

Aragvi Protected Landscape



Communication Strategy 2023 – 2028

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Motto: *“Enjoy the values of nature and culture of Aragvi – the land of rivers, mountains and valleys!”*

Aragvi Protected Landscape is an attractive part of Georgia, where sustainable activities of local people are preserved and supported to protect its natural values and characteristic landscape and to preserve local cultural traditions.

Aragvi Protected Landscape fascinates and attracts visitors by its natural beauties, local traditions and potential for sustainable tourism and ecological education.

Environmental issues of the Aragvi PL can not be solved without help and active involvement of local people.

1. Introduction

This document, Aragvi Protected Landscape (APL) Communication Strategy (*hereinafter “Strategy”*), should serve to the APL Administration as a tool, guidelines, for its communication activities and efforts especially to the visitors (Georgians and foreigners) of the area but also for communication of the APL Administration with local stakeholders of various groups.

Communication is a key instrument for reaching consensuses or agreements between the APL Administration, guarding the interest of nature/culture protection of the region, and other stakeholders such as farmers, guesthouse owners, foresters et cetera, defending their own interests.

Regarding visitors communication is the main and crucial way how to attract them, inform and educate them on what is valuable and deserves protection, how should they behave in the area, et cetera.

Environmental education and education for sustainable development as well as interpretation of the local heritage are also very important part of the communication measures and can be focused on children, teenagers, adults or otherwise defined target groups.

2. Main values of the Aragvi PL

The Aragvi PL, encompassing Piraketa Khevsureti, majority of Pshavi and Gudamakari, represents unique and well-preserved natural and cultural legacy at both national and international level. Despite relatively easy accessibility of the region and because of strong relationship of local people to their traditions, religion, culture and landscape, common negative impacts usually associated with spontaneous settlement development and disturbing traditional lifestyle and harmonious landscape features are not so pronounced in Aragvi as in some other parts of the Caucasus.

Remote valleys offer unique and calm environment with traditional features of the cultural landscape in a mosaic with natural phenomena such as forests, mountain streams, rocks and high mountain peaks.

Specific religion and spirituality of ancestors are still kept alive in impressive sacred places surrounded by unrepeatably magic old trees and forests.

Traditional products of local cuisine, diverse handicrafts, local breeds of domestic animals and particularly traditional events and holidays still prove uniqueness of the old culture of Gudamakari, Pshavi and Piraketa Khevsureti.

From nature conservation point of view, unique complex of mountain ecosystems from foothill forests at lower elevations up to nival habitats in glacial corries of the Chaukhi massif create, together with managed hay meadows and pastures, the valuable mosaic of different biotopes inhabited by wide range of plants and animals. Inaccessible valleys covered by natural mixed broad-leaved forests and floodplain habitats mostly not disturbed by human activities, last remnants of hay meadows and the landscape largely unspoilt by constructions distinguish the Aragvi PL from other parts of the Caucasus region.

In general, the most important and valuable phenomena of the Aragvi PL are as follows:

Morphology – unique scenery created by sharp peaks and crests as well as rounded mountains and ridges, glacial corries and deep gorges combined with glacial valleys, streams and rivers.

Harmonious landscape – mosaic of scattered small mountain settlements with sacred places, surrounded by fields, meadows, forests and pastures, with spectacular background of the Greater Caucasus.

Historical cultural heritage – long eventful history, original religion and spirituality, unique traditions, customs, cuisine, handicrafts, important sacred places; strong relation of Gudamakars, Pshavs and Khevsuretians to their land, customs, rituals and traditions.

Diversity of natural conditions and ecosystems – altitudinal range of 3000 m (840–3842 m asl), nival and subnival habitats, alpine and subalpine grasslands, subalpine shrubberies, different forest types and alluvial ecosystems, species-rich hay meadows and pastures.

High species diversity – high level of endemism of plant and animal species, occurrence of rare ungulates (Caucasian chamois), large predators (viable population of a brown bear, birds of prey, etc.) and endemic galliform species (Caucasian snowcock, Caucasian black grouse).

