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**The Conservation of the Balkan Lynx -
Seminar on Large Carnivores in the Balkans
and
Workshop on the monitoring of the Balkan Lynx**

Report of the meeting

**(15–17 November 2005,
Mavrovo National Park, “the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”)**

Document prepared by

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THE CONSERVATION OF THE BALKAN LYNX
BERN-CONVENTION SEMINAR ON LARGE CARNIVORES IN THE BALKANS
and
Workshop on the Monitoring of the Balkan Lynx

organised by Euronatur and IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group
15–17 November 2005
Mavrovo National Park, “the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”

Meetings report prepared by

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The isolated population of lynx in the south-western Balkans is the most threatened population of *Lynx lynx* in its entire Euro-Asiatic range. The population is estimated to consist of less than 100 mature individuals. The distribution area stretches from the southern parts of Serbia-Montenegro (southern Montenegro and Kosovo) to the northern border of Greece, with a stronghold in the mountain ranges shared by “the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” and Albania. The conservation of the Balkan lynx is of high importance, but it is complicated by severe habitat deterioration and prey scarcity (mainly on the Albanian side), general lack of capacity. Conservation was hampered by the recent political unrest in the region. The lynx is a flagship species for the conservation of the natural heritage in the whole south-western Balkans; its distribution is congruent with the area of the Green Belt Initiative in the region. The significance of the conservation of the Balkan lynx has been emphasised also within the framework of the Bern Convention and by its partner organisations. Several reports and recent seminars refer to this issue. The seminar held on 15 November 2005 in Mavrovo National Park, “the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”, was the first ever joint meeting of the two countries on this topic. The meeting was organised by Euronatur, the IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group, KORA, and the NGO “*Macedonian Ecological Society*” under the patronage of the Bern Convention secretariat, and financially supported by the Zoological Society Frankfurt and the German Federal Agency of Nature Conservation. During the seminar, the situation of the Balkan lynx was reviewed, its conservation discussed, and a draft Memorandum of Understanding between the two countries was presented. This MoU is expected to be signed between the two countries under the auspices of international organisations such as the Council of Europe or the IUCN during a bilateral meeting of their ministers of environment early next year. The seminar was followed by a two-day workshop focusing on survey and monitoring methodology relevant for the Balkan lynx, its habitats and prey base. Lectures on basic concepts and field techniques were followed by a workshop during which the participants outlined a monitoring concept for the two countries. The conclusions of the seminar were that (1) an official agreement between the two countries and international partner organisations including conservation NGOs is needed to advance the conservation of the Balkan lynx; (2) the lynx should be used as a flagship species for the conservation of wildlife and natural habitats in the frame of the Green Belt Initiative and for the creation of cross-border protected areas; (3) there is a considerable need for more detailed baseline information on the taxonomy, ecology, distribution and abundance of the Balkan lynx allowing the definition of target-oriented conservation measures and hence, a basic field survey and some specific biological/ecological research have a high priority; (4) parallel to this basic works there is a need for the establishment of a broad partnership, capacity building, and a public awareness campaign; (5) external / international funding is urgently needed as the economic situation of the range countries does not allow the financing of a conservation and recovery programme for the Balkan lynx.

1. INTRODUCTION

All reviews of the conservation status of the Eurasian lynx (*Lynx lynx*) in Europe compiled during the past twenty years (BREITENMOSER & BREITENMOSER-WÜRSTEN 1990, BREITENMOSER *et al.* 2000, VON ARX *et al.* 2004) have identified the lynx occurrence in the south-western Balkans as the most threatened autochthonous population. The main distribution area is along the mountain range forming the border between Albania and “the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”, spreading into Serbia and Montenegro (southern Kosovo and Montenegro) in the north and sporadically into northern Greece. The most recent available information indicates that the population consists of less than 100 mature individuals. If the population were to be listed as a specific taxonomic unit, it would be classified as Critically Endangered according to IUCN Red List criteria. This is a justified consideration as the Balkan lynx has been described as a distinct subspecies by BURESCH (1941) and MIRIĆ (1971). This classification is not recognised by most taxonomic registers and hence is not incorporated into international lists or treaties such as the Bern Convention. However, preliminary genetic analyses indicate that the Balkan lynx is indeed distinct from the neighbouring populations of the recognised subspecies *Lynx lynx carpathicus*.

