context have changed since then, and it needs to be updated. In addition, although the business plan sets out ideas for the future the NGO, FE interviews with the PMU and RSC staff gave the impression that there was still no clear sense of which direction the NGO should go in following the Project which probably needs further discussion and clarification. To complement this, the business plan needs a separate more strategic fund-raising document that includes an up-to-date analysis of current potential consultancy services in the Rhodope region and opportunities for funding from the business sector and international NGO community (WWF-International, IUCN, Conservation International, EuroNatur, etc) as well as the GEF SGP, with the identification of specific funding sources, and the establishment of a database of funding opportunities through EU, bilateral donors, business sector (international, national, regional and local) and international NGOs. ARC/Avalon a Netherlands-based NGO partnership is about to start a Euro 1.8 million project in the Eastern Rhodope region (they will be visiting Eastern Rhodope in October 2009) and the Project should explore possibilities for funding some of the NGO's activities through them (there seem to be many activities in common, e.g. organic farming, ecotourism). The team (with the support by UNDP) should also explore the options for funding for the new NGO from central governmental or become an implementing body of another project with external financing.

161. It should be noted that FE discussions with WWF indicated that there would be broad support from the NGO community in Bulgaria for the Rhodope Project NGO (all believed that there is a niche and that competition was unlikely to be an issue as the Rhodope Project NGO is regionally based and others have little presence in Rhodopes). It was also clear that there may be opportunities for institutional support and some cost-sharing on joint projects from some of the national NGOs.

Recommendations

- Update Rhodope Project NGO business plan to current realities, with a broader more strategic fund-raising document, with a database that includes an up-to-date analysis of current potential consultancy services in the Rhodope region, funding sources relevant for biodiversity conservation in the Rhodope Region, and an analysis of funding opportunities from the business sector and international NGO community, together with a detailed stakeholder analysis [PMU and RSCs with input from UNDP CO; October - November 2009]
- Convene meeting with potential funding sources to determine opportunities for immediate funding for the Rhodope Project NGO from 1st December 2009, including ARC/Avalon project [PMU, RSC with UNDP CO; October – November 2009]
- Meet with WWF Bulgaria, Green Balkans and Borrowed Nature to discuss possibilities of support for the Rhodope Project NGO [PMU and RSCs with support from UNDP CO; October-November 2009]

6.2 Recommendations relevant to UNDP-GEF and UNDP globally

6.2.1 Clarifying UNDP support to fledgling NGOs created as a follow-up to UNDP-GEF projects

162. The proposal to create an NGO to continue the work of the NGO was first generated in 2006 followed intensive discussions between the UNP CO and Project team in the last two years, yet the type and level of support that could be given to the NGO by UNDP during the Project lifetime appears to have been unclear (at least to the Project team), and either the UNDP CO was not aware of the restrictions and consequences of UNDP support at the in the early stages of discussion (possible) or there had been a break down of communication between the UNDP CO and the Project team over this issue (also possible but generally communication between these groups has been excellent). Given that this situation is not unique among GEF projects, UNDP probably needs to ensure other UNDP COs and UNDP-GEF projects have written guidance on this and are aware of the rules and procedures.

Recommendations

- Clarify the rules and procedures for support to NGOs both during and as a follow-up to GEF projects and ensure these are distributed to all UNDP COs and UNDP-GEF projects [UNDP HQ, UNDP COs, UNDP-GEF Project Managers, December 2009]

7. Lessons learned

7.1 Project design

- It is imperative to listen to the potential beneficiaries and end users when designing a project, not only to ensure local ownership but also to ensure that the Project is implementable. People in the Rhodope region are generally suspicious of initiatives from central agencies in Sofia and felt that the UNDP-GEF Rhodope Project had been designed by outsiders (in the FET's view, this was countered to some extent by the excellent RSCs teams who lived, and were known and respected, locally). Proper participatory project design ensures greater potential for project impact and sustainability.
- A good logframe (one objective, 3-4 outcomes and a small number of carefully chosen SMART indicators) helps keep project management focused; a bad one creates confusion and wastes valuable time and resources for little significant gain
- Five+ years should be considered as the norm for implementation of Full Sized GEF projects, as most projects take 12-24 months to really get started with delays frequent at the beginning of projects due to the need to hire and induct staff, build working partnerships, etc, and those projects with significant capacity building and/or institutional sustainability issues in particular often require more than the usual 4-year GEF project timeframe. However, impacts may still not be particularly visible even after 5+ years, especially those with a mainstreaming focus. The MTE should therefore review whether a project extension should be considered, and this should be incorporated into the TORs of MTE evaluators.
- If you inherit a project that has too many objectives, outcomes and indicators review it and reduce it to a manageable level, even if it means that you risk losing the project – don't commit the Concorde Fallacy⁴⁶. Similarly, targets on indicators should be cut if the targets were unrealistic to start with (don't assume the project design team necessarily knew what targets were feasible).
- UNDP-GEF needs to ensure that adequate advice is given on logframe design and selection of indicators with the appropriate level of detail, including a baseline and mid-term and final targets. Particular attention needs to be given to the identification of appropriate SMART indicators and how to measure them (what, when, where, and who will measure them and resources identified). It should also be noted that development of indicators in a more participatory fashion with the key stakeholders and those who are to measure them would probably have led to the choice of more efficient indicators.

7.2 Project implementation, management and adaptive management

- Good projects have good communication between participants and project staff and the staff between each other, with high face-to-face contact. It often requires significant investment in terms of time and resources (which need to be adequately budgeted for but is often minimized during project design) to maintain good communication but it pays dividends in the end.

⁴⁶ This refers to a decision taken by the British and French governments to continue to fund the joint development of the Concorde aircraft even after it became apparent that there was no longer an economic case, and that costs would never be recovered. The project was regarded privately by the British government as a "commercial disaster" which should never have been started, and was almost cancelled, but political and legal issues ultimately made it impossible for either government to pull out.

- Having a local project office with local staff is crucial if you want to win over local stakeholders – without the RSCs the Project would have been viewed as ‘outsiders’ and it would have been difficult to engage successfully with local stakeholder groups.
- Continuity of project staff between the project design phase and project implementation can substantially increase the likelihood that a project will get off to a good start. Continuity of some key staff (Carston Germer, in particular) through the PDF-B process and early implementation helped with the ‘interpretation’ of the Project Document, aided an inexperienced team in the early stages, and helped maintain close informal progress monitoring and support between UNDP Bulgaria and the PMU.
- Although it is difficult to justify the resources of a full-time International Advisor (IA) for the duration of a project, assigning one for the first 1-2 years of a GEF project or dividing his/her time between several project (same technical support), could help UNDP-GEF deliver more effective and technically competent projects.
- Taking a flexible approach to the implementation and management of a project when project activities are not clearly defined will improve the likelihood of success, and enables adaptive management responses from the project team.
- A capable, dedicated, technically knowledgeable project team with good communication and inter-personal skills is perhaps the most significant factor determining whether a project will deliver (assuming a good design)
- Close involvement of project staff with external consultants contracted to carry out project activities can reduce delays and improve quality, and can offer important learning opportunities for project staff
- Whilst annual lesson learning analysis should be part of a project’s adaptive management toolkit, it is important that there is a framework for feeding conclusions back into project implementation and management
- Find yourself good managers to run your project – they don’t need to be biologists. In fact, people with other backgrounds may be more likely to manage a project well – the key skills a good project manager needs to possess are good interpersonal communication, good organizational skills, ability to adapt to changed circumstances and creativity.

7.3 Mainstreaming

- To begin to change the attitudes of local land and natural resource users, it is most important to demonstrate what you hope to achieve, and play down theory and abstract concepts. As the saying goes in Bulgaria “Instead of telling me 100 times, show me once”. You will also get more response and respect from local people. Similarly, training courses for farmers and local stakeholders should be as practical as possible and designed with the input of the trainees themselves, and study tours for local stakeholders to see demonstrations in other areas can be a valuable (and often cost-effective) tool for increasing their awareness on best practices and for sharing experience, and changing beliefs and attitudes.
- Mainstreaming of new ideas and tools is likely to be easier to achieve within an organization where there is a clear hierarchy and discipline, and if the project can ‘capture’ the interest of the senior staff, through demonstrating the various benefits to their organization from integration of biodiversity conservation. For instance, the Project’s mainstreaming was probably most successful with the State Forestry Agency in part because it is a single

organization that has a simple hierarchy/structure (has been described as ‘running like the army’) and because the senior managers at district level saw a future (comparative advantage) in forest certification and the value of HCVPs and use of GIS systems in their work.

- To achieve changes in attitudes towards conservation of biodiversity and sustainable use of natural resources, emphasis needs to be put on highlighting the positive incentives for change, opportunities alternative livelihoods, etc, and not the negative message e.g. restrictions on activities within protected areas

7.4 Projects involving protected areas

- Don’t begin a protected area project without the protected areas already having been declared – written commitments, even from governments are no guarantee that they will be established (this should be a condition of all GEF BD1 projects). As a general point, project designers need to ensure that project deliverables should not be heavily dependent on the delivery of other products over which the project has no control.

7.5 Working with partners, stakeholders and beneficiaries

- Chose a couple of receptive municipalities first to demonstrate what can be achieved and then expand project activities to others after you’ve publicized the results and benefits – don’t try and take on too much too soon
- Some important technical staff trained by the Project were lost from municipal authorities following local elections in 2007/2008 and capacity needed to be rebuilt, and some Municipal Focus Groups lost or changed members after elections and some of the new members didn’t understand the function of MFGs. Consequently, attention needs to be paid to changes after political elections when there is a need for intensive post-election awareness-raising and promotion of the project as there are likely to be significant staff changes following changes in the political makeup of councils (this applies in many countries and needs to be built into project design).
- Volunteers can make a significant contribution to delivering project results, but they are only efficient and effective if they have received appropriate training prior to fieldwork inception, and the quality of their input is monitored

7.6 Engagement of the corporate sector

- The project had very limited dialogue with the corporate sector and changes in corporate attitudes and policy towards the environment as a result of the project were not achieved (apart from some impact with ecotourism companies). It takes time to develop trust and respect, and NGOs need to “speak the language” of business if they want to move beyond the ‘sponsorship’ stage. The corporate engagement components of the project would have benefited from the development of a specific strategic approach with better ‘branding’ of the project and the use of marketing techniques to ‘sell’ the project concepts to the corporate sector. UNDP-GEF needs to consider providing concrete guidance on how best to engage with the corporate sector on GEF projects, perhaps through a series of case studies.

7.7 Training, learning, awareness-raising and information dissemination

- It is important to understand how people learn best, and time needs to be invested early on to design effective approaches. Project designers should not assume that the usual methods employed in environmental education projects - leaflets, posters, workshops, etc - are the most appropriate and effective. The trainees themselves are often the best people to advice on this.
- Providing relevant training is important but not enough – training is more effective if offered on amore regular basis (e.g. one training day a month after initial workshop to check on what has been learned, bolster information retention and ensure training is being used).
- A well-designed website with lots of information for download is a powerful learning tool, but only if the website is operational – it is essential that there are backup opportunities available if the website goes down, especially if this is the major route for project dissemination.

In addition to these lessons learned, the FET also identified ‘strengths’ and ‘weaknesses’ of the Project (Annex VII), which can be considered as features of ‘good’ and ‘poor practice.

ANNEXES

Annex 1: Terms of Reference for Final Evaluation of Project

Terms of Reference

for

Final Evaluation of the Project

Conservation of Globally Significant Biodiversity in the Landscape of Bulgaria's Rhodope Mountains (Rhodope Project)

**Project 33627
PIMS 1966**

I. Background information on the project

I. 1. General Context

The Bulgarian Rhodope Mountains cover more than 12,000 square kilometers and some 40 municipalities fall either fully or partially within this mountain region. The Rhodope Mountains are divided into two distinct sub-regions differentiated by climatic and landscape characteristics: the Western Rhodope (WR) and the Eastern Rhodope (ER). The WR is largely forested, with over 70 % coverage of mostly coniferous species with high mountain meadows and pasture lands occupying the remaining 30 %. In contrast, only one-third of the ER is forested, primarily by deciduous forest; half of this is in plantation forestry. The remaining two thirds of the ER landscape are comprised of large and diverse grassland, farmland and steppe areas.

The total population of the region is over 500,000 people, of which between 40 to 50 % live in city or village centers. The very centralized distribution of people has resulted in that vast areas of the Rhodope Mountains have a very low level of human habitation.

Compared to the rest of Bulgaria, the Rhodope Region is experiencing high levels of unemployment as well as low levels of household income, where these two indicators have gradually improved for the last 5 years. Improved livelihoods for the general populations are still one of the most pressing issues for the regions municipality and district governments. Local authorities seek to address this by prioritizing activities related to infrastructure improvement and development, tourism (including sustainable tourism), improved agriculture, and effectuating the forestry sector, in addition to industry development.

Traditionally, there are two main sectors within the Rhodope Region, these are forestry and agriculture. Both sectors have received increased Governmental attention for the last several years particularly in connection with Bulgaria's EU membership. This has politically impacted the Rhodope Region, which is seen as both a rural and a mountainous area, both of which are primary targets for support in the EU.

On the agricultural side the Rhodope region has received attention through the EU SAPARD programme which is now being strengthened through the National Agricultural and Rural Development Plan (2007-2013).

The forestry sector is gradually reorienting itself towards a more sustainable forestry where more and more focused efforts are dedicated to environment protection and nature conservation. These areas are now firmly embedded into several strategic documents for the forestry sector which have been adopted by the Government for the last years. On-the-ground changes in forest management are also becoming visible, particularly in the forestry units where new management plans are being developed, which plans place stronger accent on biodiversity protection. Forest certification is also high into the agenda.

Aside from the two traditional sectors, eco-tourism or rather sustainable tourism is becoming more and more important. Many, if not all, municipalities see tourism as a means of addressing the dire situation that they find themselves in. As such this is a national trend as the Governmental priority sees it as the "third" tourism sector adding to the traditional "Ski and Sun" tourism.