Local agrobiodiversity – endemic breeds of domestic animals well adapted to rough mountain environment, local crops and fruit trees.

These phenomena, these main natural and cultural values of the Aragvi PL are in the same time the main source of content for any communication activity of the Aragvi PL Administration (or its partners) in respective period of 2023 – 2028 and even in a longer perspective.

This Communication Strategy proposes measures that contribute to the:

- ✓ Improvement of common understanding and awareness of importance and value of natural and cultural richness and heritage of the Aragvi PL and also awareness of the need to protect this common treasure
- ✓ Sustainable management of protected areas by creating better understanding among all stakeholders about the benefits of a rich biodiversity and the ways of balancing conflicting interests
- ✓ Rising knowledge and awareness of the Aragvi PL as an attractive destination for sustainable eco-tourism for Georgian as well as for foreign visitors.

3. Key messages to be communicated

3.1. Aragvi PL deserves protection

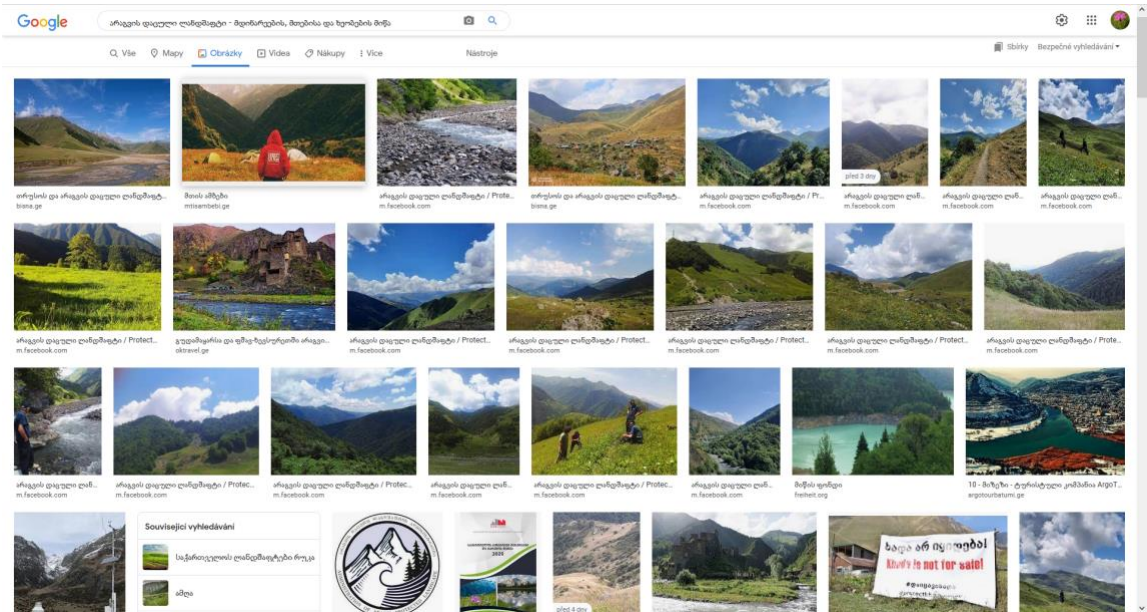
This message should be some kind of umbrella message above the following ones (3.2. to 3.5.) Because:

- => Without protecting the natural and cultural heritage of the Aragvi PL and its people – Gudamakars, Pshavs and Khevsuretians – the region could no longer stay part of the world biodiversity treasure of Caucasus unique natural heritage.
- => The uniqueness of Aragvi’s landscape combining rivers, valleys and mountains has to be protected, otherwise it loses its attractiveness for locals and visitors.
- => Without protecting traditional way of life, agricultural practices, handicraft knowledge and unique spiritual and syncretic religious heritage the region loses its uniqueness in the world.
- => And losing some, or even all, of these aspects of uniqueness and attractiveness, would mean loss of opportunities for local people to gain from tourism activities.

