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Seoul, Republic of Korea

**REVIEW OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION**

(Item 5(b) of the provisional agenda)

**Biodiversity and Nature Conservation**

*Note by the Secretariat*

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## I. BACKGROUND

1. Following the adoption of the NEASPEC Nature Conservation Strategy at the SOM-12 in 2007,<sup>1</sup> NEASPEC has implemented projects on the conservation of its six flagship species including three feline species (Amur tiger, Amur leopard and Snow leopard) and three migratory bird species (Black-faced spoonbill, White-naped crane and Hooded crane) in connection with the overall goals of the Strategy. Those projects aim to contribute to biodiversity conservation strategy of, promote transboundary and intergovernmental cooperation on, and enhance coordinated mechanisms for the target species and their habitats. The nature conservation programme has taken a two-track approach: one for the targeted feline species and the other for migratory birds and their habitats.

### *Conservation of targeted feline species*

2. The Secretariat has implemented a project titled “Transboundary cooperation on the conservation of Amur tigers, Amur leopards and Snow leopards in North-East Asia” since 2020, upon the approval by the SOM-23 in 2019. Financially supported by the Government of the Russian Federation, the project contains three components which were jointly developed by experts from China, Mongolia and the Russian Federation. The Secretariat has been closely working with implementing partners by issuing five letters of Agreement (LOAs).

3. The interim outcomes of the project were reviewed at the Workshop on conservation of big cats in transboundary areas of North-East Asia with project partners virtually on 12 October 2021. The workshop reiterated the importance of a joint cross-border protected area and ecological corridors and the need of an effective cooperation mechanism to manage habitats between neighboring countries.

4. As a follow-up of the Project component 3, a new project concept “*Evaluation of the current status of transboundary snow leopard subpopulations in the border area between Mongolia and the Russian Federation*” was shared with the NEASPEC National Focal Points in June 2022 for ad-hoc approval, and the project has been implementing since August 2022.

### *Conservation of migratory birds and habitats*

5. Migratory birds and their habitats are key biological indicators for the ecological connectivity of member States in North-East Asia as the flagship species connect multiple countries into one ecologically borderless community. Key findings of eight scoping surveys and two joint studies conducted in the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) and the Dauria International Protected Areas (DIPA) in 2014-2016 have shown that while there is significant

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.neaspec.org/sites/default/files/Publication\\_SavingNatureConservation\\_2.pdf](http://www.neaspec.org/sites/default/files/Publication_SavingNatureConservation_2.pdf)

potential in bringing multilateral actions to conserve wider habitats and biodiversity, current protected areas are no longer adequate to conserve the concerned species, and the key habitats in the subregion were not properly protected by the domestic policies in the surveyed areas.<sup>2</sup>

6. Furthermore, the joint study on “Connectivity Conservation and Transboundary Cooperation in North-East Asia” carried out by the Korea Environment Institute in 2017 suggested establishing a “North-East Asia Transboundary Protected Areas Network” to ensure the long-term conservation of most threatened species and valuable landscapes in the subregion. Built upon the field study completed in March 2014 on the Rason Migratory Bird Reserve in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPR Korea), the transboundary area in the lower Tumen River was considered as a concrete example for a follow-up research project and potential actions to establish coordination mechanisms for transboundary cooperation among member States.

7. Member States at the SOM-22 and the SOM-23 further considered strengthening the coordination among protected areas located along or near the national boundaries, including through creating a transboundary protected area, such as the transboundary Ramsar site. Member States approved the plan to conduct surveys and study visits in the lower Tumen River, with targets of the wetlands in the Jingxin and Fangchuan National Park in China and the Khasansky Nature Park in the Russian Federation, in addition to the the Rason Migratory Bird Reserve in the DPR Korea.

## II. PROGRESS OF THE ACTIVITIES ON CONSERVATION OF BIG FELINE SPECIES

*Key findings of the project on “Transboundary cooperation on the conservation of Amur tigers, Amur leopards and Snow leopards in North-East Asia”*

