



# COLCHIC RAINFORESTS AND WETLANDS



*Georgia has nominated the Colchic Rainforests and Wetlands for inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage list. The nomination as natural World Heritage under criteria ix and x was submitted for the 2019-2020 nomination cycle. The Colchic Rainforests and Wetlands are the first natural World Heritage property nominated by Georgia.*

The Colchic Rainforests and Wetlands are situated in Georgia, within the Autonomous Republic of Adjara as well as the regions of Guria and Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti. They are a series of seven component areas, which are located along the warm-temperate and extremely humid eastern coast of the Black Sea. They consist of an altitudinal series of the most typical Colchic ecosystems running from sea level to > 2,500 m a.s.l. The main ecosystems are ancient deciduous Colchic rainforests and wetlands – particularly percolation bogs and other mire types of the distinct Colchic mire region.

The property holds the oldest broad-leaved forests – together with the Hyrcanian forests of Iran and Azerbaijan – in western Eurasia. These are relict forests, which have survived the glacial cycles of the ice ages, and at the same time the most humid nemoral broad-leaved rainforests globally (up to 4,500 mm precipitation/yr). Their astonishingly diverse flora and fauna, with impressive densities of endemic and relict species, is the result of millions of years of uninterrupted evolution and speciation processes within the Colchic Pliocene refugium.

The peatlands of the Colchis mire region, which are closely interlinked with lowland Colchic rainforests, also reflect the mild and extremely humid conditions there. These allow for the existence of percolation bogs, the simplest functional type of mires, which is fundamental to the understanding of mires and peatlands in general, and only occurs there. Percolation bogs are accompanied by a complete series of other succession stages of mire development in the Colchic wetlands.

*The Colchic Rainforests and Wetlands have been nominated under World Heritage criteria ix and x.*

**CRITERION IX:** The Colchic rainforests comprise a characteristic vertical zoning and ecological succession, while the wetlands (particularly Colchic mires) are represented with their supporting processes and succession. The Colchic rainforests are the most humid temperate deciduous rainforests, and among the oldest nemoral broad-leaved forests globally. While they are distinguished from other temperate forests by their rich evergreen understoreys, they also display a remarkably dense mosaic of forest types, with 23 forest associations co-existing within an area of only about 200 km<sup>2</sup>. Together with the Hyrcanian forests, they are the most important relicts of Arcto-Tertiary forests in western Eurasia. Their peculiar and diverse community reflects exceptionally constant climatic conditions and is an invaluable example of the manifold long-term evolutionary processes of forest biota over at least 10-15 million years. The warm temperate climate is also favourable for the growth of mires and has resulted in extensive paludification along the Black Sea coast. The exceptional character of these mires has led to the recognition of a distinct Colchis mire region. Of particular global importance are the percolation bogs, which exist nowhere else in the World and can be considered the simplest and hence “ideal” mire type, due to almost permanent water supply exclusively by precipitation. Percolation bogs are essential for the functional understanding of all mires, and hence of terrestrial carbon storage in general.

**CRITERION X:** The series is home to almost 1,100 species of vascular plants (particularly woody species) and bryophytes, almost 500 species of vertebrates, and a high number of invertebrates. It hosts an extremely high – for a non-tropical, non-island region – proportion of endemic species. There are 149 species of plants with a



restricted range. The contribution of endemic species to herpetofauna and mammals of the region (excl. bats) is 28%. Some of the Caucasian relict species, such as Nordmann's fir and Caucasian Salamander, have been isolated for over 14-15 millions of years from their closest relatives elsewhere. Of outstanding importance are also the gene pool and species which dispersed after the glaciations from the Colchic Rainforests and Wetlands to pan-Europe and northern Eurasia. There are also many globally threatened species of flora and fauna.

*The nominated series has a high level of integrity, i.e., of completeness, intactness and absence of critical threats.*

The nominated component areas of the Colchic Rainforests and Wetlands cover most of the existing mires of the Colchis mire region, and the best preserved and most representative rainforests. They include more than 90% of the altitudinal range at which Colchic rainforests occur, and the great majority of typical forest associations. They also comprise a complete successional series of the mires characteristic of the Colchis mire region. The nominated component areas of the series together hold the great majority of the Colchic flora and fauna, and an even greater proportion of the endemic plant species found in the wider region.

While some of the Colchic rainforests and mires were lost until the late 20th Century, their representatives inside the series are intact, structurally and functionally. The hydrological integrity of the Colchic mires is ensured by their dependence on atmospheric precipitation, high mire oscillation capacity, the stabilizing effect of the nearby sea, and extensive upstream buffer zones.

*The Government of Georgia ensures that the requirements for protection and management are met, through effective participatory protected areas management.*

All proposed component areas of the series – and all but a few hectares of the buffer zone – are situated on State-owned land within legally designated protected areas. These are either strictly protected areas (IUCN PA category Ia), or those zones of National Parks (IUCN PA category II) that afford the highest levels of protection. Only a very small part of the nominated property belongs to a protected landscape (IUCN PA category V). The four protected areas in which the nominated component areas are located are all managed by the Agency of Protected Areas of the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture of Georgia, through its local PA administrations. Comprehensive management plans for three of them are in place, with the management plan of the fourth one in preparation and expected to be finalized in 2019. Coordination of component areas is ensured, as they are all managed by the Agency of Protected Areas and geographically close to each other. An integrated management framework of the property has been developed by the Agency of Protected Areas. The Agency of Protected Areas and its partners are working on improving the capacity of the administrations involved, in cooperation with local stakeholders, municipalities, and international partners: Three international cooperation projects have been investing in infrastructure, equipment, training, management capacity and institutional development of the three largest protected areas contributing to the series (i.e., Kolkheti National Park, Mtirala National Park and Kintrishi Protected Areas). In addition, Kintrishi Protected Areas and Mtirala National Park receive operational funding support from the Caucasus Nature Fund, an ecoregional conservation trust fund. A National Capacity Building Plan for Protected Area Staff was developed in 2016, and is being implemented.