The need to protect the area should be stressed in communication with various target groups – visitors, local people, but also local businesses and farmers or decision makers (e.g. to avoid harmful development projects from the region).

3.2. Aragvi PL is the unique land of rivers, mountains and valleys

The Protected Landscape was named after the Aragvi Rivers – Khevsureti Aragvi, Pshavi Aragvi and Black (Shavi) Aragvi. This is part of branding the Protected Landscape and its Administration should not ignore in its communication activities. Moreover, this fact can be well used as part of branding of the area of the Aragvi PL. *“Aragvi Protected Landscape – the land of rivers, mountains and valleys”* – such kind of motto can be a good example of promotion among Georgian public (see chapter 4.6.) and also potential visitors, especially foreign ones (see chapter 4.2.).



Even today (when the motto is not used by the Aragvi PLA) you can find interesting Google-search results while searching pictures of “Aragvi Protected Landscape - land of rivers, mountains and valleys” in Georgian. When it starts to be used, the results will be yet much more efficient.

3.3. Aragvi PL helps to protect world’s biodiversity treasure

Aragvi PL, as well as neighbouring National Park Pshav-Khevsureti, is part of chain of Protected Areas established to protect one of the most valuable biodiversity hotspots of all the world, of the planet Earth – the Caucasus!

This fact is a very important reason why the need for protection is so high as well as a source of pride and self-confidence of especially Gudamakars, Pshavs and Khevsuretians – the Aragvi PL local people. And this fact is to be also used as part of the communication issue towards visitors coming or being attracted to come and stay in the region.

3.4. Aragvi PL protects tradition of local people

There are several traditional activities maintaining landscape and also semi-natural habitats in a shape worth to be protected, like cattle and sheep breeding and pasturing, bee keeping, crop (esp. potatoes, vegetables and fruits) production, traditional forest use or traditional hunting practices. There are also very important cultural values to be safeguarded like local syncretic religious system with its sacred places (shrines), festivals or birthplaces of important cultural personalities like Vazha Pshavela’s in Chargali or Goderdzi Chokheli in Chokhi.

It is very important to inform on these values and these values also make chance for local people to make sustainable income based on them – either by providing possibility to get knowledge of Vazha Pshavela or Goderdzi Chokheli in their museum exhibitions (or may be some educational trails) or providing local agricultural products in guesthouses and restaurants, shops and yard sale. For religious traditions it is of crucial importance to equip visitors by information of its rules and limitations for visitors, especially regarding visiting shrines. But also history and syncretic aspect of the local religious system is very unique and interesting topic for information and education of visitors.

Aragvi PL is also the region of specific regional products of an excellent quality. The local products can be offered to the visitors and could also use the fact they are produced in the Protected Landscape area as their own brand...



3.5. Aragvi PL is a pleasant location for your active and sustainable vacations

Until now, the area of the Aragvi PL, is usually almost not used by any visitors. Tourists are only passing through the area on their way to Kazbegi NP, Truso PL or Pshav-Khevsureti NP. The region, including Aragvi PL (but mainly Dusheti Municipality together with tourism agencies and accommodators and other entrepreneurs in tourism) should continue attracting and inviting visitors to come and stay directly in the area. Compared to the tough tourist conditions and demands in higher altitudes of the Caucasus mountains the Aragvi PL can provide very good circumstances for less equipped or less physically prepared tourists and especially fantastic opportunities for family tourism and vacations.

Focused communication and promotion efforts are needed but also systemic approach to support construction and sustainability of appropriate tourist infrastructure – starting with guesthouses and restaurants as well as tourist trail marking. Good hiking map is also missing yet.

3.6. Aragvi PL Administration is here to help local nature, culture and people

It is very important to become a stable and trustable partner for other stakeholders in the region – for Dusheti Municipality, but also for local inhabitants, farmers, businesses. As well as for tourists.

So it is crucial to establish stable opening hours in the main Aragvi PLA office in Dusheti and be really available in those opening hours for the public.

