Forest Biodiversity Protection

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Introduction

i. The Belarus biodiversity protection project was the first World Bank project in Belarus, having been identified in 1992. The project, together with the GEF projects in Poland, Ukraine, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic, comprise a cohort of five biodiversity protection projects that were developed based on the opportunity and need to protect globally significant biodiversity in these countries making the transition from centrally planned to market economies. Each of the projects also focused on transboundary protected areas where collaboration with one or mote of the five GEF projects was an important objective.

Project Objectives and Components

ii. Objectives: The project objectives were to preserve the biodiversity of key endangered forests (the Belovezhskaya Protected Forest Reserve (BPF) and the wetlands and forests of the Berezinsky and Pripiatsky Reserves) through institutional support and investments in applied

research and management. The component for Belovezhskaya National Park was designed to link park management with ongoing GEF-supported work in the adjoining Bialowieza Primeval Forest in Poland. These objectives and the project design supported the country's program on protected areas.

iii. Components: The project provided: (i) institutional support to the Belovezhskaya National Park and Department of Protected Areas to undertake biodiversity conservation activities, including preparation of a management plan for the Belovezhskaya National Park, professional development and training for staff, consulting services to assist protected area staff implement selected activities, further cooperation with Poland on the management of the transboundary forest reserve, and technical assistance for developing ecological agriculture on farms in the buffer zone of the national park, and (ii) investments in programs and research to assist with conservation of forest and wetland ecosystems, including air and soil monitoring equipment, a forest gene bank and related archival nursery equipment, and a geographic information system (GIS).

Implementation Experience and Results

iv. Achievement of Objectives: The project objectives were substantially achieved. The Belovezhskaya National Park was expanded to improve protection against impacts occurring on its border. A multidisciplinary management plan was prepared for the national park and is under implementation. The applied research and management plan identified the greatest impacts on biodiversity of the puscha as poor regeneration in old and mature stands; succession to a spruce monoculture with reduced presence of pine, oak and ash typical of the climax lowland forest; overpopulation of game ungulates with attendant damage to regeneration; and agricultural drainage on the park's borders. Good progress in implementing the management plan was initiated under the project, through expansion of the national park in selected areas to reduce drainage impacts and to protect unique and threatened forest stands. Implementation of the management plan is also continuing through a reduction of deer and

a necessary increase in hunting, owing to the damage of ungulate browsing pressure on natural forest stands. A successful professional development and training program was completed in technical subjects and business aspects of park management. Cooperation with Poland was furthered to improve management of the Bialowieza and Belovezhskaya transboundary forest, and collaboration with other international organizations was initiated.

v. Major Factors Affecting the Project- Being the first Bank operation in Belarus, a number of activities and approaches were new to the Recipient, including Bank/GEF procedures and international practices in biodiversity conservation. Although the scientific and administrative staff were proficient in many technical aspects of the project, they were relatively inexperienced in preparing long-term management plans that integrated modem principles of conservation biology and social issues in natural resources management. In addition, the policy framework for such an approach needed to be adopted by the government in the course of implementation. Two factors that contributed to slow start-up and implementation of the project were Belarus' inexperience with the Bank's procurement procedures and the relative inexperience with the project's explicit approach to interdisciplinary management planning. Together, these factors delayed project completion and contributed to relatively high supervision costs. Two factors that countered the first two factors were the dedication of the project staff to the project objectives and the ownership and problem-solving at high levels of government afforded by the PMU's location within the Presidential Affairs Office, where the Department of Protected Areas is located.

Project Sustainability and Future Operations

vi. Sustainability: The most important criterion for project sustainability is continued implementation of the management plan for the Belovezskaya National Park and the extension of interdisciplinary

management planning approaches to other sites. Two factors will contribute to the project's sustainability: (i) ownership of the project was high at all levels throughout implementation. According to the directors of the national park and the Department of Protected Areas, implementing the management plan is one of their highest priorities; and (ii) the professional development and training activities were successful at building the capacity to go forward. However, there is no indication that the national park's budget will be increased in the near-term. The national park has been developing income to support its operational budget, especially through donations from private and public sponsors in Belarus and abroad. Whether this will be sufficient to sustain the project activities is unknown. Taken together, however, these factors indicate a moderate chance of the project being sustainable.

