**Lessons from the Experience of the Ukraine National Protected Area System Project**

1. Below are some of the more significant lessons identified in this evaluation drawn from the project experience, but these should not necessarily be considered comprehensive. The project team has been tracking lessons throughout the project implementation process and is expected to present a review these lessons following the completion of the project. The project team and stakeholders should continue analyzing and drawing on the project experience to identify additional or more comprehensive lessons, and support dissemination of these lessons through documentation in knowledge products.
2. ***Lesson:*** Systemic change is rarely possible without the full support of all necessary stakeholders. In the case of the Ukraine PAs project, the level of support from the most critical government stakeholder, the MoENR, shifted following the change in government in 2010. As a result the project was not able to make significant progress in further institutionalization of some key results in the second half of the project. This included the adoption of the national strategy for PA financing and further adoption of the business planning approach.
3. ***Lesson:*** Any GEF projects that seek to invest in local stakeholder capacity through micro-finance or micro-grant facilities need to strongly consider the level of capacity in the target region, and assess the potential level of absorption of funds in the region. In the Ukraine PAs project the amount of funds to be invested, and the co-financing required, was far too ambitious for the conditions of the target area.
4. ***Lesson:*** Most, if not all, projects would benefit from a clearly defined and articulated Theory of Change during the project development phase. The practical aspects of project design can then be clearly linked with the necessary mechanisms for change within the Theory of Change. The Ukraine PAs project included a large number of activities at the site level, primarily in two pilot sites. These activities proved to be of great practical value, and facilitated strong engagement from local level stakeholders. At the same time, the strategic value of the project investments in these sites with respect to the overall project objective varies, or at least was not fully evident in absence of a strong replication strategy. It would have been helpful if the project design had included a more explicit basis for the strategic value of the site-based activities such as the mini-projects program and investments in PA infrastructure. These are of course valuable and justified investments for strengthening management effectiveness of individual PAs, but with limited resources GEF projects do not have the leisure of making individual PA investments unless there is a strong and explicit strategic rationale.
5. ***Lesson:*** Project activities must be closely aligned with national strategies and priorities, and in some cases it may be necessary to make significant changes to project plans to adapt to changing conditions. In the case of the Ukraine PAs project, following the development and approval of the project the government of Ukraine announced an initiative to significantly expand the national PA system by 2020. In the meantime the project activities were focused on working within the context of the previous system of PAs, and provided little strategic relevance to the national effort to expand the PA system, which was the primary focus for the relevant national institutions, particularly the MoENR. The project might have been able to contribute to more significant systemic changes if it had been able to become well-integrated with and relevant to the PA expansion effort. At the same time, some of the project results, particularly the establishment of the national PA association, are expected to provide important support for the development of the new PAs being established.
6. The lessons identified in the mid-term evaluation also remain relevant, and are included below.
7. ***MTE Lesson:*** The experience of the mini-grants program has shown that a required 2 to 1 co-financing ratio may be beyond the financial capacity of anticipated partners in rural areas. Considering that the per capita GDP for Ukraine in 2009 was less than $2,600, a 2 to 1 co-financing ratio for a $5,000 grant for an individual would imply a co-financing amount equal roughly four years’ wages. In addition, average incomes in rural areas are likely to be lower than in urban areas. Many public-private partners are small and medium enterprises, local governments, or civil society organizations rather than private individuals, but nonetheless, the scale of co-financing required proved to be unworkable. Mini-grants programs implemented in rural areas must be structured to accommodate on-the-ground financial realities.
8. ***MTE Lesson:*** Innovative public events that require relatively little financial investment, such as the hand hay-mowing tournament, can generate significant benefits in terms of public buy-in, awareness, publicity, and revenue generation.
9. ***MTE Lesson:*** Building on previous initiatives, such as the protected areas training program, can increase the cost-effectiveness of investments and leverage greater results than would otherwise be possible if starting from scratch.
10. ***MTE Lesson:*** A well-designed project with realistic goals and objectives can set the foundation for effective project management, leading to efficient achievement of results. The Ukraine Protected Areas System Sustainability project document represents a new and improved example of GEF project documents. The clarity of the project document has allowed the project team to make a strong start on implementing project activities and outputs on time and within budget, instead of having to spend a large amount of time at the beginning of the project trying to discern the objective. This is also partially thanks to low turnover of personnel among involved organizations from the project development to implementation stage.