# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. This document presents an independent and final evaluation of a project implemented by the Russian Federation to conserve the wetlands of the Lower Volga (LV) region (GEF Project 1068: Conservation of Wetland Biodiversity in the Lower Volga Region). The project was financed by the GEF as a Full Size Project, with UNDP acting as the Implementing Agency.
2. The evaluation was carried out by an international consultant (Dr. Gonzalo Castro de la Mata) with logistical support from UNDP and the project staff[[1]](#footnote-1). The evaluation was conducted during the month of August 2012, with a visit to Russia and the Lower Volga region between August 7th and 15th, 2012. It was conducted in a participatory manner through a combination of: (i) Site visits and interviews in the field with key stakeholders, and (ii) A review of documentation.
3. Goal and Objectives of the Project. The project Goal was to “ensure the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity in the Lower Volga region.” The Immediate Objective was to “secure conservation of biodiversity in four Core Wetland Areas (CWA).The project envisioned five main outcomes:
4. Improved information on the LV and its biodiversity and improved information management and use in decision-making,
5. Strengthened institutional and regulatory capacity and multi-sectoral mechanisms for biodiversity conservation and use in the LV,
6. A strengthened LV System of Protected Areas,
7. Increased opportunities for the development of sustainable alternative livelihoods within CWAs and their vicinities, and
8. Increased awareness of and support for biodiversity conservation and sustainable development in the LV.
9. The Logical Framework (now Results Framework) was revised at project inception and after the Mid-Term Evaluation (MTE). The current Results Framework maintains the 5 original Outcomes, but the number of Outputs was changed to 15, and new indicators were agreed (Annex 1).
10. Project Implementation. The following are key observations regarding project implementation performance:

* The approval process was extremely slow. The first disbursement took place almost 8 years after its first informal pipeline entry. The project is scheduled to close in December 2012, which is 14 years after its pipeline entry.

* On the other hand, and once the project was approved by the GEF, implementation was relatively swift. The original project duration was envisioned to be 5 years, but in the end it took 6.5 years to implement it. This is not a major shortcoming both when compared with other GEF projects, as well as taking into account the challenging issues at stake.
* The Mid Term Evaluation (MTE) occurred at a critical time and the subsequent steps taken by UNDP to correct direction had fundamental and far-reaching influence over the project performance during subsequent years. The changes in the operational strategy implemented, chiefly among them the hiring of the current PM (Ms. Natalya Lopantseva), had wide-ranging implications.
* The years 2010 and 2011 saw the final consolidation of key project outputs, and the project entered into a phase in which it effectively achieved and in many cases exceeded its targets for outputs, outcomes, and its goal. This represents a remarkable success story and an example of a best practice in project turn-around.

1. Outcomes. Targets for most of the outcomes were achieved or exceeded. Although some of the indicator used both at the Outcome and Objective levels do not properly capture the higher-level accomplishments of the project, it is possible to construct a rationale to understand the project’s actual Impacts and sustainability prospects by going beyond the project’s indicators. The following unquestionable patterns emerge:

* Despite a “rocky” start, the project was able to disburse and implement activities closely following its pre-determined plan and for the most part within the GEF’s average “standards of service,”
* Most outcome indicators can be rated as satisfactory or highly satisfactory,
* The project established a solid foundation to introduce ecosystem-level management considerations at the LV at the level of key institutions, both public and private,
* Awareness regarding the relations between nature and water, and the consequent importance of the ecosystem services provided by wetlands, was substantially increased,
* A great number of tools including studies, guides, guidelines, and management recommendations were developed and adopted, including a Presidential decree recognizing the importance of water in the LV for biodiversity,
* Local capacity for understanding ecosystem-level issues was enhanced, and
* A shared vision regarding the ecosystem-level management needs of the LV has been achieved – this vision is shared across political divisions, a major accomplishment in itself.

1. Another major accomplishment of the project is the successful expansion and establishment of the PA network. Protected areas were strengthened and increased in area by more than 100%, thus establishing a “back bone” for the long term biodiversity conservation in the LV, and the total area under protection is expected to exceed the target and reach 748,640 ha.
2. On the basis of these observations, it is evident that the project’s achievement of its goal, to “ensure the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity in the Lower Volga region” can be rated as Highly Satisfactory. Because these accomplishments transcend the project’s lifetime by influencing society over the long term, the project’s sustainability is also rated as Highly Satisfactory.
3. Summary Ratings:

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| --- | --- |
| Element Evaluated | Rating |
|  |  |
| Project success overall | HS |
| Progress towards achieving its development objective | S |
| Progress in implementation | S |
| Sustainability | HS |

HS = Highly Satisfactory; S = Satisfactory; MS = Marginally Satisfactory; MU = Marginally Unsatisfactory; U = Unsatisfactory (U); HU = Highly Unsatisfactory

1. Lessons Learned. Looking ahead, it is important for future projects to learn from the successful experiences here, as well as to avoid pitfalls identified in this project. The following are the main lessons-learned:

* Proper staffing is essential to project success.
* Mid-Term Evaluations can be critical to place a project back on track.
* It is possible to turn a project around. The report highlights this experience as ***best practice.***
* Small Grants and Micro-Credit Facilities are complementary tools but are not interchangeable. The report highlights the micro-credit design as ***best practice.***
* Large and complex ecosystems require holistic approaches that go beyond the establishment and strengthening of PAs. Understanding ecosystem-wide dynamics and addressing roots causes, in this case water regimes, is vital.
* The proper bridging of science and policy can produce long-term fundamental changes in ecosystem management.

1. Recommendations. The project has successfully established the long-term foundation for a holistic management of the LV in which biodiversity and ecosystems are now recognized as legitimate water users. This is a major accomplishment and greatly enhances the long-term conservation prospects of these ecosystems. In order for the momentum gained not to be loss and for additional gains to be achieved, the following recommendations are provided:

* Engage the tourism industry to green its practices.
* Continue the long-term ecological monitoring programs.
* Consider introducing systems of payments for environmental services (PES).
* Engage the energy sector to develop biodiversity-friendly practices.
* Follow-up and measure the biodiversity impacts of the micro-credit facility.

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