Aside from being a rich cultural region the Rhodope Mountains are also one of the most biodiversity rich regions within Bulgaria. Not only that the mountains have more than 25 distinct natural habitats they also contain a very high level of endemism and vast numbers of species including 36 of Europe's 38 raptor species and 29 of Europe's 31 bat species. Despite this the total area under protection is less

than one quarter of the country's average. The NGO and academic community have found this to be very unsatisfactory and are proposing new protected areas in form of nature parks and protected sites. Along with this come the efforts to establish the NATURA 2000 network as per the respective requirements of the European Union.

In connection with Bulgaria's membership to the EU from January 2007, many changes are occurring within the country and that also goes to the civic society, which is being asked to become more and more involved in local decision making and planning.

I.2. Project "Conservation of Globally Significant Biodiversity in the Landscape of Bulgaria's Rhodope Mountains" (the "Rhodope Project")

The goal of the Rhodope Project is to protect globally significant biodiversity and to promote its sustainable use in the Rhodope Region. The project aims to conserve the unique natural and anthropogenic mosaic of habitats, species and land uses that form the Eastern and Western Rhodope landscapes. Activities are focused in areas with sensitive ecosystems and landscape components, such as priority conservation areas, buffer zones and corridors, as well as more general forest, pasture and agricultural lands.

The project is to achieve its goal through the attainment of two objectives: 1) Landscape-scale conservation is effectively operationalized in the Eastern and Western Rhodope; and 2) Stakeholders integrate biodiversity into resource management and economic development policy and practice.

In support of this the project has six outcomes:

- Structures for effective landscape-scale conservation established and operational
- Information baseline established and strengthened as a basis for adaptive management
- Sustainable management regimes piloting a landscape-based approach to conservation undertaken within the Rhodope Region
- Monitoring/Evaluation (M&E) and lessons learned
- Institutional capacity to integrate biodiversity and ecosystem management objectives into productive sector programmes strengthened
- Forestry, tourism and farming practices reoriented to support conservation while improving livelihoods
- Financing for sustainability of the applied conservation and cross-sector coordination secured.

The project, which is a joint initiative of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the State Forestry Agency (SFA), funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF), was launched in June 2004 and was expected to be completed by 31 May 2009. However, in early 2009 project partners agreed on 6 month extension until 31 November 2009.

So far the project has been subject to two independent evaluations – Initial (2006) and Mid-term from the end of 2007. The latter evaluated the project as *"Satisfactory – but with serious reservations over its future unless changes to its strategic direction are implemented"*. Along with this, the implementation approach and implementation of the project on the ground were evaluated as *Satisfactory*, as was the outlook for the sustainability of the project. Some of the main recommendations from the MTE included:

- *The RP should make a concerted effort to extend its successful biodiversity survey work to as many globally important species as is practical in the time remaining.*
- *The RP should educate, inform, and encourage the Municipal and District authorities to introduce site-specific conservation of regionally and locally important natural habitats within their area of jurisdiction through the careful zoning of these sites within their*

development plans thereby preventing development of such sites and any further protection or management measures as are within their legal reach.

- *The Project examines the efficacy of its current training programme with a view to moving it away from PAs and more in line with a broader mainstreaming approach, encapsulating other organisations as well as the MAF.*
- *The Rhodope Project ceases work on all forms of protected area support (except for continued monitoring work) and refocuses itself on its main priority of mainstreaming biodiversity into landscape sectors – municipal planning, forestry, and agriculture.*
- *The Project devote considerable time and resources to i) re-vitalising the MFG programme particularly to provide the weaker groups with the tools and knowledge necessary to become self-sufficient; and ii) fostering an umbrella organisation to take advantage of the joint visions and synergies of the MFGs post-Project, especially in the area of regional biodiversity planning.*

The management response to these and other recommendations will be included in the documents package to be provided to the consultant.

II. Project Final Evaluation – introduction, evaluation audience, objectives and scope, expected products

II.1. Introduction

UNDP-GEF Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) policy is available on-line at:

<http://www.undp.org/gef/05/monitoring/policies.html>

The Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) policy at the project level in UNDP-GEF has four objectives: (i) to monitor and evaluate results and impacts; (ii) to provide a basis for decision making on necessary amendments and improvements; (iii) to promote accountability for resource use; and (iv) to document, provide feedback on, and disseminate lessons learned.

In accordance with UNDP-GEF M&E policies and procedures, all full-sized projects supported by the GEF should undergo a final evaluation upon completion of implementation.

Final evaluations are intended to assess the relevance, performance and success of the project. It looks at early signs of potential impact and sustainability of results, including the contribution to capacity development and the achievement of global environmental goals. It will also identify/document lessons learned and make recommendations that might improve design and implementation of other UNDP-GEF projects.

II.2. Evaluation audience and why is the evaluation being undertaken

This Final Evaluation is initiated by the UNDP Bulgaria CO as the Implementation Agency for the Rhodope project. UNDP-GEF is primarily interested in analysis of how successful implementation of the project has been, what impacts it has generated, if the project benefits will be sustainable in the long-term and what the lessons learnt are for future interventions in the country, region and other parts of the globe where UNDP-GEF provides its assistance.

II.3. Evaluation objectives and scope

This evaluation is expected to provide professional assessment of the project implementation successfulness against the set objectives and indicators, including contribution of the project to achieving global environmental benefits. The evaluation will also collate and analyze lessons learn

and best practices obtained during the period of the project implementation that can be further taken into consideration during development and implementation of other GEF projects in Bulgaria and elsewhere in the world.

Specifically this final evaluation has the following objectives:

- (i) to analyze and evaluate effectiveness of the results and impacts that the project has been able to achieve against the objective, targets and indicators stated in the project document;
- (ii) to assess effectiveness of the work and processes undertaken by the project as well as the performance of all the partners involved in the project implementation;
- (iii) to provide feedback and recommendations for subsequent decision making and necessary steps that need to be taken by the national stakeholders in order to ensure sustainability of the project's outcomes/results;
- (iv) to reflect on how effective the use of available resource has been use; and
- (v) to document and provide feedback on lessons learned and best practices generated by the project during its implementation.

III. Products expected from the evaluation

The key product expected from this final evaluation is a comprehensive analytical report in English.

III.1. Contents

The evaluation report should, at least, include the following contents:

Executive summary

- Brief description of the project
- Context and purpose of the evaluation
- Main conclusions, recommendations and lessons learned

Introduction

- Project background
- Purpose of the evaluation
- Key issues addressed
- Methodology of the evaluation
- Structure of the evaluation

The Project and its development context

- Project start and its duration
- Problems that the project seek to address
- Goal, Objective and outcomes of the project Main stakeholders
- Results expected

Findings and conclusions

- Project formulation
- Project Implementation
- Project Results

Recommendations

Lessons learned

Annexes: TOR, itinerary, field visits, people interviewed, documents reviewed, etc.

More detailed break down of the evaluation report into sections and ratings is given in Annex 1.

III.2. Additional notes to the report

Formatting:

Times New Roman – Font 11; single spacing; paragraph numbering and table of contents (automatic); page numbers (centered); graphs and tables and photographs (where relevant) are encouraged. Length: maximum 30 pages in total excluding annexes

Timeframe of submission:

By 10 September 2009 - submission of an Interim Report presenting the main findings and recommendations of the field mission in Bulgaria;

By 18 September 2009 - submission of the first draft of the Final Evaluation Report;

By 15 October 2009 - submission and approval by UNDP of the Final Evaluation Report

The report should be submitted to UNDP Country Office Bulgaria.

The report should be circulated for comments to all key stakeholders and participants of the project including governmental agencies involved in the project implementation, project team and other partners by the UNDP country office Bulgaria

If there are discrepancies between the impressions and findings of the evaluation team and the aforementioned parties these should be explained in an annex attached to the final report.

IV. Methodology or evaluation approach

An outline of an evaluation approach is provided below however it should be made clear that the evaluation team is responsible for revising the approach as necessary. Any changes should be in-line with international criteria and professional norms and standards (as adopted by the UN Evaluation Group⁴⁷). They must be also cleared by UNDP before being applied by the evaluation team.

The evaluation must provide evidence-based information that is credible, reliable and useful. It must be easily understood by project partners and applicable to the remaining period of project duration.

The methodology to be used by the evaluation team should be presented in the report in detail. It shall include information on:

- Documentation review (desk study) - the list of documentation to be reviewed is included in Annex 2 to this Terms of Reference and these will be provided in advance by the Project Implementation Unit;
- Interviews will be held with the following organizations and individuals at minimum: UNDP Bulgaria, Rhodope Project Administration (Project Management Unit and Regional Support Centers), Project Steering Committee members, National Project Director;
- Field visits;
- Questionnaires;
- Participatory techniques and other approaches for the gathering and analysis of data.

The consultant should also provide **ratings** of Project achievements according to GEF Project Review Criteria. Aspects of the Project to be rated are

1	Implementation approach;
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⁴⁷ See <http://www.uneval.org/>

2	Country ownership/drivers
3	Outcome/Achievement of objectives (meaning the extent to which the project's environmental and development objectives were achieved).
4	Stakeholder participation/public involvement
5	Sustainability;
6	Replication approach;
7	Cost-effectiveness;
8	Monitoring and evaluation

The ratings to be used are:

HS	Highly Satisfactory
S	Satisfactory
MS	Marginally Satisfactory
MU	Marginally Unsatisfactory
U	Unsatisfactory
HU	Highly Unsatisfactory
NA	Not applicable

V. Evaluation team – qualities and requirements

A team of independent experts will conduct the evaluation. The evaluators selected should not have participated in the project preparation and/or implementation and should not have conflict of interest with project related activities.

The evaluation team will be composed of one Team Leader and one Additional Consultant. The consultants shall have prior experience in evaluating similar projects. Former cooperation with GEF is an advantage.

The selection of consultants will be aimed at maximizing the overall “team” qualities in the following areas:

- (i) Recent experience with result-based management evaluation methodologies;
- (ii) Experience applying participatory monitoring approaches;
- (iii) Experience applying SMART indicators and reconstructing or validating baseline scenarios;
- (iv) Recent knowledge of the GEF Monitoring and Evaluation Policy;
- (v) Recent knowledge of UNDP’s results-based evaluation policies and procedures
- (vi) Competence in Adaptive Management, as applied to conservation or natural resource management projects;
- (vii) Recognized expertise in the management and sustainable use of natural resources in temperate ecosystems;
- (viii) Familiarity with protected area policies and management structures in Bulgaria;
- (ix) Demonstrable analytical skills;
- (x) Work experience in relevant areas (biodiversity conservation) for at least 10 years;
- (xi) Experience with multilateral or bilateral supported conservation projects;
- (xii) Project evaluation experiences within United Nations system will be considered an asset;
- (xiii) Excellent English communication skills.

Specifically, the Team Leader will perform the following tasks:

- Lead and manage the evaluation mission;
- Design the detailed evaluation scope and methodology (including the methods for data collection and analysis);

- Assist in drafting terms of reference of the Additional Consultant(s)
- Decide the division of labor within the evaluation team;
- Conduct an analysis of the outcome, outputs and partnership strategy (as per the scope of the evaluation described above);
- Draft related parts of the evaluation report; and
- Finalize the whole evaluation report.

The Additional Consultant will provide input in reviewing all project documentation and will provide the Team Leader with a compilation of information prior to the evaluation mission. Specifically, the Additional Consultant will perform tasks with a focus on:

- Review documents;
- Prepare a list of the outputs achieved under project;
- Organize the mission programme and provide translation/interpretation when necessary;
- Participate in the design of the evaluation methodology;
- Conduct an analysis of the outcome, outputs and partnership strategy (as per the scope of the evaluation described above);
- Draft related parts of the evaluation report;
- Assist Team Leader in finalizing document through incorporating suggestions received on draft related to his/her assigned sections.

Individual consultants are invited to submit applications together with their CV for these positions. Joint proposals from two independent evaluators are welcome. Or alternatively, proposals will be accepted from recognized consulting firms to field a complete team with the required expertise within the evaluation budget.

The evaluation will be undertaken in-line with GEF principles⁴⁸:

- Independence
- Impartiality
- Transparency
- Disclosure
- Ethical
- Partnership
- Competencies and Capacities
- Credibility
- Utility

The evaluators must be independent from both the policy-making process and the delivery and management of assistance. Therefore applications will not be considered from evaluators who have had any direct involvement with the design or implementation of the project. This may apply equally to evaluators who are associated with organizations, universities or entities that are, or have been, involved in the Rhodope Project's policy-making process and/or delivery of the project. Any previous association with the project, the Project Administration, the State Forestry Agency, UNDP Bulgaria or other partners/stakeholders must be disclosed in the application. This applies equally to firms submitting proposals as it does to individual evaluators.

If selected, failure to make the above disclosures will be considered just grounds for immediate contract termination, without recompense. In such circumstances, all notes, reports and other documentation produced by the evaluator will be retained by UNDP.

If individual evaluators are selected, UNDP will appoint one Team Leader. The Team Leader will have overall responsibility for the delivery and quality of the evaluation products. Team roles and

⁴⁸ See p.16 of the GEF's Monitoring and Evaluation Policy

responsibilities will be reflected in the individual contracts. If a proposal is accepted from a consulting firm, the firm will be held responsible for the delivery and quality of the evaluation products and therefore has responsibility for team management arrangements.

VI. Implementation Arrangements

VI.1. Management arrangements

The principal responsibility for managing this evaluation lies with UNDP Bulgaria. UNDP Bulgaria will contract the evaluators and ensure the timely provision of per diems and travel arrangements within the country for the evaluation team. UNDP Bulgaria and Rhodope Project Administration will be responsible for liaising with the Evaluators team to set up stakeholder interviews, arrange field visits, coordinate with the Government etc.

Although the final report must be cleared and accepted by UNDP before being made public, the UNDP Evaluation Policy is clear the evaluation function should be structurally independent from operational management and decision-making functions in the organization. The evaluation team will be free from undue influence and has full authority to submit reports directly to appropriate levels of decision-making. UNDP management will not impose restrictions on the scope, content, comments and recommendations of evaluation reports. In the case of unresolved difference of opinions between any of the parties, UNDP may request the evaluation team to set out the differences in an annex to the final report.

VI.2. Timeframe, resources, logistical support and deadlines

Timeframe for submission of the final report:

- Documents review – by 21 August 2009
- Field mission and presentation of main findings and recommendations (Interim Report) – by 10 September 2009;
- Preparation of first draft – by 18 September 2009
- Submission of Final Evaluation report – by 15 October 2009.

