

Saving Armenia's Shikahogh Nature Reserve: The Government's Plan for a New "Strategic" Road Verses a Coalition's Fight to Save a Wonder of Nature

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For the past two years I have been working with colleagues from the Armenian Ministry of Nature Protection and the Russian Academy of Sciences on a collaborative study of the endangered Armenian viper, *Montivipera raddei*. On my last trip in May 2005 my Armenian colleagues, Aram Aghasyan and Alexander Malkhasyan, were obviously upset about a government policy issue that had recently surfaced involving the future of Shikahogh Nature Reserve in southern Armenia. At first I did not fully understand the problem at hand or the impact that it would have on the reserve. However, when we visited the site and the details of the issue became clearer, I began to grasp the seriousness of the problem and why prompt action was required.

So what exactly was the issue that had everyone up in arms? The Ministry of Transport and Communication of the Republic of Armenia had recently ordered the development of a construction project for the Kapan-Tsav-Shvanidzor freeway, which would cut through the Mtnadzor gorge of the Shikahogh Nature Reserve. To make matters worse they had completely bypassed the environmental impact assessment process and would be violating several national laws and international treaties. This essay will begin with an introduction to Armenia's forest crisis and the value of Shikahogh Nature Reserve. I will then examine the politics and implications of the proposed construction project as well as the impact that the coalition involving the Ministry of Nature Protection, NGOs, universities, and numerous individuals had on the outcome of this conservation issue.

Armenia covers 11,505.84 square miles and is the smallest of the former Soviet republics. It is estimated that approximately 40 – 45% of Armenia was historically covered by forests (Tufenkian 2005). At the onset of the 19th century forested land had been reduced to 25%, covering approximately 2,800 square miles. Over the course of the next 200 years, human activities such as unregulated tree harvesting and extensive land clearance for cattle grazing and agriculture would result in the destruction of over 1,700 square miles of Armenia's forests (Kauffeld 24 Feb. 2006). Following the collapse of the Soviet Union 15 years ago Armenia's environmental problems began to spiral out of control. With only 900 square miles or 8% of Armenia's forest remaining, the environment is considered to be in a state of crisis. If current deforestation rates continue, all of Armenia's forests will be eliminated by 2025 (Kauffeld 24 Feb. 2006).

Armenia had to endure a major energy crisis during the mid 1990s which had devastating consequences for the environment. As the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan heated up over Nagorno-Karabakh, Turkey and Azerbaijan instituted an energy blockade in 1995 (Wilson et al. 2000). The blockade resulted in a lack of fuel sources and subsequently led to severe deforestation. During the winters of 1996 and 1997 people were so desperate for warmth that they had to resort to any source of wood they could find, including the wooden slats of park benches (Wilson et al. 2000). It is estimated that the energy crisis resulted in the loss of thousands of trees. Although alternate heating sources, such as electricity and propane, are now available in some areas, many rural communities still rely on wood as a primary fuel source. The combination of fuel wood collection and illegal harvesting of trees for commercial

purposes results in the loss of 12,500 acres of forest annually (Armenia Tree Project 24 Feb. 2006).

Approximately 600,000 Armenians reside in rural forest villages and rely on subsistence farming. The government allows each of these families to collect 6.5 cubic yards of wood per year to use for cooking and heating. It is estimated that all of these families combined use half a million cubic yards of wood annually. Although this is a substantial quantity of wood, it is the amount that can be sustainably supplied on a yearly basis by Armenia's remaining forests (Kauffeld 24 Feb. 2006). If sustainable practices are being followed by the villagers, then what is causing the continued decline of Armenia's forests? It appears that corruption and illegal harvesting are at the heart of the problem. "Criminal elements, registered businesses, and even the government are cutting trees to make a short-term profit while destroying Armenia's long-term ability to sustain its people and protect its environment (Kauffeld 24 Feb. 2006)". Bribes are routine and allow truckloads of illegally harvested wood to be transported from remote forests to the capital city of Yerevan. The only forests that remain untouched are those that are inaccessible (Kauffeld 24 Feb. 2006). Are these forests really safe? Maybe not, the policy output being addressed in this essay may have had devastating consequences for Armenia's remaining tract of virgin timber.

Shikahogh Nature Reserve was established in 1958 and is one of only three state reserves. It is located in southern Armenia close to the Iranian border. Shikahogh covers an expanse of 25,000 acres and is the second largest forest reserve in Armenia. Due to its remote locality and the protection that has been provided by the inhabitants of the nearby villages, Shikahogh has been relatively unaffected by the unprecedented deforestation

that has occurred following the collapse of the Soviet Union (Danielyan 2005). The reserve is home to over 1,100 species of plants, of which 70 are considered threatened or endangered and have been listed in the Red Book of Armenia. Although the fauna of Shikahogh has not yet been fully studied it is known that many rare species including the black grouse, Armenian viper, bezoar goat, moufflon sheep and Persian leopard reside in the reserve (Armenia Tree Project 14 June 2005). In fact, Shikahogh is considered one of the last strongholds for the leopard in Armenia. It is estimated that between 5 and 12 leopards occur in the reserve (Grigorian 2005).