In medium-term perspective it is important to establish local ranger stations/offices in main valleys with clear contacts and presence of rangers there in selected hours as well as the presence and visibility of rangers in field is of a high importance.

In longer-term perspective it is worth to think about visitors information office of the Aragvi PL, may be shared jointly with the Pshav-Khevsureti NP.

4. Key communication target groups

4.1. Local people

The Aragvi PLA has to communicate primarily with local people. Therefore the office of the PLA should have transparent opening hours and the staff of the PLA should have clearly and understandably divided competencies for people of the Aragvi PL region to know whom to contact with various issues to be solved.

Ranger service of the Aragvi PL should be visible in field and be in contact with local inhabitants, farmers, small businesses, guesthouse owners and others. In medium-term perspective it is important to establish local ranger stations/offices in main valleys with clear contacts and presence of rangers there in selected hours.

The Aragvi PLA should be transparent in its communication with the local public as well as predictable in its decisions.

The Aragvi PLA should start or develop cooperation with local schools and teachers regarding ecological (environmental) education on protection of natural values of the Aragvi PL, education for sustainable development regarding local context of global issues such as climate change and also regarding protection and sustainability of cultural values and heritage of the Aragvi PL.

4.2. Visitors

Within this communication target group the Aragvi PLA should consider that in fact it consists of three slightly different groups of people:

- *Georgian visitors of Aragvi PL*
- *Foreign visitors of Aragvi PL*
- *Throughpassing visitors*

Not only language (Georgian vs. English) but also style and content of communication should be appropriate to specifics of each part of the Visitors target group. For example: While Georgians will usually understand preliminarily what e.g. shrines mean to locals, foreigners will have no idea about spiritual value and importance of such places if they will be not properly informed about it. Special efforts should be made to attract people throughpassing the region towards Kazbegi NP, Truso PL or Pshav-Khevsureti NP, to stay this or the next time in Aragvi.

4.3. Media and journalists

To distribute messages and to provide appropriate, transparent and attractive information to the people of Georgia, foreign visitors and all mentioned stakeholders the Aragvi PLA needs to cooperate with the media. It is necessary, especially in case of the newly established and less known area such as Aragvi PL still is. General Georgian media should be contacted and invited to inform their auditorium, as well as continuation of cooperation with specialized media, such as MountainStories.ge, is needed.

4.4. Pupils, students, youth

The region of the Aragvi PL has a network of schools which are small, but of a very good quality of education. In the same time there are very good and active teachers working in these schools. There is already a cooperation among schools and teachers on one side and the Aragvi PLA on the other side established and it has to continue or to be even further developed. The teachers could even serve, in case of their capacity will be available, as possible helpers in the environmental education programmes for the public and visitors if appropriate financial and material sources will be found (e.g. project financing).

4.5. Environmental NGOs

Non-governmental organizations are partners of crucial importance in nature protection, as well as in environmental education. It is highly recommended to the Aragvi PLA to establish as many concrete partnerships with those NGOs active in the Aragvi region to cooperate on the issues making advantage and/or profit for both sides.

4.6. Decision makers

The Aragvi PLA also belongs to the group of decision makers. But still it is not only the PLA, who decides on the issues affecting the quality of landscape, nature, water, culture et cetera in the area of the Aragvi PL. Therefore it is very important to create, develop and maintain a good quality communication with the Dusheti Municipality, various ministries of the Georgian Government, Parliament and its members and so on. The Aragvi PLA should use these contacts and communication efforts to improve the status and also the outlook of the natural and cultural values of the Aragvi PL.

4.9. Local businesses and farmers

Local businesses and entrepreneurs, such as farmers, restaurant and guesthouse owners, small local producers or other similar subjects, compose very important stakeholder group in terms of maintenance of important values of Aragvi's nature, landscape and culture. Therefore it is of a high importance to establish a transparent, regular and open communication with them to have possibility to influence their activities towards nature and environment friendly performance and also to have possibility to listen problems they are facing and to try to solve them together with them.