The report shall be submitted to the UNDP Bulgaria office.

The activity and timeframe are broken down as follows:

Activity	Timeframe and responsible party
Desk review	5 days by the Team Leader and Additional Consultant
Field visits, interviews, questionnaires, de-briefings	10 days by the Team Leader and Additional Consultant
Preparation of first draft report	8 days by the Team Leader and Additional Consultant
Validation of preliminary findings with stakeholders through circulation of draft reports for comments, meetings and other types of feedback mechanisms	7 days Bulgarian stakeholders
Incorporation of comments from Bulgarian stakeholders	2 days by the Team Leader and Additional Consultant
Review and preparation of comments of second draft	14 days Rhodope Project, UNDP, Government Counterparts and UNDP/GEF Bratislava
Finalization of the evaluation report (incorporating comments received on first draft)	2 days by the Team Leader and Additional Consultant

Working Days:

Team Leader –27 working days

Additional Consultant – 20 working days

Annex 1. Preliminary content of the final evaluation report

1. Executive summary

- Brief description of project
- Context and purpose of the evaluation
- Main conclusions, recommendations and lessons learned

2. Introduction

- Purpose of the evaluation
- Key issues addressed
- Methodology of the evaluation
- Structure of the evaluation

3. The project(s) and its development context

- Project start and its duration
- Problems that the project seek to address
- Immediate and development objectives of the project
- Main stakeholders
- Results expected

4. Findings and Conclusions

In addition to a descriptive assessment, all **criteria marked with (R) should be rated** using the following divisions: Highly Satisfactory, Satisfactory, Marginally Satisfactory, Unsatisfactory

4.1. Project Formulation

- Conceptualization/Design (R). This should assess the approach used in design and an appreciation of the appropriateness of problem conceptualization and whether the selected intervention strategy addressed the root causes and principal threats in the project area. It should also include an assessment of the logical framework and whether the different project components and activities proposed to achieve the objective were appropriate, viable and responded to contextual institutional, legal and regulatory settings of the project. It should also assess the indicators defined for guiding implementation and measurement of achievement and whether lessons from other relevant projects (e.g., same focal area) were incorporated into project design.
- Country-ownership/Driveness. Assess the extent to which the project idea/conceptualization had its origin within national, sectoral and development plans and focuses on national environment and development interests.
- Stakeholder participation (R) Assess information dissemination, consultation, and “stakeholder” participation in design stages.
- Replication approach. Determine the ways in which lessons and experiences coming out of the project were/are to be replicated or scaled up in the design and implementation of other projects (this also related to actual practices undertaken during implementation).
- Other aspects to assess in the review of Project formulation approaches would be UNDP comparative advantage as IA for this project; the consideration of linkages between projects and other interventions within the sector and the definition of clear and appropriate management arrangements at the design stage.

4.2. Project Implementation

- Implementation Approach (R). This should include assessments of the following aspects:

- i. The use of the logical framework as a management tool during implementation and any changes made to this as a response to changing conditions and/or feedback from M and E activities if required.
 - ii. Other elements that indicate adaptive management such as comprehensive and realistic work plans routinely developed that reflect adaptive management and/or changes in management arrangements to enhance implementation.
 - iii. The project's use/establishment of electronic information technologies to support implementation, participation and monitoring, as well as other project activities.
 - iv. The general operational relationships between the institutions involved and others and how these relationships have contributed to effective implementation and achievement of project objectives.
 - v. Technical capacities associated with the project and their role in project development, management and achievements.
- Monitoring and evaluation (R). Including an assessment as to whether there has been adequate periodic oversight of activities during implementation to establish the extent to which inputs, work schedules, other required actions and outputs are proceeding according to plan; whether formal evaluations have been held and whether action has been taken on the results of this monitoring oversight and evaluation reports.
 - Stakeholder participation (R). This should include assessments of the mechanisms for information dissemination in project implementation and the extent of stakeholder participation in management, emphasizing the following:
 - i. The production and dissemination of information generated by the project.
 - ii. Local resource users and NGOs participation in project implementation and decision making and an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the approach adopted by the project in this arena.
 - iii. The establishment of partnerships and collaborative relationships developed by the project with local, national and international entities and the effects they have had on project implementation.
 - iv. Involvement of governmental institutions in project implementation, the extent of governmental support of the project.
 - Financial Planning: Including an assessment of:
 - i. The actual project cost by objectives, outputs, activities
 - ii. The cost-effectiveness of achievements
 - iii. Financial management (including disbursement issues)
 - iv. Co-financing⁴⁹
 - Sustainability. Extent to which the benefits of the project will continue, within or outside the project domain, after it has come to an end. Relevant factors include for example: development of a sustainability strategy, establishment of financial and economic instruments and mechanisms, mainstreaming project objectives into the economy or community production activities.
 - Execution and implementation modalities. This should consider the effectiveness of the UNDP counterpart and Project Co-ordination Unit participation in selection, recruitment, assignment of experts, consultants and national counterpart staff members and in the definition of tasks and responsibilities; quantity, quality and timeliness of inputs for the project with respect to execution

49 Please see guidelines at the end of Annex 1 of these TORs for reporting of co-financing

responsibilities, enactment of necessary legislation and budgetary provisions and extent to which these may have affected implementation and sustainability of the Project; quality and timeliness of inputs by UNDP and GoU and other parties responsible for providing inputs to the project, and the extent to which this may have affected the smooth implementation of the project.

4.3. Results

- Attainment of Outcomes/ Achievement of objectives (R): Including a description *and rating* of the extent to which the project's objectives (environmental and developmental) were achieved using Highly Satisfactory, Satisfactory, Marginally Satisfactory, and Unsatisfactory ratings. If the project did not establish a baseline (initial conditions), the evaluators should seek to determine it through the use of special methodologies so that achievements, results and impacts can be properly established.
- This section should also include reviews of the following:
- Sustainability: Including an appreciation of the extent to which benefits continue, within or outside the project domain after GEF assistance/external assistance in this phase has come to an end.
- Contribution to upgrading skills of the national staff

5. Recommendations

- Corrective actions that need to be undertaken in order to retain and strengthen achieved results, in design of the future GEF supported projects, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the projects
- Actions to follow up or reinforce initial benefits from the project
- Proposals for future directions underlining main objectives

6. Lessons learned

This should highlight the best and worst practices in addressing issues relating to relevance, performance and success.

7. Evaluation report Annexes

- Evaluation TORs
- Itinerary
- List of persons interviewed
- Summary of field visits
- List of documents reviewed
- Questionnaire used and summary of results
- Comments by stakeholders (only in case of discrepancies with evaluation findings and conclusions)
- others

Annex 2. List of documents to be reviewed by the Evaluators

General documentation

UNDP Handbook on Monitoring and Evaluation for Results
UNDP-GEF Risk Management Strategy resource kit

Project documentation

Original Project Document
Project Revision Documents
Annual Reports to UNDP
Project Implementation Reviews
Filled-in GEF SP1 and SP2 tracking tools for the project
Quarterly Project Reports to UNDP
Examples of Monthly Reports
Steering Committee and Project Management Committee Meeting minutes
Report from Initial and Mid-term Project Evaluations
Lessons learned documents

Annex II: List of interviewed people

Rhodope Project - Project Management Unit (PMU), Sofia

Mr. Alexander Bardarov – National Project Manager
Mr. Ivaylo Zafirov – Protected Areas and Local Community Involvement Portfolio Manager, RP
Mr. Georgi Terziyski - Landscape Planning Portfolio Manager, RP
Ms. Daniela Aneva - Senior Administrator, RP
Ms. Antoaneta Lipova - Public Relations and Information Officer, RP

Rhodope Project - Regional Support Centre (RSC), Kardzhali

Daniela Popova - Regional Project Manager, RSC-Kardzhali
Hristo Hristov - Regional Landscape Planning Specialist, RSC-Kardzhali

Rhodope Project - Regional Support Centre (RSC), Smolyan

Ema Eneva Regional - Project Manager, RSC-Smolyan
Andreana Andreeva - Regional Biodiversity Specialist, RSC-Smolyan
Maria Stoitzova - Regional Landscape Planning Specialist, RSC-Smolyan
Ivaylo Gelov - Sustainable Development Specialist, RSC-Smolyan

Non-governmental organisations

Mr. Toma Belev – Director of Vitosha NP and representative of Green Balkans Federation
Ms. Dobromira Dimova - Association of Parks in Bulgaria
Ms. Nada Tosheva – Executive director of Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds
Ms. Miroslava Dikova - Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds
Mr. Stoyan Yotov – Society Borrowed Nature
Mr. Zhivko Bogdanov - WWF
Ms. Neli Doncheva – WWF
Mr. Gerassim Gerassimov – Executive Director of REC – Bulgaria
Mr. Geko Spiridonov – Wilderness Fund NGO

State Forestry Agency (formerly at the Ministry of Agriculture and Forests / Food Supply)

Mr. Georgi Tinchev – National Project Director, State Forestry Agency

UNDP Bulgaria

Ms. Maria Zlatareva - Assistant Resident Representative
Mr. Pavel Gospodinov – Programme Analyst
Ms. Ogniana Glavoussanova - Programme Analyst

UNDP-GEF, Bratislava

Mr. Maxim Vergeichik, UNDP-GEF Regional Technical Advisor

Ministry of Environment and Water

Mr. Mihail Mihaylov – Director of the National Nature Protection Service, Ministry of Environment and Water

Regional Forestry Directorate and State Forestry Agency Unit, Kardzhali

Kiril Hristov - Deputy Director, Regional Forestry Directorate, Kardzhali
Lyubomir Djishov Director of State Forestry Unit, Kardzhali
Antoaneta Stoyanova - Senior Expert on Protected Area Conservation, Regional Forestry Directorate, Kardzhali
Fikri Ramadanov - Director of State Game Breeding Station “Zhenda”

Kardzhali Municipal Authority

Petya Koleva – member of the MFG, representative of Kardzhali Municipality – environment department

Iva Uzounova – member of the MFG, Association “Arda”

Nadejda Tzvetkova - member of the MFG, representative of Kardzhali Municipality

Municipal Focus Group - Kardzhali

Kamelia Cholakova, Agora Platform and Chitalishte ‘Obedinenie’

Mr. Pavel Petkov – Director of Regional History Museum, Kardzhali

Mr. Sebahtin Reza, former Deputy Governor, Kardzhali

Regional Forestry Board and State Forestry Unit – Ivaylovgrad

Ms. Irina Yaneva – Representative of Regional Forestry Board (based in Ivaylovgrad)

Mr. Lyubomir Janev – Director, State Forestry Unit - Ivaylovgrad

Mr. Vesselin Krastev – Deputy Director, State Forestry Unit – Ivaylovgrad

Ms. Maria Kirivanova – Head Forest Engineer

Group of farmers – Ivaylovgrad

3 farmers - Todor Mitkov, Krasimir Baturov, Miroslav Huskov and another (Lucerne) farmer, name not given.

Municipal Focus Group - Ivaylovgrad

Ms. Zlatka Shermetova – Chair of Chitalishte ‘Probuda’

Ms. Diana Petrova – Head of the Children complex

Ms. Diana Markova – journalist based in Ivaylovgrad

Ms. Diana Cucharova, Secretary of Municipality of Ivaylovgrad

Ms. Sofia Bojinova, member of Chitalishte ‘Probuda’

Municipal Focus Group - Smolyan

Mr. Lyudmil Gochev – representative of Municipality Focus Group - Smolyan and chairman of the PA Consultative Council

Mr. Zdravko Dimitrov – Director of the District Payment agency, Smolyan

Ms Mariana Nedeleva – Director Regional Agriculture Advisory Services

Mr. Emil Komitov – Representative of Municipality Focus group, member of PA consultative council

Regional Inspectorate of Environment and Water

Ekaterina Gadzheva, Head of Sector

Municipal Authority and MFG - Rudozem

Mr. Valentin Terziev – environmental expert in Rudozem Municipality

Mr. Shukri Halilov - Rudozem Municipality /representative of the local business

Ms. Malina Georgieva - Rudozem Municipality

Ms. Shinka Yankova. – Madan Municipality

Ms. Lyuba Todorova. – Madan Municipality

Regional Forestry Board – Smolyan

Mr. Asen Karabov - Director

State Forestry Agency Unit - Trigrad

Ms. Zaharina Baklareva - Director of the State Forestry Unit - Trigrad

Farmer and recipient of PDP funding from RP

Mr. Mitko Kukundjiev – farmer in the village of Yagodina

Municipal Authority and Municipal Focus Group (MFG)

Mr. Nebi Kehaja – Coordinator of the LAG, Dospat

Mr. Nikolay Velinov – Expert in Municipal administration, Dospat
Mr Biser Chaushev - Deputy Mayor of Dospat

State Forestry Agency Unit - Dospat

Mr. Vergil Baykalov – Director of State Forestry Unit “Dospat”
Mr. Georgi Serafimov – director of State Game Breeding Station “Beglika”

Annex III: Itinerary of activities of the Final Evaluation Mission, Bulgaria (August-September 2009)