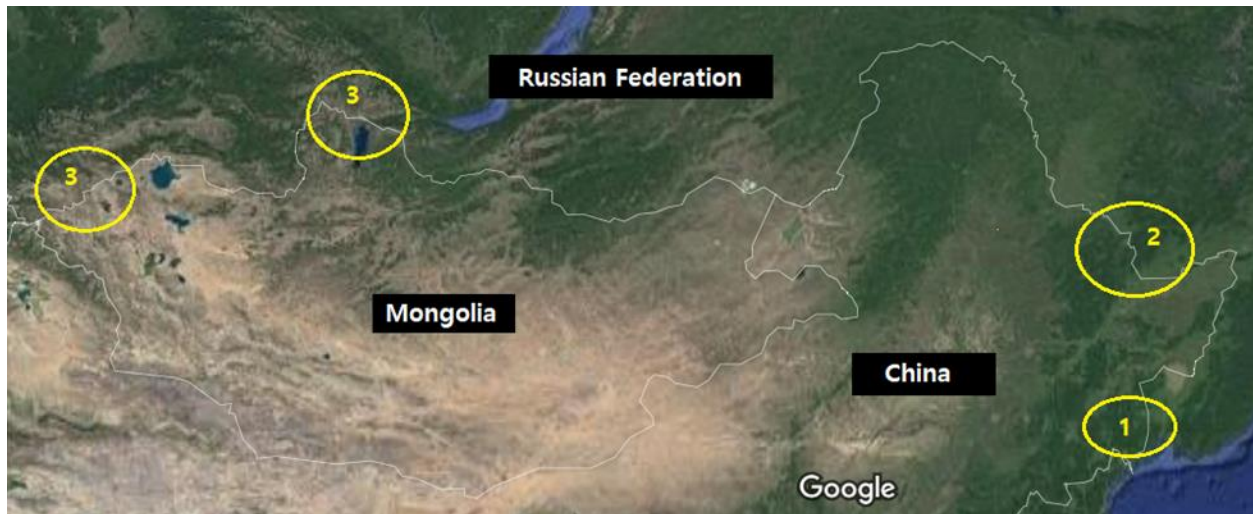
*The project contains three components:*

- Project component 1: Transboundary cooperation between the Northeast China Tiger and Leopard National Park (TLNP) and the Land of the Leopard National Park (LLNP) of the Russian Federation to conserve Amur tigers and leopards;
- Project component 2: Transboundary cooperation between neighboring protected areas in Lesser Khingan Mountains to conserve Amur tigers; and
- Project component 3: Assessment of the current status of two snow leopard subpopulations in the Transboundary area between Mongolia and the Russian Federation

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<sup>2</sup> Project report: [http://www.neaspec.org/sites/default/files//UNESCAP\\_Migratory%20Birds.pdf](http://www.neaspec.org/sites/default/files//UNESCAP_Migratory%20Birds.pdf)

Figure 1. Target project areas



Note/ 1. TLNP + LLNP; 2. Lesser Khingan Mountain areas; and 3. Chikhachev ridge (left) and Eastern Sayan ridge (right)

Table 1. Overview of the project components

Project component	Component 1	Component 2	Component 3
<b>Implementing period</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>January – December 2022</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>July 2020 – September 2021</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>May 2020 – June 2021</li> </ul>
<b>Implementing partners</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>LLNP</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Feline Research Center (FRC)</li> <li>WWF Russia</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Irbis Mongolia Center (IMC)</li> <li>WWF Russia</li> </ul>
<b>Budget</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>USD 96,000</li> </ul>	USD 50,000	USD 50,000
<b>Target areas</b>	TLNP and LLNP	Lesser Khingan Mountains	Chikhachev ridge and Eastern Sayan ridge
<b>Target species</b>	Amur tiger & Amur leopard	Amur tiger	Snow leopard
<b>Objective</b>	Enhance the collaboration between two national parks; and create the condition for the establishment of a Sino-Russian Transboundary National Park (“Land of Big Cats”)	Enhance collaboration between the existing bordering PAs; and create conditions for the establishment of a new national park in Russia and the expansion of the bordering PAs in China	Assess the current status and identify individual snow leopards in the transboundary areas between Mongolia and the Russian Federation, by utilizing modern methodologies

<b>Key Activities</b>	<b>Desk research</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assessment of national legislation of China and Russia for PAs and TBPAs;</li> <li>• Analysis of existing TBPAs;</li> <li>• Preparation of a basic unified geographical map of projected TBPA and its adjacent territories;</li> <li>• Development of unified classification of habitats and preparation of habitats map of the projected TBPA</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assessment of national legislation and protection regime across the target area;</li> <li>• Environmental and socio-economic analysis; and</li> <li>• Production of a joint geographical map of the target area</li> </ul>	Comparative study of camera trap data collected in the Mongolian-Russian border to identify snow leopard individuals and their transboundary movement
	<b>Field study</b>		Winter census on Amur tigers and their prey in the target area	Camera trapping using modern survey methodologies (mobile app developed in 2018)
	<b>Capacity building/ awareness-raising</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coordination to establish a unified information and analytical system for information sharing</li> <li>• Data exchange of up-to-date status on target species</li> <li>• Training and workshop for local field staff</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training of national park admin staff on camera traps and modern survey methodologies</li> </ul>

