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**Roadmap to better ecosystem management for Lake Baikal:
an online information system for specially protected areas in
the Republic of Buryatia**

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Introduction

Lake Baikal, the world's oldest and deepest lake, situated in South-East Siberia, holds one-fifth of our planet's unfrozen surface freshwater. The lake contains an outstanding variety of endemic flora and fauna, including the unique Baikal seal. The lake is surrounded by numerous Specially Protected Areas (SPAs) of high ecological value. Currently the SPAs in the region consist of three state natural reserves, more than 100 regional natural parks, numerous zakazniks¹ and monuments and five local recreational sites.

The Government of the Russian Federation and UNEP agreed to engage in bilateral cooperation on environmental issues in 2005. One of the prioritized actions was to promote a better nature protection system for the Buryatia region. The Ministry of Natural Resources of the Republic of Buryatia through its division the State Enterprise (SE) "Nature Use and Environmental Protection of the Republic of Buryatia" (SE 'Burpriroda') in cooperation with the Centre for International Projects (CIP), carried out a project to explore different instruments for better ecosystem management and ultimately improved livelihoods in Buryatia. They decided to develop a new information and referral system for all SPAs in Buryatia under the project "Development of Information and Referral System on Specially Protected Areas in the Republic of Buryatia to Improve Their Management in the Context of Baikal Region Sustainable Development".

The information and referral system was developed with the support from the Government of the Republic of Buryatia and UNEP over a two-year period. The development phase involved:

- Development of strategic goals and principles for the establishment and management of the system;

¹ A type of protected area in the Russian Federation, most commonly referred to in English as a "sanctuary."

- Development of implementation mechanisms;
- Identification of best available technology for the information system;
- Dissemination of scientific, technical and public information via internet, including information on Buryatia SPAs and rare and endangered species of animals, plants and fungi.
- Raising awareness of key principles of territorial nature protection adaptation strategies to changing environmental conditions and anthropogenic pressures.

The identified objective of the information and referral system was to overcome the risk of fragmented and incomplete management plans and damage to unique ecosystems by improved access to information on SPA management and rare and endangered species of animals, plants and fungi. The information will feed into the development of official documents of the Republic of Buryatia on the management of SPAs and serve as a general tool for decision makers.

Project Results

The system has become an integrated management tool with reliable information on all SPAs in the region. It helps to raise awareness on SPA activities on a regional scale and is tailored to help environmental organizations and decision makers in the Republic of Buryatia, including those in the area of environmental protection, rational use of natural resources and sustainable development of the Baikal Natural Territory. The system is internet-based and also open to stakeholders such as executive bodies, local administrations, scientific research institutions, educational organizations, investment companies, tourist organizations, mass media, public associations, civil society, and citizens of Russia and from overseas.

The system supports the integration of environmental considerations into the socio-economic policies of the Republic of Buryatia. The data-sets go beyond biological diversity and include data on legislation, pollution loads, geography, economic activities and infrastructure. Comprehensive analysis and identification of environmentally acceptable and economically viable management options are therefore made possible for not only environmental experts, but also for social and economic planners such as those working on land use and urban development.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that the information system will only be successful if it is actively maintained and used as part of wider set of policies and long-term implementation mechanisms. The information and referral system was therefore promoted throughout the project by:

- Provision of system development support;
- A specialized exhibition on the natural features and values of Buryatia SPA system and its key elements;
- Dissemination of an informational booklet;
- Dissemination of lessons learned in overcoming conflict situations during the establishment and management of Buryatia SPAs;
- Dissemination of recommendations on Buryatia SPAs development derived from the information and referral system;
- Organization of training for users of the information and referral system.

The information gathered on lessons learned in overcoming conflict situations during the establishment and management of the Buryatia Specially Protected Areas, is relevant beyond the region of Buryatia. The findings are useful to all authorities that work to avoid potential conflicts between users of natural resources and environmental protection needs.

The system is now operational and continuously electronically up-dated and actively used by the Ministry of Nature Protection of Buryatia and other users. It combines new technology and traditional approaches and ensures integrated solutions and continuity of existing traditions of natural protection in Russia.

In case of further interest on the information and referral system for SPAs in Buryatia, information can be accessed at <http://www.minpriroda-rb.ru/content/oopt/index.php> (in Russian).