Date		Activities
Sun	30 th Aug	pm: Evaluation team leader (NV) arrives in Sofia; Meeting with the National consultant (VV)
Mon	31 st Aug	am: 1. Initial team meeting and briefing with UNDP (Mr. Pavel Gospodinov) and RP manager (Mr. Alexander Bardarov); 2. Meeting with PMU staff (Mr. Alexander Bardarov, Mr. Georgi Terziyski, Mr. Ivaylo Zafirov, Ms Daniela Aneva, Ms. Antoaneta Lipova). pm: 3. Meeting with representative of the Ministry of Environment and Waters (Mr. Mihail Mihailov). 2. Meeting with representatives of the Association of Parks in Bulgaria (Ms. Dobromira Dimova) and NGO Green Balkans (Mr. Toma Belev).
Tue	1 st Sep	am: 1. Review of the project implementation at PMU office (Mr. Alexander Bardarov, Mr. Georgi Terziyski, Mr. Ivaylo Zafirov). 2. Lunch with UNDP Programme officer (Mr. Pavel Gospodinov) pm: 3. Meeting representative of NGO Borrowed Nature (Mr. Stoyan Yotov). 4. Meeting with representative of REC (Mr. Gerassim Gerassimov) 5. Meeting with representative of Wilderness Fund (Mr. Zheko Spiridonov). 6. Follow-up meetings with PMU staff.
Wed	2 nd Sep	am: 1. Review of the project outcomes attainment at PMU office (Mr. Alexander Bardarov, Mr. Georgi Terziyski, Mr. Ivaylo Zafirov). 2. Meeting with representatives of WWF (Mr. Zhivko Bogdanov, Ms. Neli Doncheva) 3. Meeting with the Project director from State Forestry Agency (Mr. Georgi Tinchev) pm: Travel to Kardzhali – Eastern Rhodope region. Meeting with Kardzhali RSC staff (Mrs. Daniela Popova, RPM; Mr. Hristo Hristov).
Thu	3 rd Sep	am: 1. Meeting with Regional Forestry Board - Kardzhali, State Forestry Unit – Kardzhali and Zhenda. 2. Meeting with the Municipality of Kardzhali pm: 3. Meetings with the MFG in Kardzhali and Chitalishte of Kardjilai. 4. Follow-up meeting with RSC Kardzhali staff.
Fri	4 th Sep	am: Travel to Ivaylovgrad; 1. Meeting with the State Forestry Unit - Ivaylovgrad. pm: 2. Meeting with MFG in Ivaylovgrad (Ms. Zlatka Shermetova, Ms. Diana Petrova, Ms. Diana Markova), 3. Meetings with farmers, supported RP with trainings and advisory support. 4. Meeting with Kardzhali RSC staff continued.
Sat	5 th Sep	am: Travel from Ivaylovgrad to Madjarovo; 1. Meeting with representative of Madjarovo Nature Protection Center (Marin Kurtev). pm: Travel to Topolovo village 2. Meeting with farmer supported by RP in converting to organic agriculture.
Sun	6 th Sep	Free day Travel to Western Rhodope area
Mon	7 th Sep	am: 1. Meeting with the staff of Smolyan RSC (Ms. Ema Eneva, Ms. Andreana Andreeva, Ms. Maria Stoitzova, Mr. Ivaylo Gelov); 2. Meetings with representatives of MFG in Smolyan, RIEW – Smolyan, Regional Agriculture Advise Services (Mr. Lyudmil Gochev, Ms. Katia Gadjeva) Mr Zdravko Dimitrov (Smolyan District payment agency), Ms Mariana Nedeleva (Regional Agriculture Advise Services) pm: Travel to Rudozem 3. Meeting with MFG – Rudozem (Mr. Valentin Terziev, Mr. Shukri Halilov, Ms. Malina Georgieva, Ms. Shinka Yankova, Ms. Lyuba Todorova), 4. Meeting with Mr. Asen Karabov - Director of the Regional Forestry Directorate - Smolyan
Tue	8 th Sep	am: Travel to Yagodina village. 1. Meeting with Director of State Forestry Unit – Trigrad (Ms. Zaharina Baklareva) 2. Meeting with farmer supported in the framework of PDP (Mr. Dimitar Kukundjiev) and visit to the model farm. pm: Travel to Dospat; 3. Meeting with deputy major and MFG in Dospat (Mr. Nebi Kehaja, Mr. Nikolay Velinov); 4. Meeting with Director of State Forestry Unit – Dospat (Mr. Vergil Baykalov) and State Game Station – Beglika (Mr. Georgi Serafimov)

Wed	9 th Sep	am: Travel to Sofia. pm: Follow-up meetings with PMU staff
Thu	10 th Sep	am: 1. Meeting with representatives of Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds (Ms. Nada Tosheva, Ms. Miroslava Dikova). pm: 2. Follow-up meetings with PMU staff and UNDP CO
Fri	11 th Sep	All day: Draft report writing
Sat	12 th Sep	All day: Draft report writing
Sun	13 th Sep	All day: Presentation development
Mon	14 th Sep	am: Final de-briefing with at UNDP and presentation of the Interim Report with the main conclusions and recommendations (Ms. Maria Zlatareva, Mr. Pavel Gospodinov, Mr. Alexander Bardarov, Mr Ventzislav Vassilev, Dr Nigel Varty) pm: NV departure

Annex IV - List of documents reviewed by the Evaluators

General documentation

UNDP Handbook on Monitoring and Evaluation for Results
UNDP-GEF Risk Management Strategy resource kit

Project documentation

Original Project Document
Project Revision Documents
Annual Reports to (2004, 2005, 2006 and 2008) UNDP
Project Implementation Reviews (2005, 2006, 2007, 2008 and draft for 2009)
Filled-in GEF SP1 and SP2 tracking tools for the project (part of some PIRs)
Quarterly Project Reports (for 2008 and 2009) to UNDP
Examples of Monthly Reports
MTE Management Response document
Project Management Committee Meeting minutes (24th February 2009 meeting)
Report from Initial and Mid-term Project Evaluations
Lessons learned documents (2005, 2006, 2008)
Rhodope Project Exit Strategy and annexes

Annex V - Members of the Rhodope Project Project Management Committee (PMC) and Project Steering Committee (PSC)

PMC

1. Mr. Georgi Tinchev – National Project Director, State Forestry Agency
2. Mr. Pavel Gospodinov – Programme Analyst, UNDP
3. Mr. Mihail Mihaylov – Director of the National Nature Protection Service, Ministry of Environment and Waters
4. Mrs. Vyara Stefanova – Head of Agri-Environment Department, Ministry of Agriculture and Food

Observer

5. Mrs. Margarita Alexandrova – Expert, Ministry of Regional Development

Secretary

6. Mr. Alexander Bardarov – Rhodope Project Manager

PSC

List of represented organizations

1. UNDP
2. State Forestry Agency at Council of Ministers
3. Minister of Agriculture and Food – rural development
4. Ministry of Environment and Waters incl. National Nature Protection Service, GEF Political Focal Point and GEF Operational Focal Point for Bulgaria (MOEW)
5. Ministry of Regional Development - Director, “Administrative and Territorial Structure and Local Self-Governance” Directorate (MRDPW)
6. River Basin Directorate - Plovdiv
7. State Tourism Agency
8. District Administrations – Smolyan, Kardzhali, Plovdiv, Pazardjik, Blagoevgrad
9. Regional Municipality Associations – Rhodope, “Trakia”, “Maritza”, Association of the South-Western Municipalities, Association of the Municipalities from the South Central Region “Hebar”
10. Mayors
11. NGOs
 - a. Green Balkans
 - b. Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds
 - c. Borrowed Nature
 - d. Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation
 - e. Wilderness Fund
 - f. Local NGOs

Secretary

12. Rhodope Project Manager

Annex VI: Summary achievement of Project Outcomes

Outcome 1: Structures for effective landscape-scale conservation established and operational

Output 1.1: Public consulted on protected areas/zones designation and project offices established

1. The project has established 27 Municipality Focus Groups (MFG) composed of representatives from various stakeholders: municipality administrations, business and NGO sectors, and local community leaders, who were interested in building consensus on the role of nature conservation in local development. The structure, organisation and operation of the MFGs were not strictly defined and differed in the different municipalities. The RP facilitated the development and operation of each in different ways but generally organised and chaired the meetings. This support was more continuous during the first three years of the MFG's establishment. Many of the MFG expressed a wish to institutionalize themselves as Local Action Groups (LAG) within the EU LEADER+ programme under the Rural Development Programme. This transformation into LAGs is an important step toward the formalization and sustainability of the structures and relationships already established in the framework of RP. It is expected that only those MFG transformed into LAG will continue their existence after the project end. Several MFGs have also become 3 NGOs.

2. The interviews with the representatives of MFG revealed a number of weaknesses. Many of those interviewed were not clear on the role of the MFG. The operation of these informal structures was largely dependant on the initiative and organizational efforts by RP team and indeed the original idea of for MFGs came from the UNDP-CO/PMU and therefore did not have local ownership. Their role and impact on the mainstreaming of biodiversity conservation into the operation of the municipal administrations is also unclear. Although the meetings and discussions were focused on environmental issues of local importance they were of most value for information exchange and networking between members than in practical solutions and activities⁵⁰. Furthermore, the links between many of the activities of the MFGs and biodiversity conservation in general, and the conservation of globally significant biodiversity in the landscape in particular is unclear. This may be partially explained by the diverse backgrounds of MFG members and the high turnover of the representatives of the local authorities after the last municipal elections.

3. The RP has carried out a number of public campaigns as part of its PR and communication strategy, e.g. a poster campaign in late 2004 and promotional materials in 2005 and 2006, and children's competitions held in early 2005. Further activities under the strategy have included the preparation of various publications: reviews, surveys, charters, wall and foldable maps, brochures, leaflets, and CDs. The PR strategy is reviewed annually and a *Promotion Strategy 2006–2009* has been developed with and action plan. The website of the RP is also a useful tool for distribution of information (at least until it suffered problems in late 2008). It is obvious that these activities have given the RP a high local profile and clearly this publicity and the open access to information have served the Project well locally, although some interviewees mentioned that information was not evenly distributed over the project area.

Output 1.2: Protected areas/zones established in Eastern and Western Rhodope

4. Following both the delay in the establishment of the two Nature Parks and the decision of the PMC in November 2005, the RP began the process of adjustment to the changed GoB approach to protected areas which had reorientated its vision toward the Natura 2000 Network, which was a GoB priority. With regard to the designation of sites under the EU Habitats Directive, the RP participated in meetings aimed at agreeing on the list of areas in the Rhodope Mountains which should be submitted

⁵⁰ Although there have been some, e.g. the Kurdjali MFG together with a chitalisthe developed a project with a local school to restore a colony of herons on an island in the river and it also promotes Earth Day.

to the EC. In 2007, the Council of Ministers approved most of these areas – taken as positive news by the RP in terms of achieving its area indicators. The RP has also supported the enlargement of 3 protected areas in the Western Rhodope and the establishment of 5 new protected areas – 2 in the WR and 3 in the ER. The FET meetings with representatives MEW confirmed that Natura 2000 remains the GoB's focus for biodiversity conservation at present and that the proposals for two very large Nature Parks in the Rhodopes are not considered relevant by the MEW. The position, expressed by a representative of the Ministry is that conservation efforts will be focused on the development of Natura 2000 network and possibly designation of some small-scale PAs as a core areas of the Natura 2000 sites in the Rhodope region.

5. Following a survey to identify the needs of existing PA and tourist information centres/outlets in June 2007 the RP prepared a support strategy to improve the effectiveness of these centres. This included the provision of printed materials as well as training for 18 staff from various centres covering public relations, marketing, and interpretation of biodiversity. 10 TICs were provided with information materials in 2008. Establishment of three other tourists information centres was also supported within the Programme for Demonstration Projects. In 2009, the project produced an information map, containing contact details of all the tourist information centers in the Rhodope Region.

Output 1.3: Capacity of relevant government institutions (RGI) to facilitate collaboration among sectoral agencies to ensure integration of biodiversity into sectoral programme implementation strengthened

6. The Project helped build the capacity of two established Protected Area Management Consultative Councils (one for Eastern Rhodope and one for the Smolyan District) by means of training in collaborative management. The Project also supported the structuring and functioning of the three public councils for management of the cross-border eco-networks between Bulgaria and Greece.

7. The RP provided important capacity building to help municipalities in their work including, support for the development of Municipal Programmes for the Protection of Environment (MPPEs) in 12 municipalities (as of September 2009). The support to the municipalities included the development of a Tool for Municipality Planning/ Scorecard to help assess the level of integration of the three Rio Conventions (UNCBD, UNCCD and UNFCCC) into municipal planning documents. The tool is innovative for Bulgaria and interviewees reported it to be useful. However, it is not clear to what extent it was used other than for the development of MPPEs.

8. The Project's many training workshops and seminars such as GIS, management of Natura 2000, FSC forestry certification, organic farming, and ecotourism development, have been a core part of the Project's capacity building effort directed at relevant local, district and national governmental institutions. In addition, the direct consultations and advice provided by the RP on the development of environmental projects and funding proposals, have also contributed to building local capacity, particularly to the municipal administrations and forestry units. The FET discovered during the interviews that some local authorities consider the RSCs as highly important service provider or even a 'free of charge' extension of their own services, providing important capacity that these institutions currently lack. Unfortunately, this success has resulted in some municipal councils becoming heavily dependent on the RP for support, which has implications for project sustainability.

Outcome 2: Information baseline established and strengthened as basis for adaptive management

9. One of the greatest successes of the RP has been the collection, analysis, and public dissemination of biodiversity baseline and monitoring data. This, particularly the provision of data through the web, was raised by numerous stakeholders as being of prime importance amongst the RP's outputs, and is especially welcomed in a region for which little information existed previously or where existing information has not been made public by the authorities.

Output 2.1: Biodiversity surveys and targeted research conducted

10. The Project contracted most of the major NGOs and academic institutions to undertake a series of biodiversity inventories, surveys on priority habitats, species and landscapes, as well as other specific assessments. The Project partners played an important role in collecting vital field information, while the RP acted as a facilitator and coordinator ensuring a holistic approach to the field-work. Biodiversity field surveys have been undertaken by the RP each year, covering an overall area of nearly 250,000 ha. Nine Forestry Units have now integrated project collected biodiversity information and HCFVs into their Forest Management Plans. The Project dataset has been further strengthened with information on 9 species of high conservation importance – Rhodope Lily *Lilium rhodopaeu*, Rhodope Tulip *Tulipa rhodopae*, Hermann's Tortoise *Eurotestudo hermanni*, Spur-thighed Tortoise *Testudo graeca*, Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*, Hazel Grouse *Bonasa Bonasia*, White-backed Woodpecker *Dendrocopus leucotus*, Three-toed Woodpecker *Picoides tridactylus*, and European Otter *Lutra lutra*. Conservation measures in support of existing species conservation plans for the Egyptian vulture and the tortoises have been implemented. Information gathered by the RP was in use by 12 municipalities for which Municipal Programmes for Protection of the Environment (MPPE) were developed. Two other municipalities also used project data for developing MPPEs without direct project support.

