

CaspEco project Component 1
Seal Special Protected Area Management Plan
Final Report, May 2012

Prepared by

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Introduction

The Caspian seal, *Phoca caspica*, is the only marine mammal in the Caspian and is an endemic species. The seal was a relatively small-bodied and numerous species, with a total estimated population in 1900 of at least 1.2 million animals giving birth to 300–400 thousand pups annually (Härkönen et al., in preparation). The population has declined by more than 90% over the past century to a maximum of about 100 thousand animals giving birth to about 21,000 pups in 2005 (Härkönen et al. 2008; in preparation). This pattern of this decline has been reconstructed using hunting records, and been mainly due to unsustainable hunting, both before and during the Soviet era. Although hunting has declined during the past 15 years, quotas continue to be issued, mainly to the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan, by the region's Aquatic Bioresources Commission; thus hunting, mainly of pups, continues even though the species is almost commercially extinct. In addition, other factors may be exacerbating the decline and inhibiting population recovery. These factors include fisheries by-catch, poaching, habitat destruction, pollution and disease. In addition, profound changes to the ecosystem resulting from anthropogenic introduction of alien species and over-harvesting of sturgeon and bony fish may mean that the potential for population recovery of the Caspian seal may be limited (Härkönen et al., in preparation).

All of these factors contributing to the species decline, with the probable exception of recent disease outbreaks, are anthropogenic, and should therefore be reversible by adopting conservation measures which involve changes in human attitudes and activities. In October 2008, the IUCN status of the Caspian seal was changed from 'vulnerable' to 'endangered', although it has not, as yet, been added to the red list of any Caspian littoral State. The Caspian seal species consists of a single transboundary population, migrating freely throughout the Caspian. Conservation of this species is therefore the joint responsibility of the five Caspian littoral States. In 2007, under a Caspian Environment Programme initiative, the Caspian Seal Conservation Action Plan (CSCAP) was agreed by all five Caspian States. The Plan is dedicated to halting the decline of the Caspian seal and restoring its habitat and population. Since the cause of the catastrophic population decline (excessive hunting) is clear, the required conservation action (stopping hunting) is equally clear (Thompson, 2009). Solutions to the other, ongoing threats faced by the seal population will require a combination of conservation measures. Establishment of a network of Seal Special Protected Areas (SSPAs) would be the first regional programme to implement the CSCAP with an integrated conservation plan.

Development of the SSPA concept during the CaspEco Project

CaspEco SSPA regional meeting in Astana, March 15–16 2010

Creation of a network of Seal Special Protected Areas (SSPAs) for the Caspian seal throughout the Caspian is a major expected output of the CaspEco project COMPONENT 1.

A report was prepared by the University of Leeds team to introduce the SSPA concept in advance of the CaspEco SSPA regional meeting in Astana, March 15–16 2010. This document (Annex 1) outlined the SSPA concept and how it could be applied in the Caspian context.

The SSPA concept

If the Caspian were a pristine environment, free from human impact, SSPAs would not be necessary. However, human activities now impinge upon seals and their habitat at every stage in their life cycle and everywhere in the Caspian. Protected areas are therefore needed either to create a buffer zone between seal critical habitat and human activities or to regulate or relocate human activities in seal critical habitat.

There is considerable precedent for the establishment of seal reserves in sea areas bordered by several littoral States between whom there is agreement on seal conservation under an international convention. Under the Action Plan for the implementation of the HELCOM Project on seals (Anon, 2001), protected areas for seals have been established in the Baltic littoral states of Denmark (10 reserve areas), Estonia (20 reserves), Sweden (23 reserves), the Kattegat (12 reserves), Finland and the Åland islands (10 reserves) (Anon, 2001). In the Wadden Sea, under the Wadden Sea Agreement (Convention of Migratory Species, CMS) seal reserves have been established in the Netherlands (20 reserves), a national park in Lower Saxony, a national park in Schleswig-Holstein, a national park in Hamburg and 3 seal reserves in Denmark (Farke, 1996). Each of these reserves implements specific regulations in relation to recreational boats, landing and fishing. In Estonia, for example, fishing gear dangerous to seals may not be used within 2km of the reserve area.

