

# BALKAN LYNX RECOVERY PROGRAMME

*Newsletter*

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## AN ERA ENDS, A NEW ONE IS ABOUT TO BEGIN

*Written by Manuela von Arx*

Sixteen years have passed by since we launched the Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme, a joint transboundary project aiming at saving the Balkan lynx while using an integrative approach. What have we achieved? Well, the Balkan lynx still exists and we know much more about its distribution, ecology and conservation needs. Personal capacities were raised and regional NGOs strengthened. Besides the knowledge of the Balkan lynx, awareness of its critical status was raised among local communities and particularly children. We lobbied successfully for the inclusion of the Balkan lynx on Appendix II of the Bern Convention and contributed to the designation of new protected areas relevant for the lynx. We placed particular emphasis to collaborate with local people and relevant interest groups like hunters and to implement joint activities, which paid off.

What did we not achieve? Although we had seen a slight increase in numbers in the core area of the population, the Mavrovo National Park in North Macedonia, and an expansion to areas further south, the population size seems to stagnate and remains very low – far below the 50 mature individuals and thus the threshold value to escape the Critically Endangered status.



Major threats like illegal killings of lynx or its main prey (roe deer and chamois) are still occurring, infrastructure developments destroying suitable lynx habitat, hunting and forestry systems not fulfilling sustainability standards and law enforcement is generally weak.

Nevertheless, we have not given up yet and believe that the Balkan lynx deserves all our efforts to be saved from extinction. It is our hope to have civil society, relevant interest groups and the authorities on board for this endeavour. We will continue working towards reducing the threats for the Balkan lynx and we will investigate the consequences of the small population size and on measures how to mitigate them.

To one partner, who was with us since the outset of the Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme in 2006, who supported us throughout all these years and therefore greatly contributed to the positive developments on different ends, we unfortunately have to say good-bye:

A big thank you to the MAVA Foundation, for believing in the Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme and in our team! It is not self-evident to receive support over such a long time and we are very grateful and happy about this trust. MAVA also helped us to find a new donor which allows us to continue our mission in favour of the recovery of the Balkan lynx. Thank you!



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# A BIG STEP TOWARDS WILDLIFE MONITORING IN KOSOVO

*Written by Bardh Sanaja*

Systematic monitoring of wildlife is important to assess their conservation status and to take measures to protect them. Progress was made in Kosovo by signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between ERA and MESPI (Ministry of Environment, Spatial Plan and Infrastructure) (see photo), to develop a Wildlife Monitoring Concept that includes brown bear, wolf, lynx and wildcat.

Over the past years, ERA in the framework of the Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme (BLRP), has made considerable steps towards monitoring of Balkan lynx: Trends of presence and distribution are now better understood. Other species remain unknown. The monitoring framework concept used for Balkan lynx is well established and can be extended to include other species. For this, ERA has agreed with MESPI to form a working group which will undertake the task of developing the monitoring concept.

During the BLRP, institutional collaboration in Kosovo was significantly enhanced. The monitoring sessions required the support of the local authorities, national park administrations and the ministries. This process will now be reciprocated which in turn will further enhance collaboration. Additionally, the data produced will support Kosovo in attaining the standard for conservation and monitoring required by the Bern Convention and Habitats Directive.



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# WHEN HUNTERS JOIN FORCES TO SAVE AN APEX PREDATOR

*Written by Aleksandar Pavlov*

Confined to the Balkan Peninsula, an indigenous and critically endangered cat has limited land to claim as its home. These patches of favourable habitat, set in protected areas or hunting grounds, suffer no severe human pressure, giving a fighting chance to the ailing population of the Balkan lynx.

Collaboration with hunters strives to sensitise them on the importance of apex predators in a hunting ground, thereby breaking myths and overcoming prejudices about lynx presence and its impact on game species. Through joint monitoring using camera-traps, we help them grasp the problem and at the same time create a sense of ownership over the process. Now hunters are the ones responsible for protecting the Balkan lynx on their turf! But such partnership is a two-way street. The years of shared work have offered us profound understanding of the hunter's paradigm – their attitudes, the values they hold, common practices, but also the challenges and difficulties they face. All this is truly beneficial for our work, since it fosters mutual trust and forges friendship with hunters, who play a vital role in the story of the lynx. And, more importantly, lynx is now seen in a more favourable light.