11. All the collected data was systematized and published in 2007 in order to facilitate its use by various stakeholders, particularly by municipalities in their development planning processes. The Project has also developed a Landscape Atlas of the Rhodopes using a landscape classification system developed by the Project to analyse satellite image data obtained from the Shuttle Raider Topography Mission of the US Geological Survey. The Landscape Atlas, together with other publications is available on DVD, and has been distributed to all key stakeholders in Rhodope area. Although feedback on its use has not been specifically monitored, some of those interviewed by the FET, especially foresters, stated it was important for their work.

Output 2.2: Monitoring protocols established and implemented

12. The RP has established a close relationship and coordination with the Executive Environmental Agency (ExEA), which has developed the National Biodiversity Monitoring System (NBMS) and responsible for its implementation. As the ExEA activities were essentially similar to the activities planned by the RP it was decided to change the RP's focus towards setting up a Voluntary Monitoring Network that would feed the NBMS with data from the Rhodope region (good adaptive management to avoid duplication of effort). The project undertook a pilot test which showed promising results, and that voluntary monitoring is indeed possible. The project developed three monitoring protocols in 2005, which were upgraded in 2006 and 2007. By June 2008, two field seasons had been completed and data was being analyzed. Furthermore, the project upgraded this initiative with three more monitoring protocols - for the European otter (2007), Rhodope lily (2008) and Griffon vulture (2008). The FET evaluates positively the approach, but has a concern over insufficient quality control of the data gathering and the lack of feedback from the state authorities to the volunteers.

13. In 2007, the RP also began collecting monitoring data using volunteers as part of the Common Bird Monitoring Scheme of the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds. Initially, a concept paper was developed by the RSCs which included a detailed plan for monitoring in the Rhodope region. Contacts with volunteers were established and training arranged using experts from BSPB. In 2008, the Common Bird Monitoring Scheme was extended (8 sites monitored in 2008 compared to 4 in 2007). Interviews by the FET suggested that both the RP and the BSPB judge this voluntary monitoring to be successful, however there are concerns over the quality of the data collected.

Output 2.3: GIS systems developed, upgraded and maintained

14. One of the most notable successes of the Project has been the development of a comprehensive geographic information system (GIS). The ArcGIS software system was selected after widespread consultation with Government agencies, NGOs and other projects to maximise compatibility. Various datasets, including ALIS cadastral information, CORINE Landcover, satellite topographical data and imagery from the US Geological Survey, infrastructure maps, and GIS and maps created within

previous projects have been included. The system incorporates a species and habitats database which is updated annually with field surveys and information provided by NGOs and other sources. The information has been summarized onto thematic maps and made available to all stakeholders. The Project has uploaded some of the GIS information onto the internet for easier and wider public access, however technical problems (server crash) have hindered the public access in 2009. ArcExplorer, the free basic viewing software, has been supplied to stakeholders (municipal authorities, forestry units, etc) via the internet or on CD together with an installation manual produced by the Project. Training on GIS has also been provided, which many interviewees stated was a key benefit from the RP for them.

Outcome 3: Sustainable management regimes piloting a landscape-based approach to conservation undertaken within the Rhodope region

Output 3.1: Priority conservation areas identified

15. An important task of the Project has been to shape a local definition of “conservation landscapes”, i.e. to make local stakeholders understand properly what they possess in terms of landscape richness. A stakeholder workshop was held early in 2005 where participants discussed this topic and agreed on a landscape classification system for the Rhodope mountains. The Project has also been synthesizing the survey information on priority habitats and land-use as part of its GIS work. Critical habitats have been identified as part of the Project’s overall work in support of the establishment of Natura 2000 (although this is now incidental since the Project has not been working on PA issues since shortly after the MTE).

16. The Project has used a bottom-up approach in identifying the priority “green” areas in the Rhodopes. Discussions within MFGs on identifying the local “green areas” took place in March 2006. In response to stakeholders’ concern that conservation of such areas is possible only through their designation as protected areas, the Project initiated support in this respect. Five new protected areas have been established (with a total area of 1810 ha) as result of the project. In addition two existing PAs have been enlarged. However, following the recommendations by the MTE, the RP reduced its efforts in PA designation and focussed on mainstreaming the protection of such areas through the municipal and district planning systems. In 2008, the Project delineated zones of conservation importance onto forestry maps to facilitate introduction of a more conservation-orientated planning and increase general awareness of biodiversity management among foresters.

Output 3.2: Simple and practical management plans and participatory management agreements for priority areas developed

17. In 2005, the Project undertook an assessment of the management practices used in existing protected areas in the Rhodope Mountains and two regional stakeholder workshops were held in November 2005 to discuss these. The RP was officially requested by MAF to develop management plans for 11 of these existing PAs, a task that was completed for all but one site in May 2007. Although efforts on the management of PAs were scaled down after the MTE, the RSCs have continued to provide advisory support to the stakeholders involved in PA management in order to ensure the sustainability of the achievements in this field.

18. As a result of two regional workshops held in 2006 and 2007, the RP has provided support for the establishment of small tourism infrastructure in selected PAs e.g. placing information boards, building shelters, and developing nature trails. This project activity was terminated following the MTE in late 2007.

Output 3.3: Conservation plans for priority endangered species and ecological processes developed

19. A review of available Species Conservation Plans (SCP) and their implementation status in the Rhodopes was completed by the RP in November 2006. A regional workshop titled: “*Conservation of tortoises and activities to prevent poaching in the Rhodope*” was held in May 2006 to initiate support for the implementation of existing SCPs, followed by work on the conservation of the Black Poplar

(*Populus nigra*), the Egyptian Vulture, and the Chamois (*Rupicapra rupicapra*). In September 2006, the Project supported the development of a Local Conservation Plan in Dospat for the European Otter, and in 2007 and 2008 on the development of SCPs for the Rhodopean Lily and the Rhodopean Tulip, and has supported implementation of existing conservation plans for tortoises and vultures (in terms of surveys, conservation measures, scientific workshops) throughout.

20. In terms of river management, the Project organised a roundtable stakeholder discussion in 2005 on the impacts of small hydropower plants on biodiversity (identified in the Project Document and reaffirmed by stakeholders interviewed by the FET as a key threat to biodiversity in the region). Based on this, the Project developed a document assessing the environmental impact of small hydropower plants in the Rhodope area, which was presented at a National River Management Workshop held in November 2007, just prior to the MTE. Since then, the RP has been invited as a member of the East Aegean River Basin Committee (EARBC) based in Plovdiv, and as a result has been able to lobby the Committee to integrate biodiversity into river management plans. To facilitate and encourage the process, the Project has provided all of its biodiversity and GIS information to the EARBC. However, although the support offered by RP to the River Basin Directorate – Plovdiv came in at the right time (the first draft of the River Basin Management Plan had to be produced in 2008 according to Water Framework Directive - WFD 2000/60/EEC), interest by the River Basin Directorate (RBD) has been limited. Instead the RBD has preferred to wait for the results of a large-scale technical assistance project, which was expected to implement all the necessary actions, required by WFD. Therefore, the FET considers the Project's efforts to mainstream biodiversity into the River basin management quite limited, but this is largely due to external factors, beyond the power of the RP team.

Outcome 4: Monitoring / Evaluation (M&E) and lessons learned

Output 4.1: Lessons learned defined

21. The Project used information from its PDF-B phase and from various relevant institutions and organisations to establish its baseline for monitoring in time for the preparation of the first PIR. This baseline has been amended by the results of a social (attitudes) survey completed in the early 2006. Progress in people's attitudes was monitored again in March 2007 through a repeat survey, and is being undertaken for a final time in September 2009 (results were not available to the FET). The RP contracted external consultants to develop "*Lessons Learned*" reports in 2005, 2007, 2008 and 2009 (the last one was not available to the FET). The FET evaluates these lessons learned reports as not particularly useful. The consultants appear to have based their reports mainly on a Project documents rather than collection of opinions from the RP staff, stakeholders and beneficiaries. Also, there is no evidence for any feedback or follow-up on the distribution and utilization of these reports, and there is no formal system for incorporation of lesson learned results back into project management and implementation.

22. The IE undertaken in 2005 and the MTE in 2007 included in-depth analyses of the implementation of the project activities, attainment of the objectives and outcomes, and external/internal factors. The IE recommended significant changes in the project's design and framework in order to overcome the risk of not achieving its main goal (mainly due to the impossibility of designating the two proposed Nature Parks). The Project's outcomes and activities were amended in order to increase the effectiveness. The MTE also provided a set of valuable recommendations for the second half of the Project. The FET considers these evaluations detailed and accurate and they have resulted in significant improvements and adaptation of the RP. The FE is also part of the Project's M&E framework and covered under this Outcome.

Output 4.2: Lessons learned shared

23. The *Lesson Learned* documents have been distributed with the aim of sharing experience with other relevant projects/initiatives, and these efforts have been complemented by the LL sections of the PIRs to share the Project's experience within the GEF network. Lessons learned were also shared internationally through the participation in a Regional UNDP/GEF Workshop in Kazakhstan in May 2007 (NPM attended), which brought together all the UNDP/GEF biodiversity project coordinators in

Europe and CIS. However, again the FET does not see much evidence that the lessons learned were used to improve the performance of the RP. Another workshop of this kind took place in June 2008 in Sofia, at which a presentation by the Project emphasized the results of the ecosystem services study and the Programme for Demonstration Projects.

Outcome 5: Institutional capacity to integrate biodiversity and ecosystem management objectives into productive sector programmes strengthened

Output 5.1: Capacity at regional and municipality levels for participatory conservation and natural resource management build

24. The Project conducted a large number of training activities targeted at different audiences and covering a wide range of topics, such as Environmental Impact Assessment, data collection and utilization, GIS, and Natura 2000 management (see Annex IX for full list). For instance, more than 30 people have been trained in the use of GIS and training on forest certification and HCVF management provided to 65 foresters in 2008-2009. Important training was also provided to foresters on ecotourism development (2009). Altogether an estimated 1,700 people received training through the Project, some attending more than one course. The Project assessed the training needs of the relevant regional structures of the MAF and agreed a training portfolio. It developed *Guidelines for Collaborative Management* and in November 2007, carried out training of more than 30 representatives, mainly of local and regional institutions. In cooperation with a PHARE-funded conservation project on brown bears, it organised a study tour for 15 stakeholders to Northern Greece, where practical experience on collaborative management was shared. The knowledge gained is already in use for the functioning of the Protected Area Management Collaborative Committee (PAMCC) established with the Project's support. The project also sought to improve biodiversity integration into the activities of the private sector through organizing and conducting study tours to raise awareness of the benefits of organic farming (20 farmers) and eco-tourism development (20 tourism entrepreneurs) in 2008. These capacity building efforts have been very important and much appreciated in the Rhodope region. However, the replication and sustainability of the results could be better ensured, e.g. through "train the trainers" approach.

Output 5.2: Conservation policies and regulation enforcement strengthened

25. Training programmes on conservation policies and enforcement of regulations were developed according to reported needs of the state institutions. General agreement on the training portfolio of the Rhodope Project was reached at a meeting with MEW, MAF and UNDP. In 2008, the RP provided training to 60 municipal planners on the use of the Project's *Tool/Scorecards for Integration of the Rio Conventions concerns into municipality planning*. Also in 2008, 45 forest guards were trained in improved biodiversity and protected areas law enforcement. Training programme on the use of EIA and other assessments in local approval processes was also prepared and implemented (4 trainings with a total of 64 representatives of municipal and district administrations and forestry structures).

Output 5.3: Technical staff trained on how to integrate biodiversity and ecosystem health considerations into productive sector programmes

26. The Project's training activities in GIS have helped established good baseline knowledge within the technical staff of municipality administrations and regional governmental structures working in the field of spatial planning. An introductory GIS training in 2006 was attended by 76 people, which were also provided with free ArcExplorer GIS software and all available GIS data for the RP. This was followed by more advanced GIS training for a smaller number of people who had expressed an interest in learning more. In addition, the Protected Areas and Planning Departments of the two Regional Forestry Boards in the Project service area were supplied with ArcMap, the basic licensed version of the ArcGIS software, and 7 people including some regional Project staff were trained in its use. By November 2007 the Project, together with the UNDP-GEF "*Rio Conventions Project*", had developed training materials on "*Information Collection and Utilisation*", with training taking place in 2008 (4 courses with a total of 59 representatives of municipal and district administrations, Forestry and MEW structures). The FE interviews revealed that the GIS training and the geographical databases provided by RP are used in the most of the beneficiary institutions that were targeted but the

institutional capacity to use GIS data is still lacking, in part due to the loss of trained staff following local elections (in one case the member of staff reportedly took the GIS data with him when he left).

Output 5.4: Implementation of existing laws to integrate BD into productive sectors strengthened

27. In 2008 - 2009 the Project implemented a training programme outlining the key concepts, interpretations, and practical implementation of Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), and the Natura 2000 Specific Environmental Assessment⁵¹. In addition to the formal training offered by the Project, many interviewees highlighted the importance of the *ad-hoc* consultations and advice provided by the two RSCs during the last 5 years to their work.

Outcome 6: Forestry, tourism and farming practices reoriented to support conservation while improving livelihoods

Output 6.1: Municipal and private sector priorities aligned with landscape conservation priorities

28. The Project has formed 27 MFGs to align municipal and private sector priorities with landscape conservation issues in the region. The first meetings held in 2005 reached community consensus on the role of nature conservation in local development, and on the necessity to integrate nature conservation concerns into economic and spatial planning at municipal and district levels. As a result, 27 *Local Visions* and two *Regional Declarations* (available only in Bulgarian) have been made, which highlight the importance of biodiversity and natural resources for the social and economic development in Rhodope region. These documents were later released publicly through brochures and posters. Although these Visions and Declarations do not have legal power, they have importance as a communication tool and their statements can be easily integrated into the municipal planning documents at strategic level. Later meetings were focused on the strategies for sustainable development of the municipalities and the funding opportunities. The EU LEADER+ approach was promoted and the formalization of MFG as LAGs is either complete or already advanced. The Project reviewed 8 municipal development strategies prepared by the UNDP *Sustainable Rural Development Project* and supported the development of the District Development Strategies of Kardzhali and Haskovo Districts. Municipality and landscape conservation priority alignment was further supported by a “*Review of the municipality planning responsibilities under Bulgarian legislation*” (published 2006, finalised 2007); and a “*Survey on the level of integration of the Rio Conventions into municipality planning and activity implementation*” and “*Tool for Municipality Planning*” (published 2007). The Project also provided valuable support to municipalities in developing their Municipality Environmental Programmes in 2008 – 2009.

