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Endangered Species Are Poached, Not Protected

By Paul Rimple

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The Georgian Tourism Department and Caucasian Safari, a private hunting outfitter, was in Las Vegas in February, trolling for sportsmen at the Safari Club International hunters' convention. Standing in front of wildlife images "borrowed" from a local environmental group, they presented a booklet advertising animals to kill in Georgia. Three of the six featured — the Brown Bear, Caucasian Tur, Caucasian Grouse — are on Georgia's list of most endangered species.

Environmentalists fail to see the logic in inviting people to come to kill threatened species when nobody knows exactly how many there are. Counts have only been done on two species — the Caucasian Tur and Red Deer, of which there are believed to be less than 100. There is neither a monitoring system nor a conservation program nor an efficient enforcement mechanism in place.

Irakli Matcharashvili, biodiversity program coordinator at Green Alternative, a local

environmental group, says environmental crime is rarely punished in Georgia. He points to the prevalence of poaching videos of threatened species on YouTube and how pet bears are kept in cages in gas stations and restaurants around the country. "Somebody killed their mother," he reasons.

While some poachers have been fined and jailed, most are never pursued. Even the Environmental Protection Ministry admits that their hands are tied, as they have very little resources to combat poaching. With a budget of $10.5 million, it is one of the least-funded ministries in the government.

Last year, most of the Environmental Protection Ministry's responsibilities were handed over to the Energy and Natural Resources Ministry, whose business is to sell, not protect. It will soon announce the recipient of a tender to count 19 mammals and seven birds for the equivalent of $110,000. It's a tall order for such a sum and reflects the improvisational character of the ministry.

In January, it issued hunting quotas for particular species without identifying specific hunting areas. For example, 168 badgers, 96 raccoons and 77 wildcats may be "extracted." Nobody knows where these numbers came from or how they will be monitored.

The problem is that the government has never showed its willingness to protect its No. 1 tourism asset — the environment. Private interests, whether they be new hydropower plants in Svaneti, oil terminals in protected wetlands or hunting outfitters for a few foreign game hunters, reflect a belief that the best way to protect the environment is to privatize it.

Paul Rimple is a journalist in Tbilisi.

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