8. **Project component 1:** Led by the Land of the Leopard National Park of the Russian Federation, with close collaboration with the Northeast China Tiger and Leopard National Park upon the Memorandum of Understanding between LLNP and TLNP (2019), it proposes a creation of the Sino-Russian transboundary projected area, tentatively named “Land of Big Cats”, to ensure survival of Amur tigers and leopards and their habitats. Recognizing that the unprecedented conservation measures of China and the Russian Federation since 2000s as well as the first joint scientific analysis under NEASPEC in mid-2010s have averted the threat of complete extinction of two species, the project team validated the proposed “Land of Big Cats” as the optimal habitats for the species conservation and suggested the creation of a formal coordination mechanism with the support of international organizations. It includes, but not limited to, a creation of working groups and regular exchanges with representatives from governments, protected areas, relevant administrations, scientific institutions, local community and non-profit organizations; and development of a common management and zoning plan, including a harmonized economic, social and environment policies for the project transboundary protected area.

9. **Project component 2:** In partnership with the Feline Research Center (China) and WWF Russia (Amur branch), feasibility studies on the Lesser Khingan Mountains were conducted during July 2020 - September 2021, based on field surveys, literature sources and archive materials. Since the successful reintroduction project in the Russian Jewish Autonomous Prefecture in 2010s, transboundary movements of Amur tigers have been continuously monitored in the study area, and the region has become a new hope for the population recovery of Amur tigers. The feasibility study suggests the establishment of a new specially protected natural areas of federal significance, Pompeyevsky National Park, and a cross-border protected area and ecological corridors for Amur tigers (Figure 2 and 3). Both implementing partners also emphasize the importance of population dispersal, transboundary migration and genetic diversity to secure the longer-term conservation of Amur tigers.