29. Some progress has been achieved in the private sector with a “*Survey on the integration of biodiversity concerns into activities of private companies*” (May 2007). The Project has also provided targeted training, including ‘Business development’, focussing on nature protection and the corporate social responsibility (CSR) as defined by the UN (2008).

30. The RP’s Pilot Demonstration Programme (PDP), with a budget of around US\$ 300,000, was launched in 2007 and ended in March 2008. This innovative small grant scheme (maximum grant US\$50,000, co-financing requirement 10%) aimed to demonstrate to local stakeholders that integration of biodiversity considerations into forestry, agriculture and tourism is practically possible, while still addressing the needs expressed by stakeholders, including improving local livelihood opportunities. In all, 20 projects were financed (14 in Western Rhodope, and 6 in Eastern Rhodope – see Annex X). Thematically, the 20 projects were separated into five “strategic areas”: (1) Sustainable agriculture and tourism; (2) Sustainable agriculture; (3) Sustainable tourism; (4) Sustainable forestry; and (5) Direct conservation measures. Some of the PDP projects were viewed as interesting by the FET, e.g. a herd of Karakachan sheep (a rare mountain breed, with only a few thousand left in existence) to keep flower-rich grassland grazed (also contributes to maintaining important agro-

⁵¹ A new regulation introduced by the Biodiversity Act amendment dated 11 September 2007.

biodiversity priorities of NCSAP), and brown bear exclusion fencing of bee hives. As pilots they demonstrate excellent ideas and the PDP scheme was well-received by stakeholders (in fact many more applications than could be funded) and most interviewees evaluate it as a success, and indeed said there should have been a second round of funding (but funds were not available). However, its overall impact at regional level remains limited (US\$ 300,000 distributed over the large area of Rhodope) and there was no second round of the scheme (due to insufficient funds). In addition, as there has been no significant, independent follow-up monitoring and evaluation since the scheme ended in March 2008, its impact and replication value in the mid- to long-term remain uncertain, and no specific mechanism has been developed by the Project to promote easy replication of good PDP projects.

Output 6.2: Sustainable forestry demonstrated

31. In 2006, two forest areas totaling 22,000 ha – the Dospat State Forestry Unit and “Borika” Cooperative – were pilot certified under the FSC standards, following preliminary and main assessment studies in 2005. Concurrently, the Bulgarian Forest Certification Standard was tested and 20 experts were trained in practical implementation of forest certification assessments. Another two Forestry units “Shiroka Polyana” and “Kirkovo”, with a territory of around 43,000 ha, started the certification process in 2007 and obtained FSC certificate in 2009, bringing the total area of forests certified through the RP to 64,347 ha at the time of FE. Three more forestry units (Beglika, Ysakoruda and Ivaylovgrad) have commenced preparations for FSC certification and their final assessment is expected by the end of 2009 (not finalized before FE mission). Thus the total area of certified forests is expected to reach 140,000 ha by the end of the Project. In March 2007, the Project completed a study on available markets for FSC-certified timber and the barriers to entering these markets. FET interviews indicated the demonstration importance of these certification activities at regional/national level, and there is a strong interest in the forestry sector in other parts of Bulgaria, which still supports extensive forested areas, and the replication opportunities are obvious.

32. High conservation value forests (HCVF) have been identified in all forestry units under certification (Dospat, Kirkovo, Shiroka poliana, Beglika, Yakoruda and Ivaylovgrad) and the SFUs of Shiroka laka and Harmanly. This support by RP was a step towards integrating biodiversity into forest management planning, and complemented by a survey of biodiversity mainstreaming into forest management plans undertaken between March and September 2007. Two of the PDP projects are also focussed on practical forestry initiatives (*Identification and mapping of the High Conservation Value Forests (HCVF) on the territory of “Slaveyno” State Forestry Unit and “Smilyan” State Forestry Unit and Multifunctional use of private forests in Bulgaria and implementation of sustainable forestry practices; Pilot area: Forests of Orehovo*). Foresters interviewed by the FET all commented on the positive impact of the RP on their work in relation to improving forestry practices, and there is a clear and high demand for further consultative support. Support with implementation of forest certification (once certification has been achieved) and integrating Natura 2000 requirement into forestry management plans were said to be the main areas where the Forestry units need capacity building and external support.

Output 6.3: Sustainable agriculture demonstrated

33. The Project has developed an organic farming publications database and identified existing projects relevant to sustainable agriculture operating in the Rhodopes, and has attempted to re-vitalise traditional knowledge in organic farming within the region⁵². Seven information seminars (three in Western, four in Eastern Rhodope) were organized in 2007 and specialised on-site training in 6 municipalities and a seminar programme have been held to build the local capacity in developing agri-environmental plans and applying for funds under the National Agri-Environmental Programme (NAEP). The Project has also worked with indigenous breeds of domestic animals aimed at enriching farms and livestock animals within the Rhodope region. Two model farms are in development with

⁵² The comparative advantage of Rhodope region for organic agriculture is that it has extensive rather than intensive farming with low usage of pesticides, especially in the Eastern part. Most organic produce from the Rhodope is sold through major supermarket chains in Sofia.

sites selected and activities defined to promote the indigenous breeds' lost popularity throughout the region, including Karachachan sheep, a rare mountain breed with a population of only a few thousand animals mostly in Bulgaria and Greece. Six agriculture-related projects were funded under the PDP. Special training events on agri-environment issues were also held, the last one in February 2009, which was attended by 50 participants at four separate events. The RP's success in the agriculture sector has not been as great as for forestry, but this is perhaps not surprising given the huge area of agricultural land in the Rhodope region, the number of individual farmers and the very limited budget within the Project for these activities. This is also not helped by the difficult local context - farmers are not well informed, not organised into formal structures, and state financing and EU subsidies have not been very easy for individual farmers to access.

Output 6.4: Sustainable tourism demonstrated

34. Preparatory studies were undertaken in February 2007 to determine the Rhodope's eco-tourism development potential and identify the main barriers faced by the eco-tourism sector in the region. Also in 2007, the RP organised a workshop on wildlife observation and visitors' fee introduction, as well as two regional workshops on ecotourism development for more than 100 regional and local RP stakeholders. These stimulated the establishment of partnerships between tour operators and municipalities, and between municipalities themselves. In 2008, the Project developed an *Ecotourism Ethical Charter* through the joint efforts of the PMU, the two RSCs, and some MFGs. Under the PDP, the Project funded 11 eco-tourism related projects. In May 2008, the project initiated a study on 'green' certification schemes, which also included feasibility studies of the adoption of certification standards for three small hotels. In 2009, a study tour was completed with local tourism entrepreneurs.

Outcome 7: Financing for sustainability of the applied conservation and cross-sector coordination secured

Output 7.1: Values and benefits of biodiversity and ecosystem health quantified

35. The Project hired two national experts in October 2005 to undertake a desk survey of Bulgaria's ecosystems, the services they provide, the value of these services, and the levels of threat they face – the first of its kind in Bulgaria – and gave a valuation for the major ecosystem services in the Rhodope mountains. The results of this study were discussed at a national workshop in Sofia in May 2006. As a follow-up, another review evaluated the extent to which the GoB's incentives address the identified threats. The work was complemented by a survey on conservation financing in June 2007. In addition, the Project developed a methodology for calculating the amount of carbon stored by each predominant tree species in the Rhodope region's forests. Although the Ecosystem Services survey was innovative and valuable, its methodology has been criticised by Bulgarian academics⁵³.

Output 7.2: Plans for achieving sustainability for protected areas/zones operations and livelihood development approved

36. The Project prepared an internal review of available funding sources for nature protection activities in Bulgaria in 2004 and a search for funding sources in May 2005. This information has been updated regularly and disseminated throughout the region. To date, this has resulted in a number of successful project applications prepared by Project stakeholders (the exact number and the total amount of the funds raised is difficult to assess because of the limited feedback). This work has been coupled with the Project's training of local stakeholders in proposal development to establish a basis for the sustainable financing of nature protection activities. In September 2006, a desk review was made of the draft *Bulgarian National Operational Programmes* –on which Bulgaria's EU Structural and Cohesion Funds are based (a total of approximately EUR 7 billion until the year 2013). Information on how the LEADER+ programme can support the bottom-up approach for nature protection was also collected and distributed among the stakeholders in the period 2007 - 2009. In late 2008, the RP developed an '*Exit Strategy*', which was approved by the PMC on 24th February 2009.

⁵³ There is no agreed method for valuing ecosystem services in Bulgaria (and much debate in the scientific community worldwide), so the FET feels that this criticism is unfair. The Study is certainly a contribution to the debate and a worthy attempt in a country with very few ecosystem service studies.

This sets out the arrangements for the transfer of the project assets and information, and considers institutional sustainability, and sustainability of the project results. It should be noted that there was relatively little collaboration and discussion over the development of this document – it was kept largely within the Project team and UNDP CO and many of the local stakeholders were not involved in its development or were only asked to comment.

A summary evaluation table showing Project success in relation to logframe indicators is shown below.

This summary evaluation matrix is based on the Rhodope project logframe.. **Key:** Green = Successful achievement of the outcome: Yellow = The target values of the indicators are not reached however the progress is visible: Orange = Indicators show insufficient progress – the outcome is marginally achieve: Red = Indicators show poor or no progress – the outcome is not achieved

Project Goal: The biodiversity of the Eastern and Western Rhodope landscape is conserved

Aim	Performance Indicator [¶]	Targets			Delivery Status at Final Evaluation	Comments	Rating					
		Project start (2004)	Mid term (2007)	Project end (2009)			HS	S	MS	MU	U	HU
OBJECTIVE 1: Landscape-scale conservation is effectively operationalised in Eastern and Western Rhodope	1. Reduction of levels of threat to landscape biodiversity in the Rhodope Region (as proportion of maximum score):					The project does not avail figures later than the ones reported during the mid-term evaluation held in November 2007. There is no indication however that these have significantly changed.						
	- forests	100/288	100/288	90/288 - 100/288	109/288							
	- grass-land/open spaces	115/288	115/288	103/288 - 115/288	116/288							
	- inland waters and wetlands	72/240	72/240	64/240 - 72/240	71/240							
	- agricultural lands	146/288	146/288	131/288 - 146/288	122/288							
	2. Land Cover (CORINE) within the Rhodope remains stable (measured by level of fragmentation, ha/km)					Calculations on this indicator are based on the CORINE land cover survey, the latest of which dates back from May 2008. Therefore, the project does not avail newer data than the one reported in the previous PIR. However, project						
	- broadleaved forests	25 ⁵⁴	25	25	25							

[¶] From Section D of the Project Document

Aim	Performance Indicator [¶]	Targets			Delivery Status at Final Evaluation	Comments	Rating					
		Project start (2004)	Mid term (2007)	Project end (2009)			HS	S	MS	MU	U	HU
	- coniferous forests	29	29	29	29	observations are that changes are unlikely.						
	- mixed forests	19	19	19	20							
	- agricultural land	14	14	14	14							
	- natural grasslands	15	15	15	15							
	- pastures	15	15	15	15							
	- woodlands/shrub	14	14	14	14							
	3. Populations of selected landscape species maintained at baseline level or increased					May not react directly to project inputs since population may be affected by other biological factors						
	- Griffon vulture (# pairs)	31	31	31 - 36	45	2007 figures (PIR 2007 says that BSPB data is under question)						
	- Egyptian vulture (#pairs)	33	33	33 - 39	20	Reason for decline associated with the use of pesticides and drugs in animal husbandry in the wintering areas of the species in Africa						
	- Capercaillie, #	1482	1482	1482 - 1704	1738							
	- Brown bear, #	300	300	300 - 345	371							
	- Red deer, #	1519	1519	1519 - 1747	1667	Species managed for game and not of conservation concern						
	- Wild boar, #	4036	4036	4036 - 4641	5447							
	4. Increased management effectiveness of protected areas - METT ⁵⁵ score points					Although the project ceased its work on PAs (as recommended by the MTE), the METT scores for the Western Rhodope improved with 2						

⁵⁴ This indicator measures fragmentation of the land cover classes (habitats) and is obtained through dividing the total area (ha) by the aggregated circumference of all individual sites within classes.

⁵⁵ Management Effectiveness Tracking Tool of the World Bank/WWF Alliance

Aim	Performance Indicator [¶]	Targets			Delivery Status at Final Evaluation	Comments	Rating					
		Project start (2004)	Mid term (2007)	Project end (2009)			HS	S	MS	MU	U	HU
						more points due to activities undertaken by the project partners and implementation of specific activities from PA Management Plans						
	- Western Rhodope	26	30	38	36							
	- Eastern Rhodope	33	35	40	36							
OBJECTIVE 2: Stakeholders integrate biodiversity into resource management and economic development policy and practice	5. Declining incidence of destructive forestry practices:											
	- illegally logged timber (m3/year);	8000	8000	6800	3164							
	- clear cut area (ha)	1008	900	700	207	Although official statistics need to be taken cautiously, positive trend on both sub-indicators are visible.						
	6. Increased level of biodiversity conservation into municipality planning and resource management (as percentage of baseline)	100 ⁵⁶	115	130	130	A good tool in measuring this indicator proved to be the project developed scorecard system for municipality planning which was tested on the project developed PPEs. The difficulty in applying only this tool is that many municipalities do not have the full set of legally required planning documents.						
	7. Area (ha) with biodiversity mainstreamed into productive sectors	0	0	900,500	820,865	Includes forest land granted FSC certification, areas for which HC VF have been identified and specific management regimes are applied, 12 municipalities with						

⁵⁶ The findings for 2004 are set at 100 for easy identification of changes in percentage in positive and negative direction

Aim	Performance Indicator [¶]	Targets			Delivery Status at Final Evaluation	Comments	Rating					
		Project start (2004)	Mid term (2007)	Project end (2009)			HS	S	MS	MU	U	HU
						EPPs with which proper zoning and biodiversity friendly management has been introduced. This figure also includes agricultural lands under sustainable land management regimes.						
OUTCOME 1 Structures for effective landscape-scale conservation established and operational	8. Number of Municipality Focus Groups (MFG) formalized	8	8	15	20	8 Leader Groups supported by the UNDP Sustainable Rural Development Project as well as 12 MFGs directly supported by the Rhodope Project						
	9. Stakeholders general perception on the importance of integration of nature conservation into local development initiatives increased (as percentage of baseline):					Figures reported are from the sociological survey completed by the project in 2007. FET does not have the figures for 2009.						
	- local administrations	100 ⁵⁷	105	115	120	May 2007						
	- farmers	100	105	115	126	May 2007						
	- forest owners	100	105	115	120	May 2007						
	- tourism entrepreneurs	100	105	115	118	May 2007						
	- general public	100	105	115	131	May 2007						
OUTCOME 2 Information baseline established and strengthened	10. Number of local authorities/ institutions using RP collected data for planning:											
	- municipalities	0	2	6	14	Information in use by 12 municipalities with direct support						

⁵⁷ The 2005-2006 survey results are set at 100 for easy identification of changes in percentage in positive and negative direction.

