

Georgian Environmentalists Fear Hunting Free-For-All

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Deregulation will bring in plenty of cash from foreign hunters, but already endangered species will be on offer.

The Georgian government is determined to open up hunting as a commercial industry, dismissing concerns about the environmental impact of deregulation.

Parliament's environment committee has already begun discussing changes to the law to allow licensed hunting of all animal and bird species, even in national parks and nature reserves.

Environmental groups have appealed to parliamentarians to block the changes, which they say will threaten the survival of Georgia's bears, deer and other fauna.

"We think that the amendments will have an entirely negative result. Specifically, several endangered species listed in the Red Book will be at risk of complete extinction," the statement, signed by Green Alternative and the NACRES conservation centre, said. "Once permission is granted for hunting in national parks, there will be almost nowhere in Georgia where wild animals can breed under natural conditions."

Environmentalists said the changes would result in short-term financial gain from hunting tourism, and long-term damage with the loss of flagship species like the bezoar ibex, a kind of wild goat, whose numbers have only recovered thanks to investment in conservation.

"Hunting the wild goat will be legalised when there are just a few individuals left. The species was reintroduced from abroad so that it could breed here," Rezo Getiashvili of the Caucasus Environmental NGO Network said. "That means a hunter will pay 100 laris to destroy something that's had millions spent on it."

Getiashvili said deregulation would endanger the conservation aid funds that Georgia receives from the European Union and the United Nations.

The architects of the bill, parliamentarians Pavle Kublashvili, Kakhaber Anjaparidze and Zviad Kukava, denied that it was in breach of the country's international commitments.

"The main aim of revising the law is to simplify the procedures for hunting, which will [create revenue and] allow more public services to be provided," they said in an explanatory note when the bill was submitted.

Georgia's opposition parties have not so far spoken out against the changes, and a number of their members have described it as a step forward.

"Hunting tourism will bring Georgia ten times more than normal tourism," said Gogi Topadze, head of the Industry Will Save Georgia party, and the owner of a hunting business. "We have many pointless restrictions, and I am glad that parliament has now realised the need for these amendments."

But other hunters were not so sure. Gogita Iobidze, a member of the Hunters' Council, which issues licenses and represents the interests of the hunting community, said he could not understand why the government would allow people to kill protected species in game reserves.

"Even without a law in place, seasoned hunters know that you need to protect species like wild mountain goats. The law has deterred poachers all this time, but what now? Can you do as you like, as long as you pay?" he asked.

Another hunter, who gave his first name as Zura, said the current law did need to be amended – but the changes being proposed went too far.

"Wolves can create problems by killing livestock in Georgian villages, but people can't do anything about it, since hunting them is banned and carries a hefty fine. Of course that needs to change. It would also be good if we were allowed to cull deer," he said. "But decisions like these should be taken in the interests of environmental protection, and in the public interest, and not to obtain meat or money."

The Green Alternative group agreed with the hunters, saying the proposal would put a monetary value on the environment. Irakli Macharashvili, a programme coordinator for the group, said that could have the positive effect of bringing tough action against poaching.

However, Macharashvili warned that lack of supervision was a more likely outcome. He said the documents submitted alongside the bill made it clear that the changes would not cost extra money, and also that the

the environment ministry would be in charge of controlling the hunting of endangered species. But the ministry has been shorn of many of its powers, and its environmental inspectorate was abolished three months ago. (See **Georgian Ecology Ministry to Lose Powers**.)

“There will be no real monitoring of hunting,” he said. “There’s just no one to do it.”

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