With a basic understanding of Armenia's devastating forest crisis as well as a brief introduction to the importance of Shikahogh Nature Reserve, I would now like to introduce the governmental policy output that could have forever changed Shikahogh. On 11 April 2005 numerous bulldozers and an assortment of other earthmoving equipment were transported to the villages of Tsav and Shikahogh, adjacent to Shikahogh Nature Reserve. Many local residents including Ruben Mkrtchyan, the director of Shikahogh Nature Reserve, were curious about all this heavy equipment that had arrived at their doorstep. Later that day a report on the television news indicated that the construction of the new Kapan-Tsav-Shvandizor freeway was about to begin (Grigorian et al. 2005). How could a project of this magnitude, with potentially devastating consequences for Shikahogh Nature Reserve, be about to get underway without even the director of the reserve knowing about it? Mkrtchyan made a few phone calls and discovered that he wasn't the only one in the dark. A substantial number of other departments, including the Ministry of Nature Protection, knew nothing about this impending project (Grigorian et al. 2005).

Further investigation revealed that the Ministry of Communication and Transportation was the department responsible for initiating the freeway project. Upon their order the Transproject CJSC had developed the necessary construction documents that would have the road crossing through Shikahogh Nature Reserve. Transproject representatives said that the ministry's documents never mentioned "forest" or "reserve", and instead used the word "section" (Grigorian et al. 2005). The government authorized the plans and submitted them to President Robert Kocharian for ratification (Armenia Tree Project 14 June 2005). However, before a construction project such as this can proceed, an environmental impact assessment by the Ministry of Nature Protection must be completed for the area under consideration. In this case, upon the order of the Ministry of Communication and Transportation, the State Purchasing Agency organized the financing (\$16 million) for the road construction and awarded contracts to four construction companies prior to the completion of the required impact assessment (Grigorian et al. 2005).

With the heavy equipment on site and ready to proceed, you definitely get the impression that the Ministry of Communication and Transportation was hoping to get their project underway and completed before anyone could stop them. However, that didn't happen. There was an immediate outcry by local residents, NGOs, and nature protection agencies (Krikorian 2005). The primary question asked by all of these groups was why the highway must pass through Shikahogh Nature Reserve. The Ministry of Communication and Transportation responded by saying that a new road was needed to make commercial travel from Iran to Yerevan less treacherous during the winter. Armenia receives approximately 10% of its import products from Iran (Krikorian 2005).

Environmentalists, including WWF- Armenia director Dr. Karen Manvelyan, contend that a new road using their planned route would not have any advantages over the existing road. The grade is too steep and the northern slopes would be closed during the winter due to snow (Krikorian 2005).

Other sources indicated that the government was building the road for “strategic reasons”. “As it stands in nature’s blessings, unless tanks, trucks, and artillery can fly, the trees provide a natural barrier to heavy invasion (Mooradian 2005)”. The construction of a new road through Shikahogh Nature Reserve would provide invaders with a route directly from Armenia’s southern border to the capital city of Yerevan (Mooradian 2005). Although government officials continued to tout the “strategic” importance of the new highway, none of them could explain why they had selected the specific route through the reserve (Krikorian 2005).

Due to the numerous complaints that the Ministry of Communication and Transportation received about their proposed routing of the new road through Shikahogh, they sent engineers from their office to re-examine the area and look for alternative routes. However, it soon became apparent that this was only done to placate the community. Tamar Ghalechyan, director of the ministry’s press department, released a statement on 17 May 2005 indicating that “the ministry had not changed its mind and that the road would be constructed as planned; that is, it will pass right through the middle of Mtnadzor (Grigorian et al. 2005)”. The Ministry of Defense joined forces with the Ministry of Communication and Transportation and together they jointly stated that they were not considering any alternative routes and had every intention of moving forward with construction as planned. However, there was not harmonious agreement within the

government for the plan. Vardan Ayyvazyan, the Minister of Nature Protection, had announced that he would resign if the road construction bisected Shikahogh Reserve (Environment News Service 7 June 2005).

The continued resistance by the Ministry of Communication and Transportation to examine alternative routes for the highway had conservationists questioning the real motives for the project. Many believed that the “strategic” road was simply a plan for gaining access to the valuable old growth oak forest. It was estimated that the 14,000 mature and 90,000 younger trees that would be destroyed by the bulldozers had a combined value of one million dollars (Krikorian 2005). Conservationists were also concerned with the government’s discussion of changing the status of Shikahogh from that of a nature reserve to a national park. Such a change would legalize the road construction and would open Shikahogh to illegal poaching and logging (Krikorian 2005).