Aim	Performance Indicator [¶]	Targets			Delivery Status at Final Evaluation	Comments	Rating					
		Project start (2004)	Mid term (2007)	Project end (2009)			HS	S	MS	MU	U	HU
as a basis for adaptive management						municipalities used project data without direct project support.						
	- forestry structures (local and regional)	0	3	8	9	9 Forestry units have integrated biodiversity information and HCFV in their Forest Management Plans						
	11. Number of monitoring protocols developed by the RP accepted for the purposes of the National Biodiversity Monitoring Scheme (NBMS)	0	3	5	7							
	12. Number of sites from which voluntary groups provide quality data to the NBMS:											
	- European Souslik	0	4	6	14							
	- Spur-thighed Tortoise	0	2	3	12							
	- Hermann's Tortoise	0	2	3	9							
	- Maidenhair Fern	0	2	2	2							
	- Common Birds	0	2 ⁵⁸	8	8							
OUTCOME 3	13. Area (ha) under conservation management supporting priority species and habitats	0	0	650,000	622,435							
Sustainable management regimes piloting landscape-based	14. Number of PA Management Collaborative Councils working under signed	0	2	4	5	Includes the two PA Collaborative Councils, established by RP in 2007 and 3 more Public Councils were established in the framework						

⁵⁸ New indicator introduced in 2007; therefore no mid-term target.

Aim	Performance Indicator [¶]	Targets			Delivery Status at Final Evaluation	Comments	Rating					
		Project start (2004)	Mid term (2007)	Project end (2009)			HS	S	MS	MU	U	HU
approach to conservation undertaken within the Rhodope Region	cooperation agreement					of the PHARE project. FET does not find their operation very effective.						
OUTCOME 4 Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) and lessons learned	15. Number of municipalities, aside those targeted by the project, adopting the conservation approaches developed by the project	0	2	5	6	Includes 3 municipalities that have established MFGs and are currently looking to get institutionalized within the EU LEADER Programme. Three other municipalities (outside the Rhodope) are adopting forest certification urged by the success of the Rhodope Project.						
	16. • Number of thematic reports published after peer review approval	0	2	5	6	Data from PIR 2009						
	• Number of Government approved thematic papers published	0	3	10	5	Data from PIR 2009						
	• Number of presentations on thematic issues at workshops outside the RP targeted municipalities	0	5	15	10	Data from PIR 2009						
OUTCOME 5 Institutional capacity to integrate	17. Level of integration of nature conservation concerns into daily activities and planning processes by staff trained					Project subjective estimate – no independent survey done.						

Aim	Performance Indicator [¶]	Targets			Delivery Status at Final Evaluation	Comments	Rating					
		Project start (2004)	Mid term (2007)	Project end (2009)			HS	S	MS	MU	U	HU
biodiversity and ecosystem management objectives into productive sector programmes strengthened	under the RP (measured on a scale 0-5):											
	- municipalities	0	2	3	3	Data from PIR 2009						
	- local and regional government structures	0	2	3	3	Data from PIR 2009						
	- stakeholders	0	2	3	3	Data from PIR 2009						
	18. Increased enforcement of nature conservation regulations (measured on a scale 0-5):					Reported increased level of enforcement is a result of the project provided trainings						
	- state forestry structures	0	1	3	3							
	- Regional Inspectorates of Environment and Waters	0	1	3	3							
	- municipalities	0	1	3	2							
OUTCOME 6 Forestry, tourism and farming practices reoriented to support conservation while improving livelihoods	19. Number of farmers adopting organic agriculture in the Rhodope Region	0	10	20	23	Includes farmers who benefited the PDP as well as farmers who started organic farming as a result of their participation in the RP provided trainings in period 2006 – 2009.						
	20 Number of farmers utilizing indigenous breeds of cattle or sheep for grazing and milk production	0	10	40	103							
	21. Area (ha) of forest plots under certification	0	22,000	40,000	64,347	The figure includes 4 forestry units certified until the FE. Three more units are expected to finalize the certification in 2009. This will increase the total figure to 140,000						

Aim	Performance Indicator [¶]	Targets			Delivery Status at Final Evaluation	Comments	Rating					
		Project start (2004)	Mid term (2007)	Project end (2009)			HS	S	MS	MU	U	HU
						ha.						
	22. Tour operators providing services in accordance with approved best practice behaviour developed by the RP	0	6	8	8	The figure includes the tour operators who have engaged in the principles of the Ethic Charter on Ecotourism Development and who participated in the tour organized by the project aimed at promoting new ecotourism products within the Rhodope.						
	23. Small hotels (B&B) operating under “green” guidelines developed by the RP. (# of B&B)	0	20	50	29	Includes small hotels that have committed to the principles of the Ecotourism Ethic Charter and which offer services promoting biodiversity conservation.						
OUTCOME 7 Financing for sustainability of the applied conservation and cross-sector coordination secured	24. Discussion document recommending (#) specific fiscal and tax incentives for: 1) farmers to adopt organic practices; 2) foresters to adopt certified practices; and 3) tourism operators to adopt low-impact practices - submitted to Government	None	in progress	finalized and submitted	Pending finalization	In late 2008 the project started compiling the document which will be ready by the revised project end date.						
	25. 25 entrepreneurs, farmers and forest owners accessing funding with RP support for business development, organic agriculture, and certified forestry (# of beneficiaries)	0	5	25	38	Includes the 38 farmers who, supported by the project, submitted successful applications under the agri-environment measure under the EU SAPARD programme						
	26. Number of cross-sector coordination structures secure	0	0	15	12	In 2007-2009 twelve supported coordination structures have secured funding from independent						

Aim	Performance Indicator [¶]	Targets			Delivery Status at Final Evaluation	Comments	Rating					
		Project start (2004)	Mid term (2007)	Project end (2009)			HS	S	MS	MU	U	HU
	operational funding from independent sources based on approved business plan/funding strategy.					sources.						

Annex VII: Rhodope Project Contribution in Attracting Funds for the Rhodope Region (Provided by PMU)

A. Western Rhodope Region

1. Rural Development Programme: (support provided in terms of development of Agri-environmental Plans, Development of application packages, provision of information)

Measure “Agri-environment” – 200 000 Euro

Measure “Young Farmers” – 875 000 Euro

Measure “Semi-subsistence farms” – 112 000 Euro

2. GEF Small Grants Programme (support provided in terms of development of project proposals and provision of biodiversity related information and expertise)

Otter conservation project - 80 000 Euro

Karakachan Sheep project in Momchilovtzi – 57 000 Euro

3. EU Phare Trans-border Programme Bulgaria – Greece - (support provided in terms of development of project proposals and provision of biodiversity related information and expertise)

Brown bear conservation project in Devin Municipality – 200 000 Euro

Technical Assistance in developing or re-orienting 37 project proposals – 500 000 Euro

Biodiversity conservation and promotion project of Smolyan municipality - 160 000 Euro

2 Biodiversity and Eco-tourism development projects for Rudozem Municipality - 300 000 Euro

4. EU Leader Programme (support provided for groups in terms of development of project proposals)

Support to 8 Leader Groups - 800 000 Euro

TOTAL FOR THE WESTERN RHODOPE REGION - 3 284 000 EURO

B. Eastern Rhodope Region

1. Rural Development Programme: (support provided in terms of development of Agri-environmental Plans, Development of application packages, provision of information)

Measure “Agri-environment” – 100 000 Euro

Measure “Young Farmers” – 275 000 Euro

2. GEF Small Grants Programme (support provided in terms of development of project proposals and provision of biodiversity related information and expertise)

Project for improving the energy efficiency and capacity of Nature Protection Center “Eastern Rhodope” in Madjarovo - Маджарово – 50 000 Euro

3. EU Phare Trans-border Programme Bulgaria – Greece - (support provided in terms of development of project proposals and provision of biodiversity related information and expertise)

Biodiversity and wild river conservation project for Ivaylovgrad municipality - 200 000 Euro

Project on the development and promotion of the area around Ivaylovgrad Dam - 250 000 Euro

Technical Assistance in developing or re-orienting 40 project proposals for Haskovo and Kardzhali Districts - 700 000 Euro

4. Projects funded by Foundations

Egrett conservation project funded by Ecoobshtnost Foundation - 4 000 Euro

Project targeting biodiversity conservation, development of organic farming and eco-tourism, conservation of indigenous breeds funded by the Dutch “Arc” and “Avalon” Foundations (the project will be implemented in the period 2009 – 2014) - 1 800 000 Euro

TOTAL FOR THE EASTERN RHODOPE REGION - 3 379 000 EURO

In addition to this the project has supported the implementation of EU Trans-border cooperation Project: Sustainable development of trans-border eco-networks. Some 110 000 Euro were officially included in project reports as co-financing from the Ministry of Regional Development.

pSCs in the Rhodope region - 670679,7 ha
SPAs - 336830,7
Overlaid pSCs and SPAs total 685073,3 ha

Proposed Nature park Western Rhodope - 695478 ha
Proposed Nature park Eastern Rhodope - 193403 ha

Legend

- Rhodope Mountains geographic borders (east and west)
- Proposed Nature parks
- SPA sites
- pSC sites
- municipalities

Annex IX: Training courses provided by the Rhodope Project (list provided by PMU)

Forestry

1. Conducting forest certification assessments
2. Forest certification and high conservation value forests management
3. Training of the staff of harvesting companies on health and safety as well as on the application of biodiversity friendly harvesting techniques

Agriculture

1. Organic farming
2. Management of organic farm
3. Organic farming study tour
4. Agri-environment

Tourism

1. Basic principles of ecotourism development
2. Development of ecotourism services and products
3. Eco-tourism study tour
4. Biodiversity conservation and interpretation of biodiversity for foresters
5. Biodiversity interpretation for staff of tourism information centers

Biodiversity

1. Monitoring of species, according to the national system for biodiversity monitoring

General Mainstreaming

1. Start your “green” business
2. Project development
3. Establishment of public private partnerships
4. EU Leader Programme and establishment of Local Action Groups
5. Use of Rhodope Project Tool on Municipality Planning

GIS and Information

1. Basic GIS training
2. Advanced GIS training
3. Information collection and utilization

Environment and Protected Areas

1. Protected area management (for foresters)
2. Collaborative management of protected areas
3. Training of Protected areas guards (rangers)
4. Environmental Assessment
5. Specific Environmental Assessment in Natura 2000 zones

Annex X: List of Pilot Demonstration Programme Projects

Project Name	Strategic area	Place of implementation
"Small farm in the field"	Sustainable agriculture and tourism	Eastern Rhodope
"Biological diversity and protected areas – a factor for sustainable development of ecotourism and agriculture in Ardino municipality"	Sustainable agriculture and tourism Municipality planning	Eastern Rhodope
"Organic production of lucerne"	Sustainable agriculture	Eastern Rhodope
"A chance for development of the village of Boliartzi, village Rani List"	Sustainable tourism	Eastern Rhodope
"Conservation of the biological diversity in Muglenishki ridge"	Direct conservation measures	Eastern Rhodope
"Conservation of the population of the indigenous breed of Rhodopean Short-horned cow in Eastern Rhodopes" (municipality of Madzharovo)	Sustainable agriculture	Eastern Rhodope
"The protected areas on the territory of Batashka Mountains as a key resource for the development of ecotourism and biodiversity conservation"	Sustainable tourism	Western Rhodope
„Pilot farm for biological production of bee honey"	Sustainable agriculture	Western Rhodope
"Capacity building for eco-tourism development in Lucky municipality"	Sustainable tourism	Western Rhodope
"Establishment of Karakachan sheep herd with a purpose of protection and restoration of rare and traditional breeds for the region"	Sustainable agriculture	Western Rhodope
"Diversification of Ecotourism Related Products and Services in Arda Village through Promotion of Region's Biodiversity"	Sustainable tourism	Western Rhodope
"Multifunctional use of private forests in Bulgaria and implementation of sustainable forestry practices (Pilot area: Forests of Orehovo)"	Sustainable forestry	Western Rhodope
"Development of new ecotourism products and services, based on biodiversity on the territory of PA Trigradsko Zhdrelo"	Sustainable tourism	Western Rhodope
"Conservation biodiversity in the Central Rhodopes, within the limits of Krichim and Rhodopi Municipalities, and its use as an ecotourism development resource through the establishment of a new protected area and a pertaining ecotrail"	Sustainable tourism	Western Rhodope
"1000 Unforgettable steps to the Snezhanka cave"	Sustainable tourism	Western Rhodope
"Development of Dospat Municipality as a sustainable ecotourism destination"	Sustainable tourism	Western Rhodope
"Development and popularizing of eco-tourism in the region of "Lisichevo – Chural", municipality of Devin".	Sustainable tourism	Western Rhodope
"Biodiversity conservation of Smolyan Lakes"	Direct conservation measures	Western Rhodope
"Identification and mapping of the High Conservation Value Forests (HCVF) on the territory of "Slaveyno" State Forestry Unit and "Smilyan" State Forestry Unit"	Sustainable forestry	Western Rhodope
"Model family farm for organic growing of chokeberry"	Sustainable agriculture	Western Rhodope