Decisions on Caspian country proposals for national SSPAs

Each country representative presented a country report on seals at the meeting, and this was followed by extensive discussion (Annex 2). To follow the meeting, each country was asked to submit a formal national report on seal status, habitat and potential SSPAs in their country. These reports were synthesised by the University of Leeds team into a final report, May 2011 (Annex 3).

The final report concluded that there was general agreement among the national report submissions that the conservation status of seals in their sea and coastal sector could benefit from the special protected areas for seals. The reports from Russia, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan referred to seal haul-out areas within existing state reserves, and both Russia and Azerbaijan suggested that other sites might be included in existing state reserves and protection measures strengthened. IR Iran proposed an extensive series of protected coastal sea areas. However, monitoring data on live seals was sparse in Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan and non-existent in Russia and Iran, and there were no specific initiatives suggested in any of the reports. Russian policy at present is to continue hunting of seals, which is contrary to the aims and objectives of the agreed Caspian Seal Conservation Action Plan (CSCAP). Owing to this disarray and lack of impetus in embarking on an SSPA scheme in these countries, the Caspeco team made a decision to continue with the proposal to establish pilot SSPAs in Kazakhstan within the life of the present project.

Kazakhstan has the benefit of hosting the majority of the breeding population in most recent winters by far the largest spring moulting assembly in the Caspian, and high numbers of seals in late autumn as the seals gather in areas adjacent to the forming ice field. The

national report on seals submitted by Kazakhstan (Annex 4 a, b) was quite comprehensive, since it was able to benefit (in late 2010) from the results of 7 years' aerial survey of the seal breeding grounds and annual pup production, 3 years' helicopter survey of haul-out and spring moulting sites and three seasons' satellite tracking to determine migration corridors and foraging patterns. Kazakhstan is therefore in a strong position to develop a pilot SSPA based on current data on critical seal habitat along the Kazakh coastline.

Moreover the Kazakh Government is enthusiastic about leading the pilot project and sharing the experiences and lessons learned with the other countries. In January 2012 the Kazakh National Committee of the UNESCO 'Man and Biosphere' programme devoted a meeting to the status of the Caspian seal, the outcome of which was a resolution (Annex 5) including a series of measures supporting the SSPA development and other components of the CSCAP. In particular, the resolution included a proposal to recommend to the Scientific Committee of the Convention of Migratory species (CMS) inclusion of the Caspian seal. This would be most appropriate, since the CSCAP was based largely on the Wadden Sea Agreement on seal conservation, which was an agreement under CMS.

SSPA role in hierarchy of CSCAP

CSCAP. Conservation of the Caspian seal and its critical habitat must be guided by an overall pan-Caspian plan. This framework plan already exists with the agreement of all five Caspian countries.

Regional Seal Secretariat (RSS). Implementation of the CSCAP would be via a Regional Seal Secretariat (RSS). The role of the Secretariat would be to act as a database for all data pertaining to Caspian seal, as an information centre and as a communications centre. The Secretariat would consist of seal biologists from different Caspian countries together with international scientific advisors. Members of the Secretariat should meet regularly, eg biannually to discuss progress and plans, and to prepare an annual report for distribution to the region and to IUCN. The secretariat office could be the office of a secretariat member – since all data would be electronically stored, no dedicated physical base would be required. The RSS would maintain close links with the Caspian Environment programme.

The RSS would play a pivotal role in the administration and coordination of the SSPA network programme. The Secretariat would discuss and advise the establishment of SSPAs in each country, and provide additional information on seal habitat use in that country from the pan-Caspian seal satellite tagging programme. The Secretariat would maintain close communication with the country Seal Centres in establishment, running and monitoring of SSPAs. Country Seal Centres would report to the RSS at least annually.