5. Media and means of communication to be used

For different target groups and different purposes (as well as different messages) also different means of communication and media should be used:

- (i) Public communication
- (ii) Media relations
- (iii) Public participation and access to information
- (iv) Environmental education and interpretation of natural heritage

5.1. Public communication

By public communication we mean (in this Strategy) direct communication with/to the public, marketing and promotion issues altogether.

5.1.1. Brand and visual identity

The Aragvi PLA already uses its own logo which is of a very good quality. In a short-term perspective the visual identity guidelines should be developed to guide the PLA how to make the graphics of the PLA's materials such as official letters style, press releases, publications, webdesign, souvenirs, etc. These guidelines should be prepared by professionals in the field of marketing and/or public relations.



5.1.2. Aragvi PLA electronic communication possibilities

a) Website

The Aragvi PLA website at <http://www.aragvipl.ge> already exists (created within this project) and is operated and updated by the PLA staff in Georgian and English. This is a very good starting point. It is necessary to focus of the information available at the website to be really up-to-date and news feed should be fed by a good quality information (including some photographs, information on the date of news publication, etc.).

The information available now at the website should be further added by other important information, crucial especially for the upcoming increase of tourism activities and development – information of accommodation and dining possibilities, links to tourist attractions such as museums, outdoor activities (rafting, horse rentals, bike rentals, etc.), visitors code of conduct, explanation of specifics like religion and shrines, local cultural specialities, links to providers of local products and handicrafts, and so on.

b) Internet social networks

The Aragvi PLA operates quite active and well managed Facebook site “არაგვის დაცული ლანდშაფტი - Protected Landscape of Aragvi” (<https://www.facebook.com/aragvisdaculilandshafiti/>). This activity should continue and it is recommended to cooperate also by coordinating the publication plan on the FB site with the administrator of the FB site of Pshav-Khevsureti NP.

In the short-term perspective it is not needed to go for other social networks such as Twitter, YouTube, TikTok or Instagram.

5.1.3. Consultations with stakeholders and public participation

Consultations with stakeholders (target groups' representatives) are a very useful tool to manage effectively steps to fulfil the mission of the PLA – to protect nature and

culture of the Aragvi PL. Consultations should be held especially on the personal meetings either bilateral or multilateral.

Taking stakeholders “on board” helps to address potential problems before they become subjects of protests or complains and to solve them in time. Due to the limited capacities of the Aragvi PLA it is clear and obvious that without having local stakeholders on its side the Aragvi PLA is not able to deliver its mission alone on its own.

5.1.4. Public events, festivals

Festivals are very important part of traditional cultural life of the people of the region of Aragvi PL. They are also a very good possible opportunity to attract people to become visitors of the area. It is worth for the Aragvi PLA to be visibly present and participate on these events, ideally by its own information and/or education standpoint which will then become an important source of information and education on protection of nature and culture of Aragvi.

5.1.5. Information and visitors centre

To create new, modern, environmentally sound visitors centres with attractive interactive exhibitions is a very costly and time demanding strategy. Therefore it is not expected to create such within the time perspective of this Strategy. But the Aragvi PLA should focus on planning activities and trying to find the appropriate place for such a visitors centre and to find the financial sources for the centre to be established.

5.1.6. Publications

The Aragvi PL needs at least the basic set of information materials – publications – for visitors to be available at appropriate places – in the PLA office in Dusheti, at the Dusheti Municipality office, in the Pshav-Khevsureti office, in guesthouses, in Vazha Pshavela and Goderdiz Chokheli museums or other similar spots where visitors are coming to.

This set should be prepared in a short-term period and include:

- At least overall map of the area showing main roads and tourist trails, villages, accommodation and restaurants available, museums and other tourist attractions
- “Image” leaflet presenting the main natural and cultural values of the Aragvi PL
- Code of conduct for visitors
- A leaflet about specific religious heritage including information about shrines and rules of (non)accessing them
- Tourist map in a scale at least 1:100 000

In a longer term it is worth to think about other, may be more topically focused publications. But the energy of the PLA should be these first several years focused on publishing this basic publications set.