vii Future Operations: Two Bank rural development and environment project are currently under implementation (Forestry Development and the Ozone-depleting substances phase out but neither is a follow-on activity of the biodiversity project. With regard to the biodiversity conservation project, the national park is continuing with the activities initiated or strengthened under the project, especially implementation of the management plan for the Belovezskaya Puscha, pollution monitoring, and cooperation with Poland on joint management of the Belovezskaya and Bialowieza transboundary forest. The Recipient has indicated interest in working with the Bank to develop a follow-on GEF project for the last of these, to implement transboundary priorities of forest and wildlife management identified under the project. The Recipient has also requested assistance for a follow-on GEF project for wetlands conservation in the Polessie region of southern Belarus. Both projects are eligible for financing under the GEF biodiversity conservation operation program and provide an opportunity for continued Bank dialogue with Belarus and, based on the results of the recently completed project, would yield substantial results for biodiversity conservation and natural resources management in Belarus.

Bank and Recipient Performance

viii. Bank Performance: Bank missions were led by a biodiversity and forestry specialists with sufficient experience in supervising technical and of non-technical (e.g., procurement) issues. Based on the government's communication with the Bank team, and supported by its comment letter on this ICR (Appendix 3 of this report), the Bank's performance during implementation was satisfactory. The cost of project supervision costs was high, amounting to approximately one-quarter of the grant amount. However, the project was appraised on a low budget, with the result that many of the project issues that are normally addressed during preparation and appraisal were addressed instead during supervision.

ix. Recipient Performance: The administrative and technical staff demonstrated a strong commitment to achieving the project objectives. During the first year of the project, the PMU experienced difficulties in initiating the project due to its lack of experience in Bank operations. As stated in the Recipient's comment letter on this ICR (Appendix B), "...we have to keep in mind that the project was the very first experience of cooperation between (the) Republic of Belarus and the World Bank. Due to this fact, some delay in project implementation occurred, but later, when we became more familiar with Bank procedures project development was smooth and efficient." The administrative and technical staff demonstrated a strong commitment to achieving the project objectives. On these bases, the Recipient's performance was satisfactory.

x. Assessment of Outcome: The project achieved its objectives, with two important outcomes. The first is the improved management of the old growth forest ecosystem of the Belovezhskaya, which itself improves the chances for the persistence of its globally significant biodiversity. The second

is that protected areas management in Belarus is now more similar to that employed elsewhere in Europe. These outcomes, in concert with project publications and outreach efforts by the Belovezhskaya National Park, are promoting nature based tourism. They have also lead to further international collaboration on natural resources management issues in the forest and environment sectors. In recognition of these achievements, the European Commission awarded the national park the European Diploma in Nature in 1998. Key Lessons Learned

xi. The lessons learned were discussed during a regional meeting involving participants of GEF biodiversity projects from Belarus, Ukraine, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and the World Bank. Based on discussions held during the completion mission and at the regional workshop, the key lessons learned from the Recipient's perspective are:

a. The social assessment component of the management plan conducted in the last year of the project revealed that public awareness of the project objectives and activities was weak. Local residents valued the park's conservation objectives and would be more supportive of the national park if they received some of the benefits. As a result, the national park is improving its communication with local communities, and is looking for opportunities to contribute to local benefits while protecting the park's resources. Participation of local communities would have been more successful if the social assessment had been conducted earlier in the project.

b. The project was strongly oriented to achieving results, especially in technical subjects. The project design could have been improved by identifying discrete results to be achieved at different stages of the project, and used as measures of success. These should include measures of sustainability, technical aspects, social changes, policy decisions, and innovation.

c. Professional development and training activities were an important ingredient of the project s success. Training should be targeted to mid-career professionals and students. Part of the program should include extended studies for individuals who will be responsible for training others.

A key lesson learned from the Bank's perspective is:

a. Early in the project, a needs assessment of the PMU could have identified the need for training in the office management and business skills needed to implement the project. This could have reduced the initial delays in implementation and given greater time to the substantive work to be done.