

Dighomi Meadows: Years of institutional failure risk erasing last floodplain forest in Tbilisi, Georgia



Dighomi Meadows (photo: Mariam Patsatsia).

Dighomi Meadows, Tbilisi's last floodplain forest, has been left to degrade by institutions for years while private interests have been devastating the area. Continued neglect and unchecked development now threaten to erase the meadows, and with them the habitat that sustains Tbilisi Otter Island, an Emerald Network site, and more than 40 species strictly protected under Appendix II of the Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (Bern Convention).

The importance of Dighomi Meadows

Located on the right bank of the Mtkvari River, Dighomi Meadows encompasses roughly 190 hectares of once rich and varied natural habitat – a riparian forest

For more information

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ecosystem of poplar, oak and willow trees, along with shrubs and herbaceous plants.¹ Woodland covered about 64 hectares of the site.²

In a single survey between February and June 2024, close to 95 bird species were recorded in the area, 18 of which are listed under Appendix II of the Convention.³ For the kingfisher, little bittern and night heron, the meadows are a breeding and feeding ground.⁴

The meadows also shelter at least 8 (possibly 19) protected bat species,^{5,6} 7 reptile species, including 2 species of pond turtle and the spur-thighed tortoise, and their most elusive inhabitant, the Eurasian otter.⁷

In December 2022, the 12.7-hectare Otter Island, adjoining the meadows, was officially adopted into the Emerald Network, Europe's network of areas of special conservation interest.⁸ Tbilisi Municipality is listed as the body responsible for managing the site.⁹ The island's management plan states that the island cannot sustain its dependent species, such as otters, kingfishers, egrets and night herons, without the surrounding forest, ponds and meadows, and calls for extending its boundary to include the adjacent woodland.¹⁰

The floodplain also protects Tbilisi from flooding and offers valuable recreational space for the city.¹¹



Tbilisi Otter Island, an Emerald Network site, in purple and the approximate area of Dighomi Meadows in red. (image: Google Earth, 28 October 2025; annotation: Mariam Patsatsia)

¹ Mariam Khvedelidze, Ana Trapaidze, დიღმის ჭალები ეკოლოგიური კატასტროფის წინაშე: არსებული მდგომარეობა და პრობლემებიდან გამოსავალი, 6–7, January 2021.

² Ibid., 7.

³ Dighomi Meadows Initiative, CEE Bankwatch Network, Social Justice Center, [Complaint to the Bern Convention](#), 6–7, 25 August 2026.

⁴ Ibid., 7.

⁵ Asian Development Bank, [Livable Cities Investment Project for Balanced Development: Dighomi Floodplains Municipal Park Updated Initial Environmental Examination](#), 112–119, 16 January 2024.

⁶ Dighomi Meadows Initiative, CEE Bankwatch Network, Social Justice Center, [Complaint to the Bern Convention](#), 2.

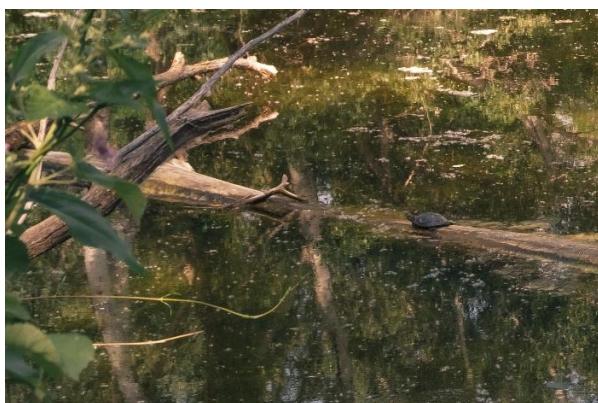
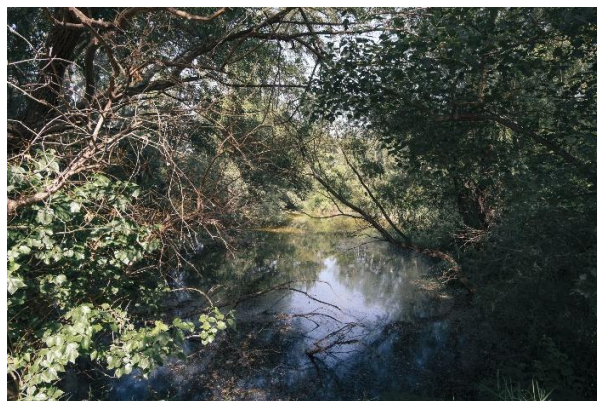
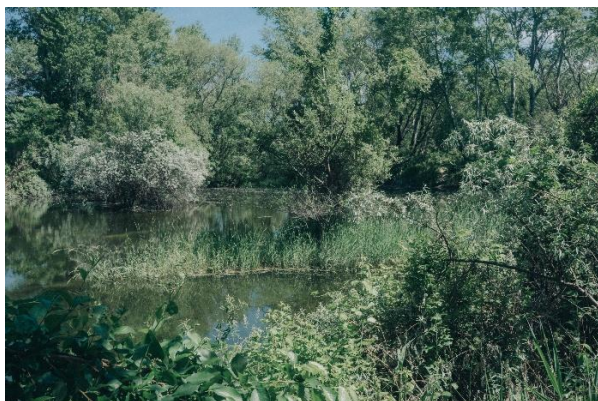
⁷ Natia Kopaliani, Zurab Gurielidze, Ilia Akobia et al., [მართვის გეგმა ზურმუხტის ქსელის ტერიტორიისთვის თბილისის წავის კუნძული-GE0000048 \(2024-2034\)](#), 13–17, 2023.