Figure 2. Schematic map of the scope of cross-border tiger protected areas

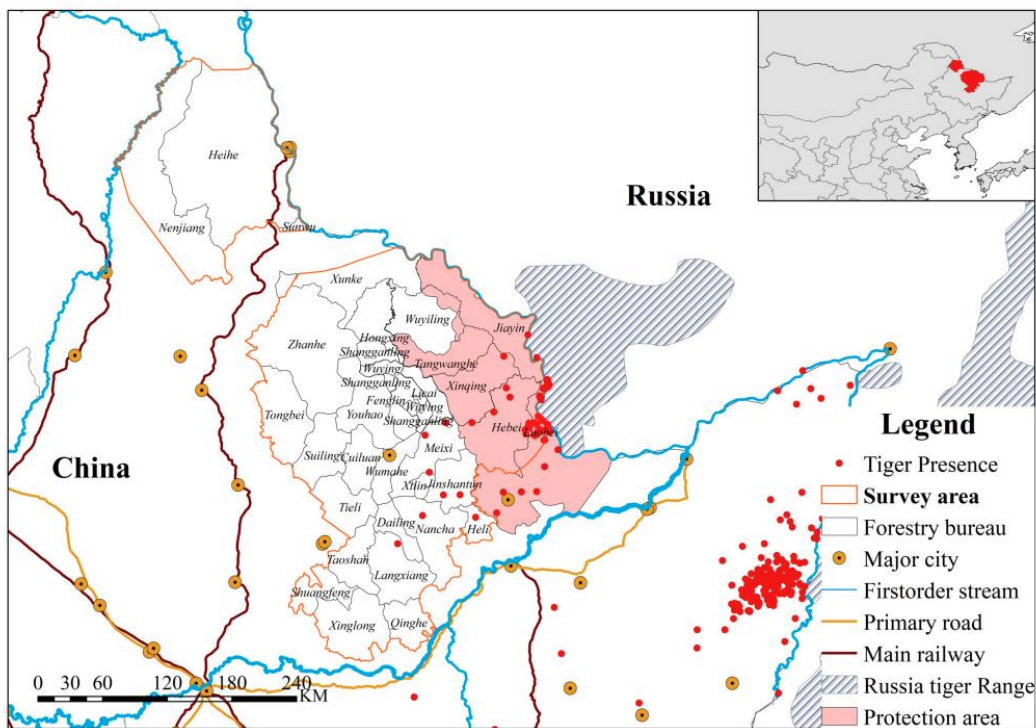
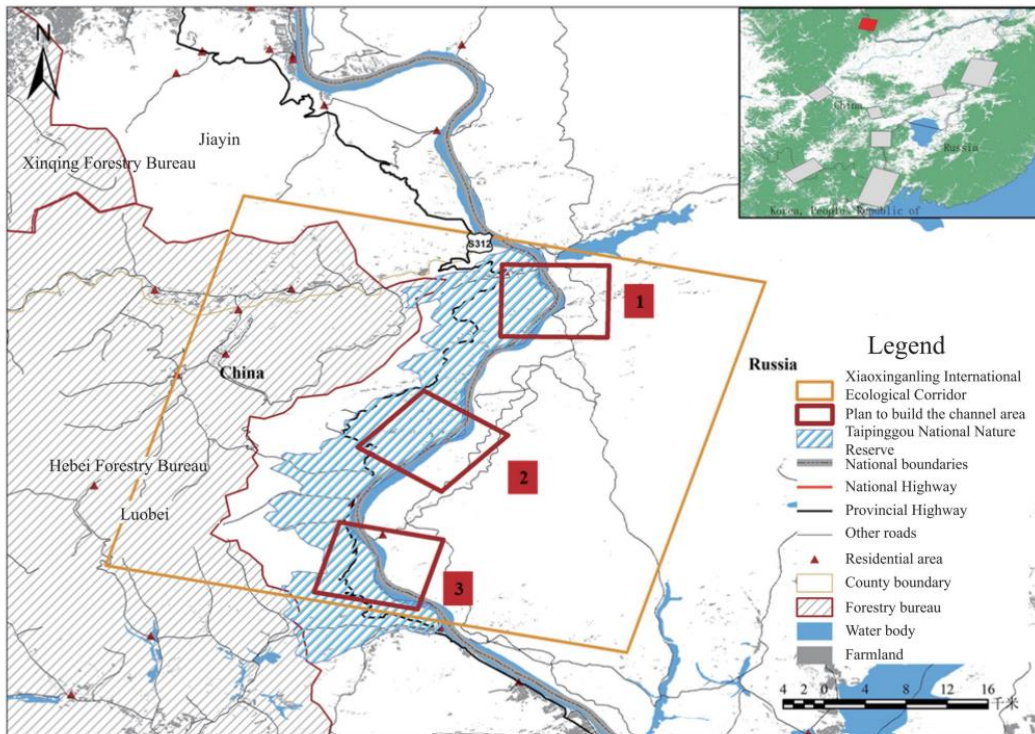


Figure 3. Suggested construction design of an international ecological corridor for Amur tigers in Lesser Khingan Mountains



10. **Project component 3:** Irbis Mongolia Center (IMC) and WWF Russia (Altay-Sayan branch) conducted field studies using the standardized snow leopard monitoring application (NextGIS mobile application) in (1) Siilkhem B National Park in Bayan-Olgii Province (Mongolia)/ Chikhachev ridge (Russian Federation) and (2) Khuvsugul mountain range in Khuvsugul Province (Mongolia)/ Eastern Sayan ridge (Russian Federation); and jointly analyzed data in 2020 and 2021. It was the first joint monitoring project to obtain the data on abundance and density of transboundary snow leopard subpopulations along the Mongolia-Russian border, and the project team identified transboundary movements of (1) 16 individuals in the Chikhachev ridge and (2) 6 individuals in the Eastern Sayan ridge. However, the survival of the Snow leopards is still under threat due to poaching and overharvesting of its prey species as well as harsh living conditions. The project team thus recommends establishing a new protected area or migratory corridors and expand the study areas to cover all transboundary subpopulations and map the entire habitats in the transboundary areas between Mongolia and the Russian Federation.