This year's joint monitoring presents a continuation of the cooperation initiated in 2017 between MES and the four hunting societies (HSs) managing hunting grounds where lynx presence was established: Sokol-Z HS (Kichevo), Piton HS (Ohrid), Malesija HS (Struga), and Cern Kamen HS (Vevchani).



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The joining of another HS from the Kichevo area, Eko Fazan, was a welcome boost to the 2022 monitoring efforts. Before starting the actual monitoring, game wardens and hunters from all five HSs were given a presentation on the biology and ecology of the Balkan lynx, with explanation of the method and discussion about the animal and the work in the field (see photo). Following this, each HS was given camera-traps and basic training by the MES lynx team to conduct a session within their own hunting grounds. All camera-traps were deployed in the beginning of February and remained on site by the end of May.

Results are encouraging! Three out of five HSs managed to capture a lynx individual. A total of 50 lynx images were obtained. The biggest thrill to all involved came from a video of a female lynx with two kittens. The video was taken in the hunting ground managed by the debutant Eko Fazan HS. Camera-traps also reveal a variety of wildlife, where roe deer, the lynx principal prey, seems to be abundant. Hence, the solid prey base and the presence of Balkan lynx in these areas means that conditions are suitable to sustain a number of lynx individuals. This also means that hunting grounds neighbouring the lynx core area can provide stepping stones for the dispersal of this animal from its stronghold – Mavrovo National Park – to other areas that could potentially house the Balkan lynx.

A well-managed hunting ground can support a healthy population of both game species and apex predators within it. The Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme strongly affirms the role of hunters in the conservation of the Balkan lynx, for they are the eyes on the ground when it comes to in-situ protection. We must ensure that good rapport and mutual trust are maintained, because we need everyone on board if we want to see this cat rescued from the brink of extinction!

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# HOW THE BALKAN LYNX BECAME PART OF MY DAILY LIFE

*Written by Naim Palushi*



"My name is Naim Palushi and I work as a teacher in the village of Zapod, one of the very deep and mountainous villages of Kukës, Albania. I have a degree in Albanian language and literature and I teach in high school for these subjects. Nature is my passion. I often participate in the civil society meetings of biologists and naturalists in the area, where protected areas and endemic species that are on the verge of extinction are the main topics for discussion. Such discussions and debates about endemic plants and the unstudied and unknown wildlife of the steep mountain slopes are objects of conversations that make me very enthusiastic. The first information about the Balkan lynx and its presence in the area I had was from biologist Arben Palushi (*member of the Balkan lynx monitoring network, North region, Albania*).

One of the best nature events I witnessed myself was my encounter with the species.

Teachers and students knowing my passion told me that on both slopes of the Vanaj Canyon, both that of Koritnik and Gjallica, the lynx has been seen and his calls were heard, by students and also shepherds, especially during the last 5-6 years. A fact that further strengthened my belief in the presence of the lynx in the area was the assertion of my colleague Albert Muja, who insisted that he had encountered it twice. On 20 December, at 7.20 in the morning, the lynx passed in front of the van of the teachers that I was driving, without being afraid and with a safe step. He came down from Gjallica, crossed the river, and went up to Koritnik. This was the moment! I recognized him from a distance of 20m and immediately stopped the van. I went out to document the event together with my colleague Muja, where we filmed the Balkan lynx. The teachers said that he had come especially for me to see him with my own eyes and to prove that he really exists here. For more than five minutes he paraded in front of us. It was a very happy and exciting moment as if I had achieved an extraordinary goal.

The Balkan lynx has been seen again, not only here. I think he is a permanent resident of these habitats."

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# HONOURING OUR ENDANGERED BIG CAT ON INTERNATIONAL LYNX DAY

*Written by Andrej Gonev*



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Raising public awareness for biodiversity is one of the main pillars in the work of conservationists. Year-round, many days are dedicated to commemorate and shed some light on various endangered species and the number of these days keeps growing. Since 2018, International Lynx Day is celebrated every year on 11 June to spotlight Europe's biggest cat and its importance for a complete and healthy ecosystem.

Working on the public's appreciation of this critically endangered carnivore in our forests is essential for its survival and has been a high priority of the Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme. This year, MES and Mavrovo National Park have joined forces and brought the topic to the younger generation of locals, organising an educational event in the park's infocentre at the heart of Mavrovo. The event was also open for MES' members, especially encouraging those who have children to come and join.

Around one hundred children from the region were accompanied by their teachers, and had the chance to learn about the lynx through a short and interesting presentation that highlighted the pivotal features and roles this cat plays, as well as the danger it faces.