⁸ Standing Committee of the Bern Convention, [Draft updated list of officially adopted Emerald Network sites](#), 22 November 2022.

⁹ European Environment Agency, [Emerald - Standard Data Form: Tbilisi Otter Island](#), accessed 8 October 2026.

¹⁰ Natia Kopaliani, Zurab Gurielidze, Ilia Akobia et al., [მართვის გეგმა ზურმუხტის ქსელის ტერიტორიისთვის თბილისის წავის კუნძული-GE0000048 \(2024-2034\)](#), 31.

¹¹ Tbilisi Development Fund, SMEC Georgia, Asian Development Bank, [დიღმის ჭალის რეაბილიტაციის სტრატეგია საბოლოო ანგარიში](#), 17, 2024.



Top: ponds in Dighomi Meadows. Bottom left: a turtle resting on a log in the meadows. Bottom right: cormorants on a rock in the Mtkvari River next to the meadows (photos: Mariam Patsatsia)

The tragedy of Dighomi Meadows

Since 2014, the meadows have been devastated by encroaching development, unregulated and illegal gravel extraction, on-site processing and illegal waste dumping. The authorities have largely ignored this, despite repeated notifications.^{12, 13} By May 2020, more than half of the floodplain had been wholly degraded.¹⁴ By 2024, only about 8 hectares of original forest remained intact.¹⁵

The most recent threat is the construction of two football stadiums 400 to 450 metres from Otter Island, approved through a rushed, formalistic administrative process that ignored the local community and the ecological significance of the Emerald site and the meadows.¹⁶ A private company's request for the land in June 2025 triggered a rapid land transfer, a 20-year lease (July 2025) and rezoning (October 2025).¹⁷

¹² Mariam Khvedelidze, Ana Trapaidze, [დიღმის ჭალები ეკოლოგიური კატასტროფის წინაშე: არსებული მდგომარეობა და პრობლემებიდან გამოსავალი](#), 22–42.

¹³ Tbilisi Development Fund, SMEC Georgia, Asian Development Bank, [დიღმის ჭალის რეაბილიტაციის სტრატეგია საბოლოო ანგარიში](#), 5–6.

¹⁴ Mariam Khvedelidze, Ana Trapaidze, [დიღმის ჭალები ეკოლოგიური კატასტროფის წინაშე: არსებული მდგომარეობა და პრობლემებიდან გამოსავალი](#), 20.

¹⁵ Tbilisi Development Fund, SMEC Georgia, Asian Development Bank, [დიღმის ჭალის რეაბილიტაციის სტრატეგია საბოლოო ანგარიში](#), 42.

¹⁶ Social Justice Center, [დიღმის ჭალები ისევ საფრთხის წინაშე დგას - სოციალური სამართლიანობის ცენტრი დაცულ ტერიტორიასთან დაკავშირებით „ქართული ოცნების“ ხელისუფლების გადაწყვეტილებებს აფასებს](#), 11 August 2026.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Preparatory works began in February 2026 and by June had exceeded their permitted boundary, dumping construction waste into protected turtle and bird habitat and burying about 9,000 m² of additional vegetation.¹⁸



Top left: gravel extraction in the meadows, October 2020. Top right: trucks entering the meadows to unload construction waste, March 2021. Bottom left: a pond being filled in during stadium construction, June 2026. Bottom right: the meadows levelled for stadium construction, June 2026 (photos: Dighomi Meadows initiative).

The grassroots fight for the meadows

For years, the Dighomi Meadows initiative, led by local resident Ana Trapaidze, has fought to protect the floodplain forest. Despite threats and intimidation, their unrelenting activism eventually brought the illegal waste dumping and extraction to a halt.¹⁹

In March 2024, the National Enforcement Bureau and Tbilisi City Hall's municipal inspectorate demolished the illegal structures from which the operations had been run.²⁰ In November that year, after a three-year case, Tbilisi City Court ruled in Trapaidze's favour, ordering City Hall to remove the waste from municipal and state-owned land in the meadows.^{21,22} Around the same time, a rehabilitation strategy and action plan

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Mariam Patsatsia, [Dighomi Meadows: An uncertain future for Tbilisi's last floodplain forest](#), CEE Bankwatch Network, 19 October 2026.

²⁰ Dighomi Meadows Initiative, [დიღმის ჭალები - Dighomi Meadows's post](#), Facebook, 5 March 2024.