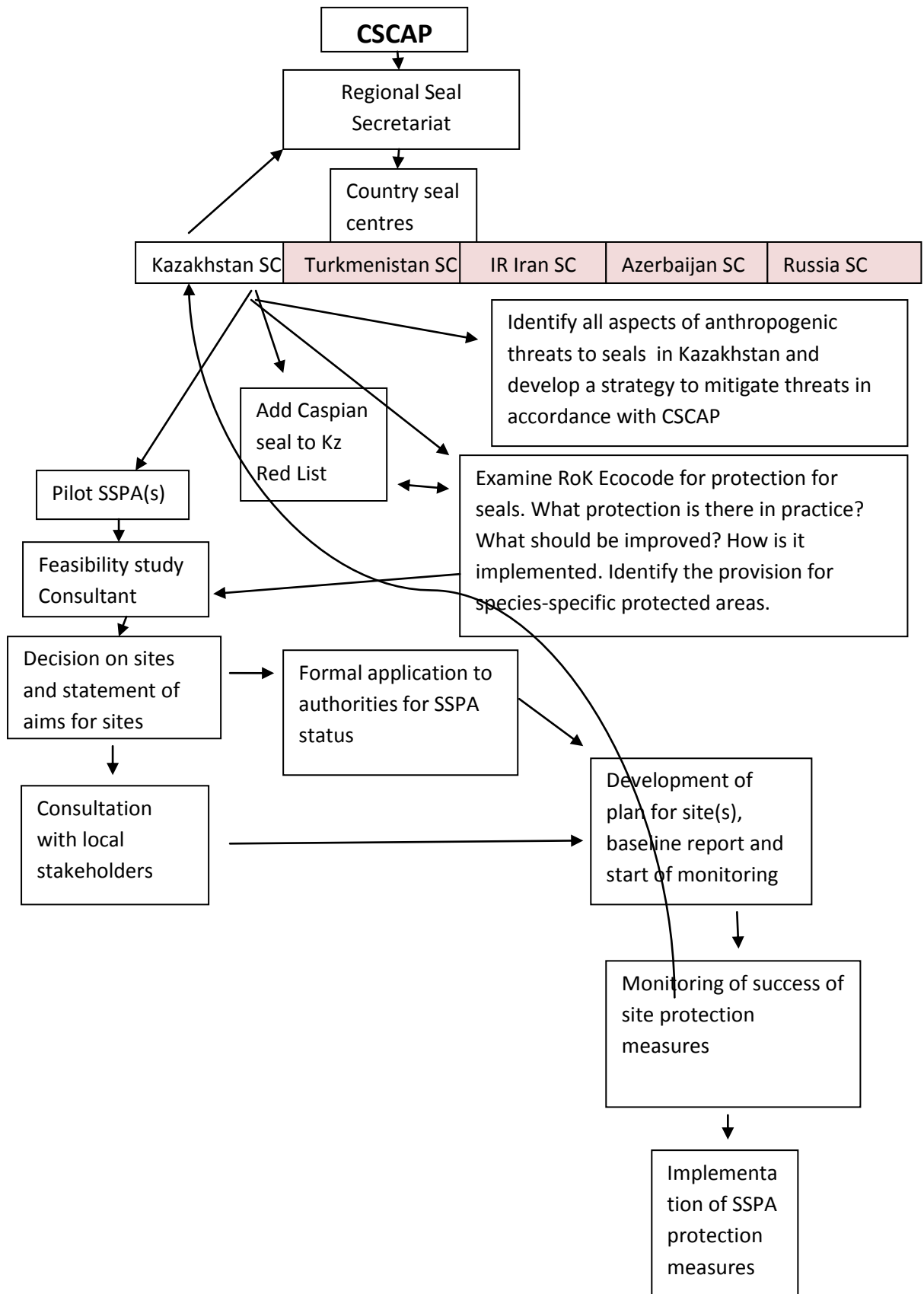


Fig. 1. Proposed structure of pilot SSPA development

Country Seal Centres. Each of the five Caspian countries will establish a country Seal Centre, supported by the national government. The Seal Centres will be physical entities close to the Caspian shore, and accessible to the public, both local residents and visitors. The Centres would fulfil several roles, i.e.