Annex XI: Interviewees' views (with quotes) on the successes and failures of Rhodope Project, recorded during interviews by the FET

Successes (in no particular order)

- Forest certification – first in Bulgaria and model for rest of the country
- Establishment of Municipal Focal Groups (MFGs)
- Pilot Demonstration Programme (PDP) – it gave people the opportunity to see the benefits from sustainable management of natural resources
- Enormously increased knowledge on biodiversity of Rhodope region compared with 5 years ago
- Increased awareness among local people about biodiversity, threats and need for conservation compared with 5 years ago
- Institutionalisation of the MFGs by becoming LEADER groups and promotion of the LEADER idea – “MFGs formed a platform for the creation of LEADER groups”
- Contribution to Municipal Environmental Protection Programmes
- ‘Opened the door’ to the possibility of biodiversity conservation in the Rhodope region
- Good use of UNDPs network of contacts - ‘wise use of UNDP’
- UNDP and GEF management systems
- Introduction of LEADER approach to region and 4 municipalities (Rudozem, Madan, Nedelino and Zlatograd) coordinated to form a Local Action Group
- Support for small protected areas in the Rudozem area
- Training courses, particularly on certification, GIS
- Project has created a favorable environment for sustainable economic development and now others don't need to work as hard to explain why we need to protect biodiversity
- Promoting the Rhodope region within Bulgaria and to the world, and helping to create more of a ‘Rhodope brand’
- Rhodope Project provided concrete example of how biodiversity conservation could work that local people could see (good demonstration value) - Project translated theory into practical examples of how biodiversity conservation could be done in the Rhodope region
- The Project helped “translate biodiversity into the local language”
- “The Project hasn't limited their tasks to exactly what was in the Project Document but been able to respond to local needs”
- Ecosystem services valuation study
- Changes in attitudes towards the environment at the local level
- Introduction of GIS to the region – people gradually realized the benefits for decision-making especially as a tool for local resource planning
- “On-the-ground action”
- Management plans for small protected areas
- Improved forest management and introduction of good forestry practices
- Designation of new protected area (Karadja dere) and enlargement of existing (Trigrad Gorge)
- Classification of the environment of the Rhodope region
- Increased knowledge of the biodiversity of the Rhodope region (‘probably best of any region in Bulgaria’)
- Involvement of local communities in the Project
- Database (available publicly) – ‘best example in Bulgaria’
- “Making the project data available free helped build trust”
- Enormous increase in information/knowledge about biodiversity in the Rhodope region and making it freely available in user-friendly ways
- Demonstrated to others that forest certification in Bulgaria can work and be profitable
- Certification has helped the owners of privately owned forest areas to organize their work as well as presenting anew market for their timber
- Certification has given more independence to the local foresters since the process is driven and undertaken at a local level and not by central government

- “I needed to spend less time on project management than I expected, due to the excellent National Project Manager”
- Flexibility of Project – able to interpret generic activities set out in Project Document
- First project in Bulgaria to make GIS data publicly available
- Provided professional software and made data available in an easy format which has helped organisations adopt a common approach to spatial analysis allowing improved opportunities for collaboration later
- Forestry using paper maps much less after adoption of GIS system - “We now have the skills and resources to process forest maps”
- Positive impact on forestry policy
- Contributed to the identification and documentation of Natura 2000 areas in the Rhodope Mountains
- Uptake of some of the terminology associated with biodiversity conservation by local stakeholders
- Demonstrated practical ways of promoting alternative livelihoods to people through sustainable use of natural resources ‘instead of just selling hope to people’
- Forestry Units are now more open to new ideas and projects after five years of the Project maintaining close communication and involving them in significant activities
- Changed forestry practices, including planting with native species rather than exotic species
- “Training created a better vision among our (Forestry) staff of a future for biodiversity” and “The Project training gave me a different perspective on environmental problems – before I was just had a ‘forest manager’ perspective”
- Inventory of biodiversity in the state Forestry areas
- Increased public awareness about protected areas in the Rhodope region (as MEW doesn’t have resources for this)
- ‘Lots of information generated that was really useful to the municipality – it saved us time and effort’
- “Project has helped us reduce illegal logging and forest fires”
- “Herodotus said that Rhodope is a holy mountain, now after the Rhodope Project, I understand why” – Member of Kardzhali Municipal Focus Group
- Increased awareness of nature among the urban population – “Even the old people are talking about the environment and conservation”
- Broadened the scope of work of foresters - “We can now develop ecotourism in our forests”
- Change of awareness and attitudes among foresters - “I see now that even dead wood has a value” and “The forests are now more than just timber”
- “Forest certification has given more value to our forests”
- Project provided useful information on organic agriculture and helped with application process including helping farmers link with certification bodies and agricultural advisory authorities
- Well organized exchange visits to see how organic agriculture is being developed in other parts of Bulgaria
- Involving school children in the volunteer monitoring programme, which has raised their awareness and “now twice as many children in the school are interested in environmental subjects” and “the children from the villages still remember what they were taught”
- Contacts established and friendships made (the social benefits the Project has brought appear to be particularly important to the women interviewed)
- Profile and image of the Chitalishte increased
- Expertise provided to the municipal authorities – “It made me wonder who did the work before!”
- Important contribution to the Municipal Environmental Programme
- Marked out tourism paths
- “The work of the Project with Forestry has meant that foresters are now more open to other conservation initiatives and partnerships”
- Helped create stronger networks between stakeholder groups
- Increased capacity at local level, especially for farmers

- “Project initiated organic agriculture in the region” (interviewee from Western Rhodope)
- “Training was a great success for local farmers and also for the staff at the Agricultural Services”
- “The Rhodope Project has provide us with an extension of our agricultural services”
- New protected areas and expanded established ones in the Western Rhodope region
- “We now have a good baseline for forestry management in the region”
- “Project information allowed us to produce a lot of visual materials, important for raising awareness and environmental education for the children”
- “The Project really provided a lot of funds for local capacity building”
- Rhodope region has become more competitive on the tourism market as a result of promotion by the RP
- Training and knowledge of Forestry staff
- “A certificate for attending training on agri-environment”
- Opportunities for exchange of experience with other farmers
- Good opportunities for involving young people who lack them in the Rhodope region
- Private owners of forest are interested in the financial gains from certification but have also stated that the FSC certification process and implementation helps them organise their work
- Certification has given more independence to the local foresters since the process is driven and undertaken at a local level and not by central government
- “The Project broadened my horizons”
- Networking and partnerships - one forester commented that project gave him the opportunity to work with and better understand NGOs (previously seen as the enemy!)

Failures (in no particular order)

- The creation of the two Nature Parks
- Project too large, complex and ambitious
- Lack of publicity about the project’s objectives, activities and results (from some of the more remote municipalities)
- Some of the information provided by the Project is difficult to use and there is a need for more training to be able to fully use it - two interviewees stated that it was difficult to extract information from the DVD
- Risk analysis at project design stage was poor
- Lack of support to remote municipalities
- Sensitive data on localities of endangered species should not have been published and should be treated as confidential
- Failure of UNDP to push for the creation of the Nature Parks
- Creation of Nature Park was too ambitious, especially for the Western region (would have been easier for Eastern, which should have been treated as separate project)
- Failure to create enough protected areas
- Limited impact related to municipal planning (but may be too early to detect the impacts)
- Lack of impact on regional planning due to poor project design
- UNDP bureaucracy! “It impacts time and the effectiveness of our work”
- Training was not practical enough (too abstract) in some cases
- Government keen to have the project at any price and ‘ready to promise anything’ just to secure the project
- Project didn’t address threat from the mini hydroelectric plants
- Not enough involvement of local people – not many individuals actually benefited from the PDP scheme
- No professional development opportunities for staff through Project
- Communication with agricultural sector authorities not considered very successful by some interviewees (surprising since Project was sited within the MAF) and agricultural sector considered less ‘accessible’ than forestry
- Kardzhali office a bit too remote for access by local farmers

- Not enough interest from Municipal Councils (in Western Rhodope) as some still see a conflict between biodiversity conservation and economic development, with the latter more important
- Ecosystem service study not promoted widely enough, and not understood by the public or decision-makers
- “Not enough farmers involved”
- Many of the achievements of the Project are not visible to the ordinary public (only experts/technical staff) and need to be better communicated to the general audience
- “Project activities didn’t happen fast enough”
- Insufficient attention paid to environmental education in schools
- Needed more tangible, visible results for the general public
- Municipal staff trained by the Project have been lost after municipal elections due to political reasons which reduces capacity and requires Project to reinvest in awareness-raising and training (but not due to the Project)

Annex XII: Strengths and weaknesses of Project (in view of FE team)

Aspects that have contributed to successful project implementation, and can be considered ‘good practice’ include (in no particular order):

- Good adaptive management and flexibility in project team which has allowed them to successfully switch from PA to more mainstreaming after the MTE (“everyone of project activities was tested, modified and adapted to the situation”)
- Good relationship and communication between Project team and UNDP CO and UNDP-GEF in Bratislava, and able to interpret project activities within local context
- Very good communication skills among team members who, generally, sort out problems quickly (although it should be noted there were internal communication problems early on that were resolved through the Projects annual retreat using an external facilitator)
- Very good pro-active as well as reactive communication between RSCs and beneficiaries (a model for other GEF projects) with fast response rate to queries from stakeholders and general public (and if they do not know something they find out!)
- Project team is viewed as knowledgeable, credible, reliable and trusted among local beneficiaries (and UNDP viewed as transparent and not corrupt) and has high commitment
- Very good capacity (staff, skill sets, technical expertise) within the PMU and two RSCs, although many staff have had to ‘learn by doing’ rather than having formal training e.g. project management
- Wise selection of project staff who already had a good network of important contacts (nationally and locally) and many were well known and respected in the national conservation community prior to working for the Rhodope Project, which helped build effective partnerships quickly
- All the RSC staff were from the Rhodope region, which help quickly build trust, and the Project was not seen as comprising ‘outsiders’ or being imposed by a Sofia-based body and so the Project had a good ‘local presence’ from the start
- Very good network of contacts, including NGOs, technical bodies, experts and universities that the team is able to call on
- Location of RSC office in Smolyan, close to municipal and district authority offices has been a big advantage for access to these bodies and also because many individuals and stakeholder groups can visit the office when they have dealings with the authorities
- Good reporting arrangements, e.g. monthly reports good for internal communications
- Good use of national experts (and very limited use of international consultants) - contracted many of the national environmental NGOs to undertake work for the Project, which helped build good links and kept expenses low
- The Project was developed over a relatively long period of 5 (5.5 with the 6-month extension) period, allowing sufficient time for most project activities to be developed and importantly there was sufficient time to adapt to the change in focus after the MTE and deliver important mainstreaming results
- An advanced reporting system that has helped the Project deliver activities on time and to identify and adapt to risks and threats to project delivery
- The Project’s Initial Evaluation, unusual for GEF projects, helped identify early problems which could have become critical if left till the MTE
- Continuity of some key staff (Carsten Germer in particular) through the PDF-B process and early implementation helped ‘interpretation’ of the Project Document, aided the inexperienced team in early stages, and helped maintain close informal progress monitoring and support
- Most of project data made freely available which helped build trust (academics, in particular, have a reputation in Bulgaria for not sharing information)
- State Forestry Agency has a strong organization and hierarchy (described by a couple of interviewees as ‘like the army’) which made mainstreaming forest certification, identification of HCVF and use of GIS as a planning tool, easier once the senior managers were convinced of the value

- Project reflected real needs, which partly explains strong local stakeholder buy-in
- Project team have made an effort to identify other projects/initiatives with which they can collaborate and won't compete with or overlap (making most of their results publicly available has helped build trust with other projects making cooperation more likely)
- Project team spend 1-2 days a year tree-planting with Forestry staff which has earned the team increased respect from the SFA Units
- Staff of RSCs spend a great deal of time out in field with stakeholders (RSC manager in Kardzhali travel an average of 2,000km/month)
- RSC teams have developed a good understanding of what local stakeholders need through frequent, regular communication with them, and many field visits
- Volunteer groups kept regularly informed of Project progress through quarterly newsletter and personal contacts with Project team, as well as an annual brochure on the results of volunteer monitoring activities
- "We see the team as members of the community" (MFG member, Ivaylovgrad)
- Good ability within the RSCs to 'translate' the Project into 'language of the local people', which has been needed as some of the technical aspects of Project, e.g. ecosystem services (and even the word 'biodiversity') are not understood by locals
- The information collected and made by the project will be useful for future projects; it will give them an information base and reduce their costs

Note: Most of these relate to the Project team and their relationships with others

Aspects which have hindered Project delivery and can be considered 'poor practice' include (in no particular order):

- Weak risk assessment in initial design related to NPs (insufficient consideration of local population's views, especially in Western Rhodope and overestimation of GoB commitment, and the practicality of proposal)
- Original project design too complicated with too many elements (revised after IE but still too complex and ambitious)
- Logical framework complicated and too big (needed a lot of reporting time) and doesn't capture all project successes
- Poor Indicators (too many, original were mostly performance rather than impact or threat indicators and non-SMART) and many dependent on outside bodies to provide data (therefore risky) or don't really indicate the objective or outcome
- Project area (Rhodope mountains) is huge so difficult to make significant impact with agricultural community and remote municipalities (should have chosen smaller area to start with and then added in more as Project depending on progress)
- PDP had some weaknesses, e.g. management (reporting and financial management) and contribution to global biodiversity isn't very clear in some cases and no lessons learned
- PSC not effective and essentially abandoned
- Staff turnover in municipalities (due to changes after elections) impacted capacity levels (loss of GIS trained people mentioned as important) and no system of 'training the trainers' to multiple training within institutions and so improve sustainability
- Failure to manage the high expectations of UNDP's ability to influence the GoB to meet their commitment to establish the Nature Parks in Western and Eastern Rhodope
- Unrealistic expectations on sustainability of Rhodope Project NGO (need to be more realistic)
- Project team/UNDP has been shown to tackle the easier problems and leave the more difficult problems on occasion, e.g. the non-creation of the Nature Parks, fund-raising for the Rhodope Project NGO, which have, surprisingly, been left for a long period before they were properly dealt with
- Project teams in RSCs not large enough (this was independent criticism from several interviewees)

Note: Most of these relate to the original project design