Through some questions and discussion, they learned why it is important to coexist with them. To jazz it up after the presentation, they had a glimpse of what it feels like to be a lynx in their natural habitat, roaming on a forest trail where a camera trap had been installed, while wearing a lynx-inspired mask on their faces (see photo). To their huge excitement, they also had the chance to see how a real GPS collar works with a playful hide-and-seek demonstration where one had to hide wearing it and the others used a radio-antenna to find them.

Activities like these are really important if we want to bring our work closer to the local community. Getting the people more familiar with the monitoring methods and the conservation activities will undoubtedly yield a higher acceptance of them.

Involving the younger generations is key if we want to spark their admiration and interest for keeping the Balkan lynx around in the future.



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# NEW HUNTING MORATORIUM IN ALBANIA: WILL IT BE FOR REAL OR WILL IT REMAIN ON PAPER?

*Written by Aleksandër Trajçe*

The Albanian government has recently pushed forward the bill for a new hunting moratorium in Albania. The new moratorium is proposed for five more years and it will continue the sanctioning of a complete hunting ban in Albania following the two previous moratoria (2014-16 and 2016-21). While at first glance, such a decision might sound like a very beneficial one for wildlife, the reality on the ground is far from being so. The previous two moratoria have been a disaster in terms of their implementation on the ground and they have been only ‘nice’ decisions to show on paper. With the only exception of the first year (2014-15), the following years have seen a dramatic increase in poaching almost in all of the Albanian territory, and particularly in the interior highlands, where the influence and reach of institutions is the weakest. Evidence has shown that ‘silent’ methods of killing wildlife, such as trapping, snaring, poisoning, etc. have increased dramatically during the period of moratoria. A multitude of restaurants in Tirana and the countryside have offered meat from wildlife species, well throughout the moratoria period. Their demand is being fulfilled by hordes of organised poachers, who shoot and trap a multitude of species, without any regard of their protection status or rarity.

Balkan lynx have fallen victim to such a practice, with one prominent case of a restaurant in Elbasan, which has exhibited three stuffed Balkan lynx in their premises, two most likely shot in 2017 and one shot in 2020 (see photo). The moratoria have provided a justification for responsible institutions to not do anything on the ground, hiding behind the paper decision and not following it through with patrols and controls of the hunting situation on the ground. The parallel reform of the Environmental inspectorate and forest service have left a void in terms of inspecting institutions and their responsibilities and it is quite unclear as to which institution is responsible to inspect the situation in the field, particularly outside protected areas.



While one of the most important aims of the first two moratoria was to use that period to improve the hunting legal framework and strengthen management institutions, almost nothing has been done in this regard. There is no new law on hunting and no clear strategy for the long-term situation of wildlife management in the country.

Under such a situation, PPNEA has advocated against another five-year extension of the moratorium, by pushing for improving the legal framework on hunting and wildlife management instead, as the only long-term solution for the benefit and sustainability of the fauna in the country. We have pushed for the creation of the National Fauna Council, an advisory institution to the Ministry of Tourism and Environment for issues of wildlife and wildlife management, which has been established in 2021 and which brings together many stakeholders on wildlife issues, including the hunters’ community, conservationists, researchers and responsible authorities. The long-term solution for wildlife management in the country can come only through dialogue, understanding and joint agreement of all concerned stakeholders and not through top-down decisions such as the moratoria, which are good only on paper, while they leave poachers undisturbed to do as they please in nature.

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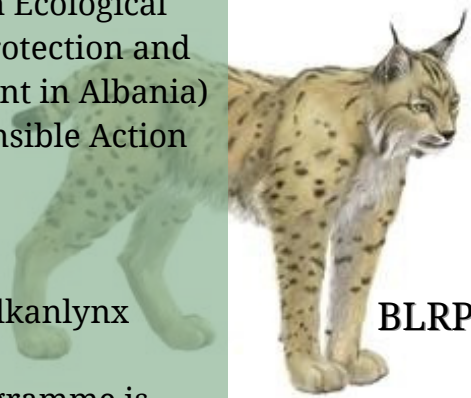
# Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme

The „Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme” (BLRP) is jointly implemented by EuroNatur Foundation, KORA (Carnivore Ecology and Wildlife Management), MES (Macedonian Ecological Society), PPNEA (Society for the Protection and Preservation of Natural Environment in Albania) and ERA (Environmentally Responsible Action Group, Kosovo).

More Information:

<https://www.facebook.com/balkanlynx>

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