What has been achieved by the conservation department of SABUKO? All the details will take us too far to tell. The result of 2021 is quite fruitful and includes the ringing of young Eastern Imperial Eagles on their nests, but we do ring young eagles every year and it was not highlight of 2021, the most successful activity for us was the GPS tagging of first ever young Egyptian vulture in Georgia and collect the valuable information about him/her.

We have started 2021 with counting of wintering little bustards and finally counted about 10,000 individuals on their two main wintering grounds in Georgia – Chachuna managed reserve & Vashlovani National Park.

We had two cases of illegal shooting on eagles this year. Since 2016 Eastern Imperial Eagle is our target species and one of the main aims of SABUKO is to save the local population from extinction in Georgia. It is very challenging work since they face various threats from the day they hatch and fly.

One of the biggest highlights of the year: after a couple years of waiting and doubting, Imperial Eagles occupied one of the several artificial nesting places SABUKO arranged for them near Chachuna MR.
The pilot program of tagging Egyptian vultures was very important since nothing is known about the migration routes of the local Egyptian vultures hatched in Georgia - where they go, when they are coming back to their breeding grounds, or if they come back at all etc. In order to find out as much information as possible our team has tagged one young Egyptian vulture hatched on Kvernaki Ridge. Tagging was successful and the result is already notable after several months. The vulture covered more than 5000 km in 23 days and crossed several middle eastern countries to finally arrive in Africa through Bab al-Mandab Strait that is the strait between African continent and Arabian Peninsula. At the moment our vulture from Kvernaki ridge is travelling in Africa and sending newest information every day with its GPS transmitter. The collected data will be used to plan their future conservation in Georgia.

Since 2020 SABUKO has been implementing the Joint Environmental Monitoring in the Black Sea Basin project, which aims to increase the level of access to transboundary environmental monitoring data and information in Protected areas.

In 2021 SABUKO had an opportunity to obtain three important items for environmental monitoring in Kolkheti National Park. The drone was used within the project for habitat mapping and will be used further for invasive species monitoring in forest studies. The software which is used to map the habitats is DJI Terra. SABUKO has now a permanent user of the software. With the air and water quality monitoring systems we can now measure the parameters necessary to assess the quality and condition of water and ambient air and collect data. This is provided by a wireless touch network that stores the received information on a web-based cloud server. Both air and water systems are located on the shores of Lake Paliastomi.

Administration staff, rangers and stakeholders (students, locals) had an opportunity to participate in different meetings and trainings organized by us.
SABUKO has completed the development of a working version of the Chachuna Reserve Management Plan, the main purpose of which is to define long-term goals for the protected areas and appropriate management approaches. Long-term goals describe the state of core values that the Agency for Protected Areas and Chachuna Managed Reserve Administration aim to achieve within 25 years of the approval of the first management plan.

In the Chachuna managed reserve, SABUKO has arranged watering corridors to help reduce sheep grazing in the forest. With the help of the corridors, it is easier for the shepherds to move the flock in an orderly manner to the watering points. The sheep entering the forest is severely restricted. Chaotically moving sheep in the forest hinder the future growth of plants. Chachuna forest, with its biodiversity, is unique and vital for conservation. Currently, a 6 km-long corridor has been arranged. SABUKO also developed information boards in both Georgian and Azerbaijani languages, which provide information: “Grazing in the forest is prohibited and punishable by law. “Video surveillance is underway.” Information boards are already placed, which will further reduce the entry of sheep into the floodplain forests and illegal grazing.

Moving forward would have been significantly slower process without bold policy work.
According to a hydrological study prepared for restoration purposes, Iori floodplains requires periodic flooding from the Dali Reservoir. To support the natural restoration of the floodplain forest SABUKO has established an agreement with local authorities to periodically release water from Dali Reservoir every spring. To keep released water on-site we have built a gabion. The arrangement of the gabion required the preparation of an appropriate assessment to assess the impact of the activity. It is noteworthy that this activity fully served the conservation of the Chachuna reserve and the floodplain forest, although we have nevertheless assessed the impact. The competent authority approved our assessment and issued a permit to continue construction works.

Approval of regulations for sustainable pasture management

SABUKO is actively advocating for improving legislation supporting sustainable land resource management. Our advocacy began with an analysis of existing legislation. As a result, we identified gaps and shortcomings and prepared a policy brief with recommendations. We communicated with the relevant decision-makers and authorities on the issues and shared our findings. We began working to introduce sustainable pasture management practices on plots that are inside the protected areas. In cooperation with the Agency of Protected Areas and
Dedoplistskaro Municipality, in two leasing agreements, rotational grazing became mandatory.