²¹ Commersant.ge, [დიღმის ჭალების დასუფთავება მერის დაველა - ლოკაცია წლების ნაგროვები სამშენებლო და ინერტული ნარჩენებითაა სავსე](#), 24 November 2024.

²² City Hall has since appealed the decision.

for the meadows, backed by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in response to grassroots demands,²³ was finalised.²⁴

However, the restoration never materialised, and now looks unlikely. The ADB walked away without securing any commitment from City Hall to implement the strategy.²⁵

The initiative continues to fight off private interests that have pushed sports facilities into areas covered by the strategy, which recommends no construction there unless it is essential to the area's functioning.²⁶ The initiative and Trapaidze have appealed almost all of the administrative decisions and filed a lawsuit at the same court against the four decisions that paved the way for the development.²⁷ In parallel, in August 2026, the initiative, CEE Bankwatch Network and the Social Justice Center filed a complaint with the Standing Committee of the Bern Convention.²⁸

Georgia's international commitments

When governments gather in Yerevan, Armenia, for the UN Biodiversity Conference (COP17) from 19 October 2026, Georgia will be among those reporting on progress towards Target 3 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, on protecting and effectively managing 30% of land and sea by 2030.²⁹ The Otter Island Emerald site is exactly the kind of site Georgia could count towards that target, yet the continued destruction of the meadows that sustain it puts it at risk. The floodplain's ongoing neglect and the encroachment of vested interests also undermine Target 2, on restoring 30% of degraded ecosystems,³⁰ and Target 12, on green spaces and urban planning for human well-being and biodiversity.³¹

Georgia, an active party to the Bern Convention, hosted the Convention's Group of Experts on Protected Areas and Ecological Networks in Lagodekhi in September 2026.³² The case of the meadows, however, shows that the country still falls significantly short in protecting the species the Convention is meant to safeguard.

²³ Mariam Khvedelidze, Ana Trapaidze, [დიღმის ჭალები ეკოლოგიური კატასტროფის წინაშე: არსებული მდგომარეობა და პრობლემებიდან გამოსავალი](#), 22, 53.

²⁴ Tbilisi Development Fund, SMEC Georgia, Asian Development Bank, [დიღმის ჭალის რეაბილიტაციის სტრატეგია საბოლოო ანგარიში](#), 5.

²⁵ Mariam Patsatsia, [Dighomi Meadows: An uncertain future for Tbilisi's last floodplain forest](#), CEE Bankwatch Network, 19 October 2026.

²⁶ Tbilisi Development Fund, SMEC Georgia, Asian Development Bank, [დიღმის ჭალის რეაბილიტაციის სტრატეგია საბოლოო ანგარიში](#), 52.

²⁷ Social Justice Center, [დიღმის ჭალები ისევ საფრთხის წინაშე დგას - სოციალური სამართლიანობის ცენტრი დაცულ ტერიტორიასთან დაკავშირებით „ქართული ოცნების“ ხელისუფლების გადაწყვეტილებებს აფასებს](#).

²⁸ Dighomi Meadows Initiative, CEE Bankwatch Network, Social Justice Center, [Complaint to the Bern Convention](#), 1.

²⁹ Convention on Biological Diversity, [Target 3: Conserve 30% of Land, Waters and Seas](#), 19 December 2022.

³⁰ Convention on Biological Diversity, [Target 2: Restore 30% of all Degraded Ecosystems](#), 19 December 2022.

³¹ Convention on Biological Diversity, [Target 12: Enhance Green Spaces and Urban Planning for Human Well-Being and Biodiversity](#), 19 December 2022.

³² Council of Europe, [16th Meeting of the Group of Experts on Protected Areas and Ecological Networks and 5th Strategic Plan Working Group Meeting, alongside the European Diploma on-the-spot appraisal visit](#), 6 October 2026.

Authorising construction of the stadiums near the Emerald site without an appropriate assessment of its impact on the site's habitats, otters and birds also runs counter to Georgia's commitment under the EU–Georgia Association Agreement to apply the safeguards of Article 6 of the Habitats Directive.³³

Recommendations

To the Government of Georgia and Tbilisi City Hall

- Take measures to halt construction and prevent any further damage to Dighomi Meadows.
- Implement the Dighomi Meadows rehabilitation strategy, including a bar on further sale, rezoning or fragmentation, and extend the boundary of the Tbilisi Otter Island Emerald Network site as its management plan recommends.

To the Parties and Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity

- Urge Georgia to protect environmental defenders and guarantee meaningful public participation in decisions affecting protected and candidate sites.
- Call on Georgia to fulfil its international biodiversity and conservation commitments.
- Call attention to the case and encourage the Bern Convention to treat it with urgency.

To the ADB

- Publicly clarify what follow-up the Bank will undertake on the strategy it financed and use its leverage with the Georgian authorities to secure the protection it recommended.

³³ European Union, [Association Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, of the one part, and Georgia, of the other part](#), Annex XXVI, 590, 30 August 2014.