- (i) Assessing the requirements for an effective seal conservation biology action plan on the country's coastline. This will involve – as appropriate or each country - monitoring seal numbers at haul-out sites in different seasons, monitoring diet (from seal scats on haul-out sites), monitoring fisheries by-catch, monitoring mortality and shore strandings, carrying out post-mortem analyses on fresh to moderately decomposed carcasses according to standard international protocol currently in use.
- (ii) A centre for field work relating to seal conservation biology on the country's coastline, storing field equipment, library, computers etc.
- (iii) Exhibitions depicting Caspian wildlife, interdependence of ecosystem components (in line with the CaspEco theme of an ecosystem-based approach to conservation), children's artwork, community activities, talks etc, library of materials – picture books, pamphlets, information videos (including the most recent Caspian Seal film).
- (iv) The centre could be based in an existing centre where there are local specialists involved in the programme, e.g. for Azerbaijan at the Natural History Museum (Dr Tariel Eybatov) in Baku, for I.R. Iran at the Hormoz Asadi Seal Centre in Guilan, with links to the University of Guilan and Plan for the Land), and for Turkmenistan at the Hazar Reserve centre in Turkmenbashi. The centres should be led by a local specialist and have close links with each other (in accordance with the Caspian Seal Conservation Network, as set out in the CSCAP) and with the RSS and the CEP.
- (v) When each country establishes an SSPA within its borders, the Seal Centre would be the centre for administration and coordination of the running of the reserve, and would report biannually to the RSS.
- (vi) Since it has been agreed with CaspEco that the first pilot SSPAs are to be established in Kazakhstan, it is necessary for a Kazakh Seal Centre to be established also, in order to be on the ground to establish and administer the SSPA feasibility study for the pilot SSPAs. A site for the Seal Centre should be selected in the vicinity of the SSPA, and a suitably qualified and dedicated Consultant should be employed by the designated Kazakh Government agency to administer the Centre and lead the feasibility study.

The Kazakh Seal Centre. The Kazakh Seal Centre should be established as the first step towards implementing the CaspEco SSPA project. Since a final decision on the pilot SSPAs has not been taken at the end of the CaspEco project (May 31, 2012), it is recommended that the Seal Centre should be a 'virtual' centre carrying out the initial assessment work via electronic media.

The initial and urgent work of the Kazakh Seal Centre (KzSC) should include the following:

- (i) Review and update the 2010 Kazakhstan National Report on Seals (Annex 4a, b), in collaboration with the international research team (CISS, University of Leeds) and the CEP.
- (ii) List (in tabular form) the critical and most important habitats and locations for seals in Kazakhstan territory, together with current anthropogenic and natural threats to seals and habitats. Present seal habitats and locations in Kazakhstan, according to information available in November 2010, are set out in the National Report part 2 (Annex 4b). Prioritise threats according to the scheme developed by the 2009 Atyrau workshop resolution (Annex 6).
- (iii) List the sections in the Republic of Kazakhstan (RoK) EcoCode, 2007 (Appendix 7) which are most relevant to Caspian seal conservation in Kazakhstan. Since only one of these sections refers specifically to the Caspian seal, prepare a document to assess the practical implications of the EcoCode for Caspian seal conservation and any shortcomings identified in the law, with recommendations as necessary.
- (iv) RoK EcoCode Article 250 (Ch 36) prohibits "*actions that can lead to death, reduction in numbers or damage to the habitat of rare and endangered animals*". Although a case might be made for this prohibition to include the Caspian seal on the basis of the IUCN listing, this section would apply much more strongly to seals, and provide a much more robust basis for SSPA establishment, if the Caspian seal were to be included in the Kazakhstan Red List of Endangered Species. Two previous recent applications to the Kazakh Government (Committee of Fisheries) for Red listing have failed, apparently due to having been 'timed out'. The Seal Centre Personnel should make a new application immediately and ensure that the application is forwarded through the correct channels and is processed in a timely fashion.

Kazakhstan pilot SSPA proposals

- (i) Based on an updated version of the Kazakhstan National report (Annex 4) and in consultation with the international research team (CISS, University of Leeds), a document formally proposing the site for a pilot SSPA should be prepared and submitted to the RSS and the Kazakh government. The document should include

- (a) a justification, explaining how the selected SSPA would contribute to the overall conservation action plan for seals in Kazakhstan, with reference back to the CSCAP
- (b) a prediction of what would be most likely to happen to seals at that site without SSPA establishment.
- (c) The specific aims for the SSPA.

At present it seems that the most effective SSPA to protect seals in the short term would be Komsomolets Bay, Kenderli Bay and the coastal corridor linking both bays. If this decision should indeed be reached, consideration should be given to the location and staffing of the Seal Centre. Possibilities for location could include Aktau sea front, Kenderli resort development, or Fort Schevchenko.

