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1. Introduction

High elevations are home to unique assemblages of plants and animals. Although the overall economic importance of alpine and subalpine ecosystems has probably never been particularly great, high mountains remain an integral and important part of the biosphere. Admittedly, this is one of the most fragile and poorly studied ecosystems in the world (BLISS 1985, WALTER & BRECKLE 1986, ARCHIBOLD 1995). Alpine tundras and subalpine meadows, grasslands and scrub communities are used as important grazing areas worldwide. The great aesthetic quality and solitude of alpine ridges attracts multitudes of tourists to the high-mountain wilderness areas (LUKSCHANDERL 1983).

The Teberda State Biosphere Nature Reserve (Teberdinskii Zapovednik) is one of the largest in the Caucasus, covering 85'000 ha. It has played an extremely important role in keeping biological diversity of thousands of species. The flora of the reserve is well-studied (VOROB'EVA & KONONOV 1991). The vegetation, on the other hand, has not yet been well documented (KOROTKOV 1994). This hampers conservation work in the region, since the preserve remains essentially the only "baseline" pristine area undamaged by grazing and other human activities in Karachaevo-Cherkessian Republic.

The main aim of our study was to describe the vegetation of the reserve in terms of its syntaxonomy. Our interests were focused mainly on the alpine (non-forest) vegetation, but some transitional to forest communities have also been included.

The present volume describes, for the first time in English, all principal types of alpine and subalpine plant communities of the Teberda Reserve. The monograph is intended as a handy reference for plant ecologists, park rangers, and amateur naturalists interested in studying plant ecology in the Northern Caucasus – a land of unsurpassed beauty and remarkable biological diversity.

Among different approaches to studying terrestrial ecosystem diversity, floristic classification (syntaxonomy) is the most widespread in Europe. We used this method of community classification to characterize communities since it has long ago become a common language for plant ecologists in many countries of the world. Position of a community within the syntaxonomic system may serve as its "address" when more detailed investigations take place. Syntaxonomic "reviews" are very important in national parks and nature

reserves, and in poorly studied vegetation areas as a first step in detailed vegetation surveys.

The syntaxonomic (floristic) classification was at first developed by Braun-Blanquet and colleagues early in this century (BRAUN-BLANQUET 1921). It very much resembles the conventional biological classification of living organisms. The highest level of classification is represented by classes, subdivided into orders. The latter are further subdivided into alliances (unions) and then into particular associations. Once classifications are published, scientists and land use managers can both use them as a common reference point.

The plant releves for this volume were collected over 16 years (1980-1995). Due to similar ecological conditions and vegetation structure of the Alps and the Caucasus, we chose to adjust the well-developed European system of higher syntaxa to our conditions. Regional specificity was reflected mostly at the level of alliance or association. Such an approach seems to allow comparison of vegetation structure between large regions.