The Balkan lynx is legally protected in all range countries, but no specific conservation actions have been undertaken so far. It occurs in several protected areas, of which the most important ones are in “the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”. The main threats are believed to be illegal killing, lack of prey, habitat deterioration and fragmentation of the population. For the recovery and the long-term conservation of the Balkan lynx, it is vital to (1) stop any further decline of the remnant nuclei, (2) stabilise and increase the extant sub-populations, and (3) recreate a viable meta-population in the historic range and secure the corridors – and hence the genetic exchange – between the sub-populations. Cross-border co-operation is indispensable for a recovery programme, and international financial and methodological support is needed. The Green Belt Initiative launched by IUCN and the German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation offers an opportunity to advance nature conservation in the core areas of the Balkan lynx. In contrast to most large carnivore recovery programmes, protected areas will play a significant role in the conservation of the Balkan lynx. Furthermore, the lynx – which already has a high profile in the two countries – is an excellent flagship species for a much broader approach.

The Bern Convention of the Council of Europe has on several occasions recognised the conservation of the Balkan lynx as a priority for large carnivore conservation efforts in Europe, and all reports commissioned by the Bern Convention (e. g. the Action Plan for the conservation of the Eurasian Lynx (*Lynx lynx*) in Europe; BREITENMOSER *et al.* 2000) have emphasised the critical status of the population. In the Seminar on the Transboundary Management of Large Carnivore Populations organised by the Bern Convention Secretariat, the Slovenian Ministry of Environment and the IUCN/SSC Working Group Large Carnivore Initiative for Europe (held in Osilnica, Slovenia from 15–17 April 2005), the importance of a close co-operation between Albania and “the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” was recognised as a precondition for a successful conservation programme. Two country-oriented workshops initiated by the IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group and Euronatur in Mavrovo National Park and in Tirana in April 2005 explored the possibilities to establish a cross-border alliance for the conservation of the Balkan lynx. To advance this, it was decided to organise a meeting between the experts of the relevant GOs, NGOs and scientific institutions of the two countries. On 15 November 2005, a seminar on the conservation of the Balkan lynx took place in the Mavrovo National Park under the auspices of the Bern Convention/Council of Europe. The seminar was organised and facilitated by Euronatur, the IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group, KORA (Co-ordinated Research Projects for the Management and Conservation of Carnivores in Switzerland), and the “Macedonian Ecological Society”. Some 60 participants representing the authorities in charge of nature protection and wildlife conservation and management of the two countries, national and international NGOs and institutions (e.g. IUCN/SSC Working Group LCIE) and scientists attended the seminar.

The seminar was attended by the relevant GOs and NGOs (called the Consortium) (financially supported by the Zoological Society Frankfurt), and was followed by a workshop on monitoring on Wednesday and Thursday, 16–17 November 2005 (financially supported by the German Federal Agency of Nature Conservation). This report summarises the programme, achievements and

conclusions of both events. The detailed programme, the minutes, and all documents produced for or resulting from the seminar can be downloaded from the Balkan Lynx Compendium hosted on the website of the IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group (www.catsg.org).

2. BALKAN LYNX CONSERVATION MEETING 15 NOVEMBER 2005

During the seminar, the situation of the Balkan lynx was reviewed and needs for its conservation discussed. The Green Belt initiative and the creation of new cross-border protected areas were presented and synergies between the protected area programme and the Balkan lynx recovery were examined. The Memorandum of Understanding between the two countries and the Consortium was presented and discussed. The original intention that the representatives of the Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning of “the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” and the Ministry of Environment of the Republic of Albania would sign the MoU at the seminar had to be postponed, as other important obligations prevented the high-ranking Albanian representatives to be present. The MoU is now expected to be signed by the respective Ministers of Environment of the two countries during a bilateral meeting early next year.