11. **Project evaluation:** In accordance with the norms, standards and procedures set out in the “ESCAP monitoring and evaluation: policy and guidelines”<sup>3</sup> to ensure the evaluation would be independent, objective, and of high quality. The evaluation was conducted from January 2023 by Dr. Bishwa N. Paudyal, a Guyana-based independent consultant. As of September 2023, the

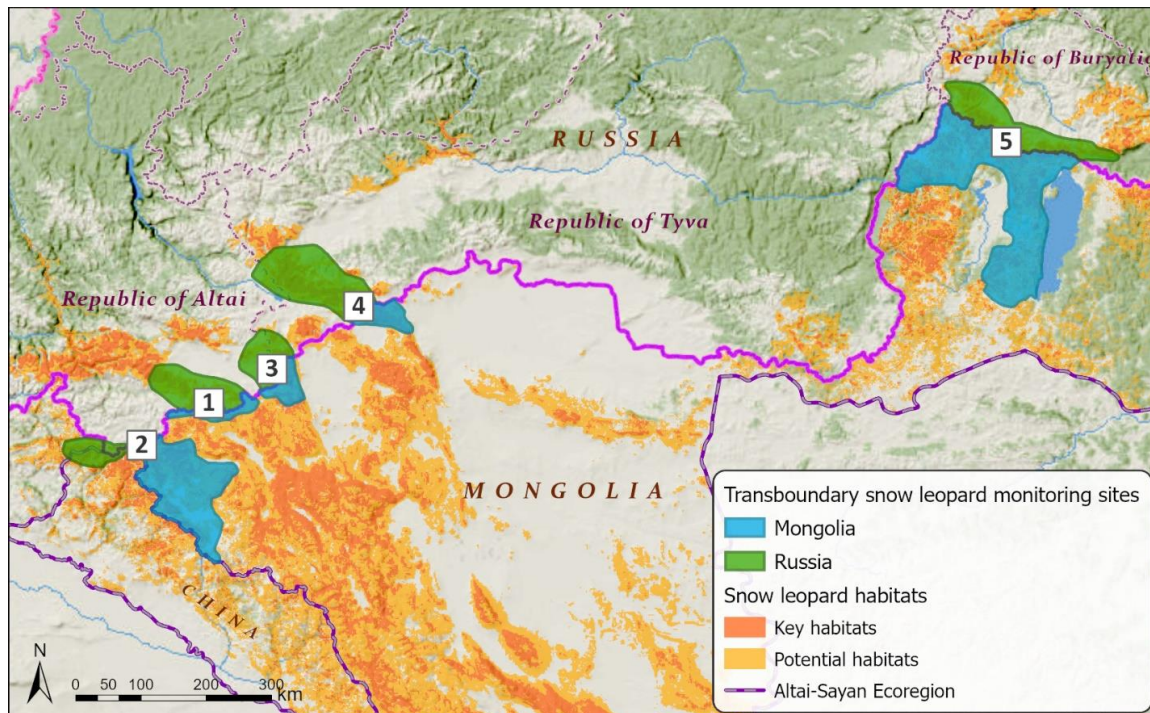
<sup>3</sup> [ESCAP Monitoring and Evaluation \(unesco.org\)](https://unesco.org)

independent evaluation involved a comprehensive review of all project documents; in-depth virtual interviews with implementing partners, key stakeholders and ESCAP secretariat staff; and a stakeholder survey. The evaluator plans to have an interview with ESCAP senior managers and finalize the evaluation report with recommendations by the end of 2023.

***Progress of the project on “Evaluation of the current status of transboundary snow leopard subpopulations in the border area between Mongolia and the Russian Federation”***

12. As a follow-up to the Project component 3, IMC (lead institution) and WWF Russia have been jointly implementing the project since August 2022, to continue the field survey and joint analysis in the expanded areas to study all transboundary subpopulations of Snow leopards along the Mongolia-Russian border (Figure 4). The project team organized a series of inception meetings with government officials, protected areas and field staff as well as training sessions on standardized monitoring methodologies in July – September 2023, followed by setting up camera traps, and checking and analyzing camera trapping data from September 2023 until now. The project is expected to be completed in November 2023, and key findings will be available in 2024.

Figure 4. Study sites of the project on “Evaluation of the current status of transboundary snow leopard subpopulations in the border area between Mongolia and the Russian Federation”



Note/ 1. Sailugem ridge; 2. Southern Altai / Tavan Bogd ridge; 3. Chikhachev ridge; 4. Tsagan-Shibetu/ Tsagaanshuvuut ridge; and 5. Eastern Sayan ridge



### III. PROGRESS OF THE ACTIVITIES ON CONSERVATION OF MIGRATORY BIRDS AND HABITATS

#### *Transboundary Cooperation among Protected Wetlands in the Lower Tumen River Area*

13. Following to the field survey results and recommendations in the Rason Migratory Bird Reserve of the DPR Korea in 2014,<sup>4</sup> and the discussions at the SOM-22 and SOM-23, the Secretariat worked with national experts from China and the Russian Federation to 1) systemically review the status and conservation efforts of the protection of migratory birds and targeted wetlands along the lower Tumen River area; and 2) explore the potential for establishing a transboundary protected area in this region.