While the Ministries of Defense and Communication and Transport remained unwavering in their determination to construct a new highway through Shikahogh Reserve, an opposing coalition called “SOS Shikahogh” was gaining strength and size. This coalition was comprised of more than 40 NGOs and scientific organizations, both local and international, and included the World Wildlife Fund, Armenian Forest NGO, Armenian Assembly of America, and the Armenia Tree Project. Representatives from these NGOs worked “together to identify viable alternatives to the proposed route which would do less environmental damage (Environment News Service 7 June 2005)”. Influential Armenian Diaspora from the United States including Carolyn Mugar (founder of the Armenia Tree Project), Hrair Hovnanian (chairman, Armenian Assembly of

America) and the Jeffrey Tufenkian (president of the Armenian Forests NGO) provided crucial support to SOS Shikahogh (Paskevichyan 2005).

In early June 2005 construction of the new road was suspended by the government for a period of 15 days. This was a direct result of the extensive media coverage that the project had received (Krikorian 2005). The Republic of Armenia is a signatory to several international conventions including the UN Convention on Biodiversity, UN Convention to Combat Desertification, UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, and the European Convention on Landscape. Through the continued efforts of the SOS Shikahogh coalition, it was brought to public attention that the Armenian government would be violating these international conventions if it allowed the road construction in Shikahogh (Armenia Tree Project 14 June 2005). The construction project would also be breaking numerous national laws (Law on Flora, Law on Fauna, and Law on Specially Protected Areas) and blatantly contradicting several governmental decrees such as the National Action Plan for Development of Specially Protected Areas (Krikorian 2005).

A public forum organized by the SOS Shikahogh coalition was held at the American University of Armenia in Yerevan on 17 June 2005. The coalition invited the relevant governmental ministries to attend the forum. Many environmentalists considered this forum to be pivotal not only to preserving Shikahogh Reserve, but to the future of Armenia's forests as well (Krikorian 2005). During the forum Andranik Manukyan, the Minister of Transportation and Vardan Ayvazyan, the Minister of Nature Protection announced that the government had decided to select a new route for the highway that would bypass Shikahogh Reserve (Armenia Tree Project 1 July 2005).

Manukyan went on to say that the decision to reconsider the plans for the road was due to “strategic problems”, not because of pressure from the SOS Shikahogh coalition (Grigorian 2005).

Although the government tried to downplay the role that the SOS Shikahogh coalition had in its decision to alter the route of the highway, it was their persistent, unyielding battle that ultimately saved Shikahogh Nature Reserve. There are a number of factors that contributed to this victory: 1) individuals and organizations united to save a significant natural treasure that the government was determined to destroy, 2) the government could not justify their policy decision for the planned road construction and it became apparent that personal profit was the real motive, 3) there was unprecedented cooperation between NGOs and the local government of the Syunik Province (site of Shikahogh Reserve) that was unwavering to the end, and 4) the SOS Shikahogh coalition had the support and participation of prominent Armenian Diaspora (Paskevichyan 2005).

The conservation issue described in this essay is unique due to the fact that the policy issue involved did not drag out over years or decades, but was “resolved” in the course of about two months. Although it is hard to pigeon hole the type of policy that was really at work in this situation, distributive policy seems to be the one that fits the situation best. In this particular case governmental officials would directly benefit as would a small number of construction and logging companies. There were two coalitions at work: 1) the Ministry of Communication and Transportation and the Ministry of Defense who were advocating the construction of the road, and 2) SOS Shikahogh comprised of a strong force of 40 NGOs that were opposed to the route. It is apparent that the governmental ministries involved were not anticipating the magnitude of

resistance they received to their proposal or that there would be such a strong, cohesive coalition fighting to save Shikahogh Nature Reserve. Many believe that had it not been for the campaign launched by the environmental groups Armenia would have lost one of its most valuable natural treasures. This case is best exemplified by two questions asked at the public forum by Nora Hakobyan, chairwoman of the Republican Women’s Council of Armenia. “If there had not been active discussion by ecological organizations, wouldn’t Shikahogh have disappeared? Who bears responsibility for failing to make an analysis before taking a decision about such a state program? (Deheryan 2005)”.

In the end, the victorious public movement to save Shikahogh set a new precedent in Armenia. The citizens and NGOs now have a renewed sense of confidence and strength. The fight for Shikahogh demonstrated that if they are united and persistent they can be successful in stopping governmental “strategic” cynicism (Paskevichyan 2005).

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