5.2. Media relations

The Aragvi PLA is a small organizations without a special unit or even a single person responsible for a full-time job for public relations. But still there is a need to have somebody, who is responsible for communication with media – at least the head of the Administration should be available for journalists and it is very advantageous when the head is substitutable for this work by somebody else in the office. But until the Aragvi PLA has such a personal capacity, the media relations will be coordinated by the Dusheti Municipality.

The Aragvi PLA should think about the topics to provide these journalists via Dusheti Municipality, either up-to-date news about what is going on regarding the Aragvi PL or about the tourist seasons, changes and improvements which have been reached or a “good news” from nature and culture of the region of the PL.

The Aragvi PLA should provide media with these information also via its website, via e-mails or a special events like press trips or by being present at public events such as traditional festivals.

5.3. Public participation and access to information

Georgia is a signatory of the Aarhus Convention - The UN ECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters. The Convention requires signatory countries to ensure free access by the public (and its representatives such as NGOs) to decision making processes and to consultation during the legislative process. The Convention also presumes that public has the right to receive information on environmental issues and on the state of the environment. And, last but not least, the public also has to have access to justice – this means that state bodies could be taken to court.

A second reason, and the most important one, is that it is much more likely for the Aragvi PLA to reach its strategic and management aims in the environment and nature protection if the local public and/or interested NGOs “on board”, well, and timely, informed and asked for their opinion in advance, during the preparatory phase of the decision making processes.

A good way to meet this target is to organize public hearings or seminars/workshops where the PLAs plans are presented and explained and the public’s questions can be answered.

6. Environmental education and interpretation of natural heritage

As already written above, the Aragvi PL region has a network of schools which are small, but of a very good quality of education. In the same time there are very good and active teachers working in these schools. There is already a cooperation among schools and teachers on one side and the Aragvi PLA on the other side established and it has to continue or to be even further developed. The teachers could even serve, in case of their capacity will be available, as possible helpers in the environmental education programmes for the public and visitors if appropriate financial and material sources will be found (e.g. project financing).

The cooperation between the PLA and schools, teachers or environmental education NGOs should be maintained on a systemic basis, not ad hoc. The PLA should develop and regularly update its own environmental education strategy based not only on own activities of the PLA staff (rangers, Dusheti office staff) but also on cooperation with schools, NGOs and the Administration of NP Pshav-Khevsureti.

The environmental education should be targeted to the specific target groups in appropriate way. The main target groups are:

- Children
- Youth
- Local people
- Visitors

7. Feedback and monitoring of implementation

The effectiveness and efficiency of every activity needs to be monitored and evaluated. In the case of the Communication Strategy it is not easy task to evaluate its effectiveness and efficiency in a simple way; however there are some particular measures by which implementation of the strategy will be monitored.

The Strategy should be regularly revised and updated as appropriate on yearly basis. This is a basic feedback to be done. This will be done by the Aragvi PLA itself.

It is important to evaluate successes reached in a previous year (number of publications issued, trails marked or renewed, rangers offices opened, web news published, Facebook posts published, number of Facebook followers development, et cetera) and get some feedback from this evaluation. This feedback should be a basis for decision on further steps which will be done in the upcoming period (yearly or longer period).

9. Action Plan for 2023-2028

Main priorities:

- I) To maintain and improve the performance of the website of the Aragvi PL and information available there
- II) To maintain the performance of the Facebook site of the Aragvi PL
- III) To establish clear and stable opening hours and divide competencies of the staff of the Aragvi PLA in Dusheti office
- IV) To publish the basic set of information publications for visitors and make them available by appropriate distribution
- V) To prepare the environmental education strategy of the Aragvi PLA
- VI) To review the existing tourist trails, renew marking of them and mark the new ones
- VII) To prepare, together with local stakeholders, a marketing plan for attracting new visitors to come and stay in the Aragvi PL and a joint strategy how to support and promote the local products