SABUKO has evaluated the legislative framework and is actively communicating with policymakers and civil society organizations about it. We have been invited to participate in a working group of the Agrarian Issues Committee of Parliament of Georgia to develop laws to enable effective monitoring and management of state-owned agricultural land resources. As a result, the parliament has recently issued a new ordinance, “On approval of the state program on access to state-owned pastures”, in which our comments and recommendations were reflected. The programme aims to improve the rational use and access to the state owned-pastures; prevent pasture degradation; promote livestock development and production of local products in Georgia and improve the socio-economic state for farmers employed in the livestock sector. The framework has already been developed, and new guidelines have suggested that stocking rates must be agreed prior to leasing. In the case of Chachuna MR, a pasture management plan has already been established, which takes stocking rates and a rotational grazing method into consideration.

SABUKO deepened relations with the Agrarian Affairs Committee of the Parliament of Georgia in order to monitor the implementation of the law in the future and share the existing results with them, and if necessary, make changes.
SABUKO continues to support local farmers in introducing rotational grazing. We have completed the construction of a bridge for a beneficiary farmer involved in the rotational grazing scheme. The bridge helps the farmer to connect two pastures and introduce a rotational grazing scheme.

SABUKO has finished the rotational grazing scheme for 3 new Azerbaijani farmers that introduced rotational grazing on more than 2,000 ha of private pastures. Under the Memorandum of Understanding with the Agency of Protected Areas and SABUKO, APA handed over 900 hectares of pasture to two local farmers on the basis of the lease agreement, which also incorporates a pasture management plan, e.g. rotational grazing scheme developed by SABUKO.

SABUKO, along with the Ilia State University and international students, monitored and collected data in Chachuna MR to assess the status of the vegetation cover to further compare the anticipated impact of rotational grazing based on the randomly chosen plots and preliminary settled methodology. SABUKO's internship program has already supported more than eight students gain fieldwork experience and gave them the opportunity to integrate academic knowledge with practical skills. SABUKO is also using 9 GPS trackers to monitor the implementation of the rotational grazing scheme as well as greatly enhance the knowledge of sheep flock grazing behavior.

To promote the export of the local farmers’ products, SABUKO, together with the Export Development Association, conducted the sheep and sheep products’ survey providing information regarding milk and dairy products, sheep meat and meat products, live sheep, and sheep wool. The research also contained information on sales channels, technical regulations, and standards in Georgia, EU, and GCC countries.

SABUKO facilitates the restoration of existing habitats, species in the Reserve and surrounding areas and their conservation through the introduction of ecotourism services. Under the Global Environment Facility (GEF) Small Grants Program, we...
plan to develop ecotourism, which will increase both the economic income of the Chachuna administration and the degree of protection of the managed reserve, while the increased revenue will focus on the conservation of Chachuna MR. Within the project, SABUKO is producing a business plan for the development of ecotourism that will be implemented in cooperation with the administration of the reserve and with the involvement of local service providers. In addition, ecotourism infrastructure will be built and improved (bungalows, campsite, vulture restaurant, bird watching point), and online and print information materials will be developed to popularize the area. It is also planned to upgrade information boards and signs in the area to make travel to Chachuna as safe and comfortable as possible for visitors.
Advocacy

In the last few years SABUKO’s successful advocacy work got a lot of spotlight, despite of countless challenges and flawed legislation and practices.

We are still pursuing an advocacy campaign for two wind power plants on the Kvernaki ridge. As the permits were issued for both developments, SABUKO appealed both decisions to the Tbilisi City Court. It should be noted that both decisions are important as they explicitly state the potential dangers that SABUKO was pointing to. To gather scientific evidence and use it in the advocacy process, we tagged an Egyptian Vulture to gather data and general information about the vulture’s flight routes. Based on this activity, the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture requested one of the companies (Chalik Georgia Wind) to tag vultures and continue the observation and monitoring of vultures. The competent authority also requested to consider the possibility of reducing turbines quantity in areas where the high concentration of Egyptian Vultures are represented.

Given the planned developments of Wind Power in Georgia, SABUKO prepared a “Guidance document for on-shore wind farm development in Georgia” with the support of Birdlife International. The guidance document intends to guide wind energy developers, investors, local authorities, and community organisations to appreciate potential conservation and biodiversity issues related to on-shore wind farm development in Georgia. The document was already published on the organisation’s social media resources. It is planned to issue printed versions of the document and share it with all relevant stakeholders.
SABUKO seeks relationships with the private sector that are interested in environmentally friendly activities. At this stage, we are starting a partnership with one of the largest private groups, with the cooperation of which it will be possible to conduct research, as well as various campaigns for the conservation of species, as well as for sustainable activities.