3. SURVEY AND MONITORING WORKSHOP 16–17 NOVEMBER 2005

The workshop was dedicated to the survey and monitoring of the Balkan lynx, its habitats, and prey base. All status reports so far (see Introduction and Balkan Lynx Compendium) are based on more or less qualified guesses. Old scientific publications suggest that the Balkan lynx does not only differ from the neighbouring Carpathian lynx morphologically, but also in regard to its ecology and land tenure system. However, as no field studies have ever been conducted on the Balkan lynx, the basic knowledge needed to design effective and target-oriented conservation measures are lacking. Furthermore, a sound survey of the habitat quality, the status of potential prey populations, and the attitude of, and conflicts with, local people need to be conducted. The representatives of KORA and the IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group gave lectures on lynx biology and ecology, basic survey and monitoring concepts and field techniques, and the identification of field signs were given. Two documents were prepared to support the training and the future monitoring: (1) the Guidelines for the Monitoring of Lynx, and (2) the Balkan Lynx Field Handbook. Both products are available in English, Macedonian and Albanian languages and can be downloaded from the Balkan Lynx Compendium.

The teaching part was followed by a workshop during which the participants outlined a monitoring concept for the two countries. The participants of each country split into four groups, each working on specific tasks. The responses and conclusions from each group were first discussed within the country groups, then translated into English and presented to the plenary. The workshop revealed a lot of useful details in regard to the organisation and network of a basic survey and a future monitoring of the Balkan lynx and its environment in “the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” and in Albania. The results of the workshops were summarised in a Power Point presentation, which can be downloaded as a PDF from the Balkan Lynx Compendium.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

The conclusion of both events were that :

- (1) An official agreement between the two countries and international partner organisations including conservation NGOs – called the Consortium – is needed to advance the conservation of the Balkan lynx.
- (2) The lynx will be used as a flagship species for the conservation of wildlife and natural habitats in the frame of the Green Belt Initiative and for the creation of cross-border protected areas.
- (3) There is a considerable need for more detailed baseline information on the taxonomy, ecology, distribution and abundance of the Balkan lynx allowing the definition of target-oriented conservation measures. Consequently, a basic field survey and some specific biological/ecological research have a high priority. The baseline-data survey should be carried out in 2006 and should (a) determine the presence of lynx in the entire area of its historic range in the countries concerned, and try to come up with at least a relative measure for its abundance; (b) survey the expansion potential and conservation status of forests as the prime lynx habitat; (c)

and the distribution and (relative) abundance of prey species such as roe deer, red deer, chamois, hares and tetraonids; (d) investigate the human attitudes and possible conflicts (attacks on livestock, illegal killings, etc.). The basic survey must then be expanded into a monitoring system for relevant parameters. Specific needs include further research on the taxonomic status of the Balkan lynx.

- (4) Parallel to this basic works, additional preparations for the implementation of conservation measures are needed: (a) a broad partnership for the conservation of the Balkan lynx must be established; (b) capacity building in regard to monitoring and ecological field work must be continued; (c) the establishment of further cross-border protected areas must be advanced; (d) a public awareness campaign should be launched in both countries and on the international level. The Mavrovo seminar was well covered by national media of “the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”, indicating that the lynx already has a high profile in the country.
- (5) International funding is a prerequisite for the implementation of any conservation activity, as the economic situation of the range countries does not allow the financing of the recovery programme for the Balkan lynx. To launch the most urgently activities (baseline surveys, capacity building and training, and protected area design), the international co-organisers of the seminar proposed to submit project proposals to Swiss, Norwegian and German funding agencies in the coming months.

The participants at the meeting concluded that a well-planned step-by-step approach towards a comprehensive conservation programme is necessary in regard to the lack of baseline data, capacity and funding. The next steps are (a) to analyse and summarise the findings of the workshops, (b) to prepare proposals to start the activities, and (c) to continue the training of young scientists and field staff from Albania and “the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”. All participants sensed that the Balkan lynx conservation programme goes beyond the protection of a regionally endangered species, and touches central questions of nature conservation and can be a model for cross-border co-operation. For most participants, it was the first time that they attended a joint meeting of the two countries, and they agreed that the Balkan lynx will only survive if all institutions involved make a common effort.

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