

Bringing the Golden Eagle Back to Kazakhstan: A Community Helps Restore Traditions and Develop Policy

SGP Grantee: Remez

Location: Almaty region, southeastern Kazakhstan

Ecosystem Type: mountain

Biodiversity Significance: Global 200 Ecoregion 111 (Middle Asian Montane Steppe and Woodlands)

Key Themes: species conservation, policy development, ecotourism

SGP Contribution: \$40,410 (November 2000)

Background

The golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) is both culturally and historically important to the Kazakh people. The birds, symbols of pride and freedom, have been used by traditional falconers (*berkutchi*, from the Kazakh word for the eagles, *berkut*) to hunt small animals in the mountains and plains. However, the eagles are now threatened in Kazakhstan, and are listed in the country's Red Book. Habitat loss and pesticides used in agriculture threaten their survival, and so does poaching. Traditional falconry has become popular again, but this has encouraged poachers to trap and sell them to rich customers, who do not know how to care for them.

Implementation

Remez, itself named after a bird of prey, is a community organization in the Almaty region. With SGP support, this group launched a new initiative to protect the eagles and falcons from poaching, and instead to encourage tourism around the responsible practice of traditional falconry. The group began by monitoring the birds, regularly checking on 35 nests and feeding the birds in the winter. In addition to collaborating with bird specialists, Remez is also working with farmers, shepherds and hunters, many of whom have also gotten involved in protecting the nesting places. Local residents collect data to help track the progress of the eagles, falcons and other birds of prey in the area.

At the same time, Remez has raised awareness about the plight of the birds and is promoting ecotourism as an option for local income generation. To make ecotourism possible, more infrastructure and training is necessary. A falconry museum is being planned, and Remez has sponsored educational programs about traditional falconry, which, along with the region's natural beauty, would be a draw for tourists. Women are also involved through the development of local handicrafts as souvenirs.

However, to ensure that the birds would also benefit from these efforts, the practice of falconry needs to be properly regulated. Remez worked with the Institute of Zoology in Kazakhstan to develop appropriate regulations about the capture and keeping of rare birds, including the golden eagle. These regulations have been submitted to the Committee for Hunting and Forestry.

Results and Partnerships

Although the ecotourism activities are still being developed, the monitoring and protection of eagle nesting places is already paying off in higher local bird counts. Careful monitoring of the nests by project members has also reduced poaching levels. Awareness about the birds and support for ecotourism plans have greatly increased thanks to Remez's close work with a diverse set of stakeholders, ranging from ornithologists to local farmers and school children. Local authorities are also involved, and will be instrumental in enforcing falconry regulations, once they are in place. Remez is well on its way to restoring the golden eagle in its natural habitat and to its traditional place of honor, while opening new avenues for income generation in the Almaty region.