14. Within this context, a study on Transboundary Cooperation among Protected Wetlands in the Lower Tumen River Area was conducted from 2019-2020. It provided an overview of migratory birds and their habitats along the lower Tumen River, based on updated information and analysis of the region's environmental, social and economic status and conservation management systems. Highlighting the significant roles of the Jingxin Wetland of China and Khasan Wetland of the Russian Federation in ecosystem integrity and economic-social development.

15. Over the course of conducting the study, preliminary findings were reviewed through an Expert Group Meeting on Promoting Transboundary Cooperation among Protected Wetlands in the Tumen River Estuary held in May 2020, joined by government officials, national experts, and representatives of the Ramsar Convention Secretariat and its training center. In addition, the draft report was presented at SOM-25 and further consulted with the National Focal Points. The final report was completed in September 2023.<sup>5</sup>

16. The report recommended the following actions to enhance transboundary cooperation in the lower Tumen River among China, DPR Korea and the Russian Federation:

- (a) Raise ambitions and commitments at subnational, national and regional levels for promoting transboundary cooperation on biodiversity and wetlands conservation along the lower Tumen River;

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<sup>4</sup> Rason Migratory Bird Reserve Survey Report (2014)

[http://www.neaspec.org/sites/default/files/Rason%20migratory%20bird%20reserve\\_birds%20and%20habitats.pdf](http://www.neaspec.org/sites/default/files/Rason%20migratory%20bird%20reserve_birds%20and%20habitats.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Transboundary Cooperation among Protected Wetlands in the Lower Tumen River Area (2023)

[https://neaspec.org/sites/default/files/Transboundary%20Cooperation%20among%20Protected%20Wetlands%20in%20the%20Lower%20Tumen%20River%20Area\\_final.pdf](https://neaspec.org/sites/default/files/Transboundary%20Cooperation%20among%20Protected%20Wetlands%20in%20the%20Lower%20Tumen%20River%20Area_final.pdf)

- (b) Expand and strengthen partnerships and networks domestically, regionally and internationally to scale up joint conservation efforts and promote visibility of the lower Tumen River;
- (c) Promote joint and strategic planning, coordinated monitoring and management plans for cross-sector and transboundary conservation among the three countries; and
- (d) Conduct capacity-building activities and joint scientific research to enhance transboundary cooperation.

### *Connectivity conservation of key migratory birds in North-East Asia*

17. Aligned with the NEASPEC Nature Conservation Strategy adopted by the member States, the Secretariat prepared a new project proposal, Connectivity Conservation for Habitats of Flagship Migratory Birds in North-East Asia (Black-faced Spoonbills, Hooded Cranes, and White-naped Cranes), to the Russian Federation for funding (US\$299,789) and approval. The proposed project is included in Annex III to the document.

18. The proposed project specifically targets NEASPEC's three flagship migratory bird species and their habitat to facilitate member States' transboundary cooperation and capacity for monitoring, assessing and managing the species and their habitats, especially noting Black-faced Spoonbills area endangered and the Hooded Cranes and White-naped Cranes are threatened species listed by IUCN.<sup>6</sup>

19. In addition, the proposed project integrated the recommendations of the earlier NEASPEC project implemented in 2014-2016, which provided consistency and continuity of NEASPEC projects in this field. The proposed project focuses on 1) demographics of the three flagship species and the impacts of environmental, social and economic conditions on the species and their habitats; 2) good practices and recommended subregional guideline for agro-biodiversity management; and 3) capacity-building activities among stakeholders, especially empowering youth and women.

20. In this regard, the proposed project contributes to the implementation of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, Sustainable Development Goals 13 (Climate action), 15 (Life on land) and 17 (Partnerships for the goals), the ESCAP's Regional Roadmap for Implementing the 2030 Agenda in Asia and the Pacific, and the regional conservation efforts strengthened by various actors from governments to grassroots.

21. The proposed project is pending for approval.

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<sup>6</sup> IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, available at <https://www.iucnredlist.org/>

#### IV. ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

22. The Meeting may wish to request member States to provide their views on the completed and ongoing activities on (a) big cat species and their habitats, (b) migratory birds and their habitats, and (c) transboundary cooperation on the Tumen River area, including outcomes and recommendations.

23. The Meeting may wish to review and approve the proposed activity plan for 2024 (Annex IV).

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