Since SABUKO has gained experience in advocating for infrastructure projects in November 2021 we began implementation of the 12-months project “Strengthening local community involvement in the environmental decision-making process”. The project financed through the U.S. embassy democracy commission small grant program aims to increase civic participation in decision-making and monitoring of large-scale infrastructure development projects in Georgia through a dedicated capacity development programme on environmental advocacy. Two central results are expected to be achieved by the project:

- Civil society actors are empowered to effectively influence EIA and infrastructure development construction processes at the local level
- Local communities are informed about the environmental and social aspects and effects of large-scale infrastructure development projects

Among the important documents developed by SABUKO in 2021 are the management plans for the emerald territories of the Chorokhi Delta and Kvernaki Ridge. It was especially important for Sabuko to develop a management plan for these areas, as both Kvernaki Ridge and Chorokhi Delta are at risk of unwanted infrastructural development. SABUKO’s advocacy campaigns on wind power developments are related to the Kverkani ridge.
Over the past year, SABUKO has been actively involved in ongoing political processes in environmental protection, in particular, both in the drafting of new bills and in the discussions of initiated legislative changes.

SABUKO was actively involved in the process of drafting and improving new draft law on biodiversity. The vast majority of recommendations are reflected in the current version of the legislation.

In 2021, the Ministry presented the draft law of Georgia on water resources management, the working meetings of which will be held in 2022. SABUKO reviewed the draft law submitted by the Ministry and intends to participate in the final drafting of the law.

SABUKO is actively engaged in processes that are related to the country’s environmental strategies. In this regard, we presented our views on Georgia’s 2030 Climate Change Strategy and 2021-2023 Action Plan. We presented our views and remarks on various issues that are important to achieve the conservation goals set by SABUKO. Our recommendations were reflected in the final version of the strategy.
Awareness raising

SABUKO in cooperation with Caucasus Nature Fund produced a breathtaking documentary movie “Facing the Desert”. The documentary is available for the audience in both Georgian and English languages with the relevant subtitles. The movie overviewed the ecosystem and biodiversity of Chachuna MR with an aim to increase public involvement and support for environmental conservation.

SABUKO has developed training materials to support local administration in law enforcement. During the reporting period, SABUKO initiated and already conducted the joint patrol with rangers, equipped with video recorders. In order to increase the capacity for law enforcement, SABUKO provides regular training sessions.

Relevant part of raising awareness about the topics SABUKO works on is environmental education, which is in hands of motivated professionals who created lots and lots of classes, modules, activities, events, materials, etc. for children and adults.

2021 significantly limited SABUKO’s education activities and possibilities. COVID impacted outreach to schools and events that were planned for bigger audience. Therefore SABUKO worked to modify existing programs and found new opportunities for delivering environmental education.
Education modules were developed for outdoor education. They’re easily accessible on www.sabuko.org. The idea behind education modules giving possibility to every educator to organize and implement outdoor education programs independently.

“Story Walk” for young children was offered in Botanical garden birdwatching trail in order to promote birdwatching.

The course “Birdwatching for beginners” was offered to teenagers in two languages, finished with bird walks and practice.

SABUKO in Museum – running for 3 years, has been restarted.

Annual environmental education program – SpringAlive, was repeated with urban bird walks. In parallel teachers were supported with activities to get involved in SpringAlive project.

Outdoor summer camps with different environmental topics were offered to young children and families.

Three boards on Turtle Lake environmental education trail were renewed and updated with information.

Several bird walks for schools and adults were organized.
As in recent years, SABUKO's education team had 3 main focus groups: Schools, young families and people interested in our work.

The activities are divided in 3 main directions: regular events and activities, irregular, opportunistic events and activities, working with schools.

SABUKO in Museum is a monthly program for young children. Every month different topic with fun, educational games are offered in the Caucasus Biodiversity hall of the Museum of Georgia. SpringAlive is a simple, international project that aims to raise awareness about migratory birds. Through 7 different species, children learn about migration, the importance of gathering data, threats and citizen science. The main activity is the creation of the live interactive map, but every BirdLife partner organizes different educational activities for local communities.

Urban Birding is the project SABUKO started in 2018. The aim of the ongoing tours is to raise awareness about urban birds, threats, conservation work and the organization. Due to its’ popularity, urban walks are offered annually, usually from March to June.

Young Naturalists were established in order to offer outdoor activities during the pandemic. The program consisted of three weekly meetings with different environmental topics for younger children.

Birdwatching for Beginners is a course organized in 8-10 meetings, divided in two parts: theoretical and practical. Theoretical part includes bird anatomy, taxonomy, adaptations, recognition and identification. Practical part includes birdwatching for garden birds, excursion at Krtsanisi ponds for practicing identification of water birds.
In the framework of strengthening the financial sustainability of the system of protected areas in Georgia, SABUKO, in cooperation with the Vashlovani Friends Association, has completed the renewal of the Vashlovani Protected Areas Management Plan.

In this reporting period, SABUKO was invited to be part of the Scientific Council of the Georgian Protected Areas. This is a new development under the recommendation given by the Head of the Biodiversity Department of the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture of Georgia. Its function will be to evaluate any project being implemented within PAs. Scientific Council will strengthen the institutional structure of the Agency of Protected Areas through periodic consultations.
DONORS AND PARTNERS