- (ii) The document should show
 - (a) All known information on current and historical use by seals of the site
 - (b) Physical description of the site, including islands and height above current sea level and depth contours
 - (c) All known information on human use of the site, past, present and potential, including fishing (legal and illegal), industrial and recreational development and military use
 - (d) Plan for local stakeholder involvement, including fishers and industrial and recreational developers. Ideally the management plan for the SSPA should succeed in integration of seal protection with human activities in such a way that, for example, legal fisheries would be encouraged to develop sustainable effort and seal-friendly methods with possible seasonal restrictions. The SSPA should be designed to balance seal habitat protection with benefit to local communities, e.g. with eco-tourism opportunities, PR enhancement for industry.
 - (e) Proposed boundaries of SSPA (to include buffer zone)

Formal application for SSPA status to the Kazakh Government

The formal procedure for establishing an SSPA will include the following steps:

- (i) Enlist the support of the Kazakh Government Fisheries Committee, agree terms of reference for development of the Seal Centre and the scientific and economic feasibility studies for the proposed SSPA
- (ii) Seek and secure funding for the Seal Centre and SSPA feasibility studies. It has been suggested that no state resources will be available until 2014. If this is the case, and since this is a Kazakh government project, the Fisheries Committee or responsible agency should assist in seeking interim funding for the project. An estimated 50–70 thousand US\$ will be needed for the feasibility study, in addition to funding the KzSC and staff. The Kazakhstan representative at the CaspEco steering Committee meeting on March 06 2012 apparently stated that

this project should be postponed until 'more research' has been carried out. However, since sufficient information on seals from ongoing research by the international team is now available for making informed decisions on protection measures and SSPAs, it seems likely that the proposed postponement may relate to lack of immediate funding rather than to the need for more research.

- (iii) Announce a tender, to be administered by the Kz Fisheries Committee (FC), among research institutions to affiliate to the KzSC and develop the scientific and economic feasibility study. It is anticipated that the feasibility study would take 1–2 years. The economic study would include obtaining agreement of the local authorities, land owners, water industry and the RoK Land Management Agency.
- (iv) On receipt of the final feasibility study report, the FC will direct the report and recommendations to Ministry of Environment for review.
- (v) The FC develops a budget request for establishing, monitoring and maintaining the Kz Seal Centre and the SSPA and submits this to the Ministry of Finance for approval.
- (vi) The RoK Government then, with KzSC agreement, a draft decree with the KzSC and introduces a formal proposal to establish the SSPA. This proposal will include:
 - (a) the agreed draft decree of the government of RoK
 - (b) positive reviews from judicial and anti-corruption expert panels
 - (c) decisions of the local executive body on reserving coastal plots to establish the SSPA.
- (vii) If the proposal receives a positive review, the Prime Minister of Kazakhstan will sign the decree of the Government of Kazakhstan and designate State bodies to take the necessary measures to implement the decree. After public notification in the media, the SSPA will be legally created and the state body having the SSPA within its competence will start to take measures to develop the SSPA, including the official creation of the KzSC, employment of personnel, financing and transfer of territory to the SSPA.
- (viii) The SSPA administration, together with the international scientific team and local hired specialists, will develop the SSPA management plan. The plan should pass state ecological expert review, be agreed by local agencies and the corresponding state body which has the SSPA within its competence. The baseline data for the management plan include the ongoing research data, historical hunting, fishing and other human use records, and the scientific and economic feasibility studies already undertaken.
- (ix) The SSPA Management plan will be the main judicial document for the SSPA which will govern the management, development and financing of the SSPA. It must be updated and revised annually in association with the KzSC personnel, International scientific team (CISS) and the RSS.
- (x) The timing of this process should be:
 - 2012: Start of 1–2 year feasibility study, to be ready by mid-late 2014

2014: 3rd-4th quarter of 2014 the state environmental review will be received and (in accordance with the field programme 'Zhasyl Damu' for 2010-14, the feasibility study and report authors, together with the FC (and in consultation and cooperation with the Committee of Forestry and Hunting), shall introduce the proposal of SSPA creation to the Kazakh Government.

2015: The State Budgetary Committee will make funding available for the KzSC and pilot SSPA in the budget for 2015. If this proceeds, the Kazakh Government will sign the decree on establishment of the SSPA in the middle of 2015.

2016: The management plan for SSPA will be finally approved.

