

BALKAN LYNX RECOVERY PROGRAMME

Newsletter

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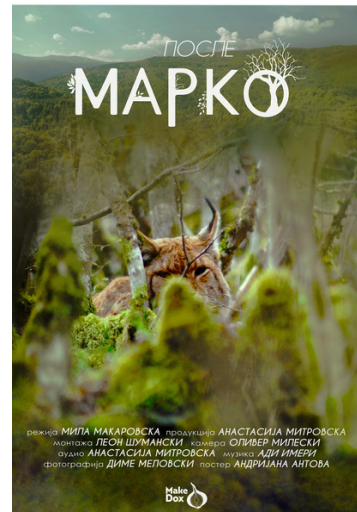
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RECOVERY OF THE BALKAN LYNX POPULATION: TIME IS RUNNING OUT

Written by Manuela von Arx

Our range-wide camera-trap survey conducted earlier this year (see Newsletter 1/21) revealed **devastating results**: Only one lynx in Kosovo, four lynx individuals in Albania located in two separate locations, and five individuals in Mavrovo National Park, N. Macedonia were photographed, which is half the number we pictured there three years ago! Although there is the incidence of further individuals in the vicinity of the park and in other areas of North Macedonia (for instance three lynx in Jasen PA and one in Galichica National Park), there are far too few individuals for the long-term survival of the Balkan lynx. Particularly the decline in the Mavrovo National Park, which is the stronghold of the population, is a big worry. Prey species like roe deer and chamois seem abundant enough – although this is something we'll have to investigate more in detail. There are no indications of increased human-caused losses in the area. However, illegal killing has been a major problem in all range countries in the past: From 2006–2020 the BLRP found 14 cases of lynx being poached. Intrinsic factors due to the long-term low population size and consequently low genetic variability are another hypothesis that could explain the negative trend and the low reproduction rate in Mavrovo National Park. Whatever the reasons are, it becomes clear that we have to increase efforts to avoid the Balkan lynx becoming extinct. The BLRP team will do whatever it can, however saving the lynx needs the commitment of all: the authorities, stakeholders and the society.



AFTER MARKO: A FILMED DEPICTION OF LYNX CONSERVATION EFFORTS IN NORTH MACEDONIA

Written by Aleksandar Pavlov

The latest addition in the line of Balkan lynx documentaries premiered this August at MakeDox Creative Documentary Film Festival in Skopje. Now in its twelfth year, this cinematographic event is the country's signature festival on documentary storytelling that provides the stimulating environment for both experienced and new filmmakers from home and abroad. The film, named *After Marko*, offers a glimpse into the work of the Macedonian team of the Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme (BLRP). It also presents the directorial debut of Mila Makarovska, festival's youth DocuSprout programme participant.

The Macedonian Ecological Society (MES), country's BLRP partner, helped the filming of the documentary, taking the film crew to the field, where they had a first-hand opportunity to capture a day's work of the lynx team outdoors. While the fieldwork focused on camera-trapping, prey search, and radio-telemetry, MES's contribution also encompassed provision of relevant information about lynx biology and ecology, with updated input from the field, photos and footage, and interviews of team members.

The film's storyline provides a kaleidoscopic account of the events during and after the controversial hydropower plants project in Mavrovo National Park, switching between personal testimonials and real-time fieldwork. Despite the dangers of thematic repetition, *After Marko* successfully manages to offer the viewer a refreshing and relatable narrative that underlines the importance of BLRP's conservation work.

So far, the film was only screened at the Festival, but it will be shown at other festivals before making it available to the general public. The film was very well received by the audience, which, applause aside, was obvious from the questions to the MES lynx team on stage and the interest to discuss lynx-related issues.



ARE THERE FEWER FORESTS IN THE BALKAN LYNX RANGE?

Written by Vasko Avukatov & Aleksandar Stojanov

Forests are important habitats for large carnivores, providing shelter, food for prey species, and serving as corridors that enable connectivity between their populations. However, forests nowadays are under a severe anthropogenic pressure, which results in their loss or fragmentation. Forest loss and fragmentation, along with poaching and prey depletion, have been identified as main threats to the survival of the Balkan lynx population during the past decades.

In that regard, two separate sets of analysis on forest change have been conducted to establish the situation with the forest ecosystem across the Balkan lynx range and examine the changes over the period 2000–2012. To that aim, two significantly different source datasets were used: CORINE Land Cover and Global Forest Cover Change (dataset containing information about the state in the year 2000 and subsequent changes of the forest cover, considering only the canopy of trees higher than 5m). The extent of forest loss was especially interesting in both nuclei for the Balkan lynx: N. Macedonia's Mavrovo National Park and Albania's Munella Mountains, but also in the areas that connect these two areas, and the areas to be repopulated first by the Balkan lynx, according to our estimates and Kosovo.

Results from the analyses of both datasets indicated a dominating non-degraded forest area and tree cover loss trend across the Balkan lynx range in the 12-year period analysed. Even though there are spatially specific variations in the severity of these changes, the overall trends in all countries are unsustainable in the long term. The results indicate dominant and unsustainable (long-term) forest degradation in the core area, Mavrovo NP, similar to the national level in N. Macedonia, and critical levels of overall forest and tree cover loss in the core area Munella. Analyses on national level reveal that Albania had the poorest overall state of the forests in the year 2000, with relative forest area covering 27% of the country, while Montenegro had the best state of forests, with more than 41% relative forest on national level. Albania and N. Macedonia also had high negative trends of forest area changes during 2000–2012, losing 6.78% and 4.88% of the non-degraded forest area, respectively.

Results of the analysis are worrisome and they should be a solid basis for further research and they call for immediate action. They should be considered when planning and endorsing national forestry policies to fight forest loss with the relevant authorities in countries of the Balkan lynx distribution range.

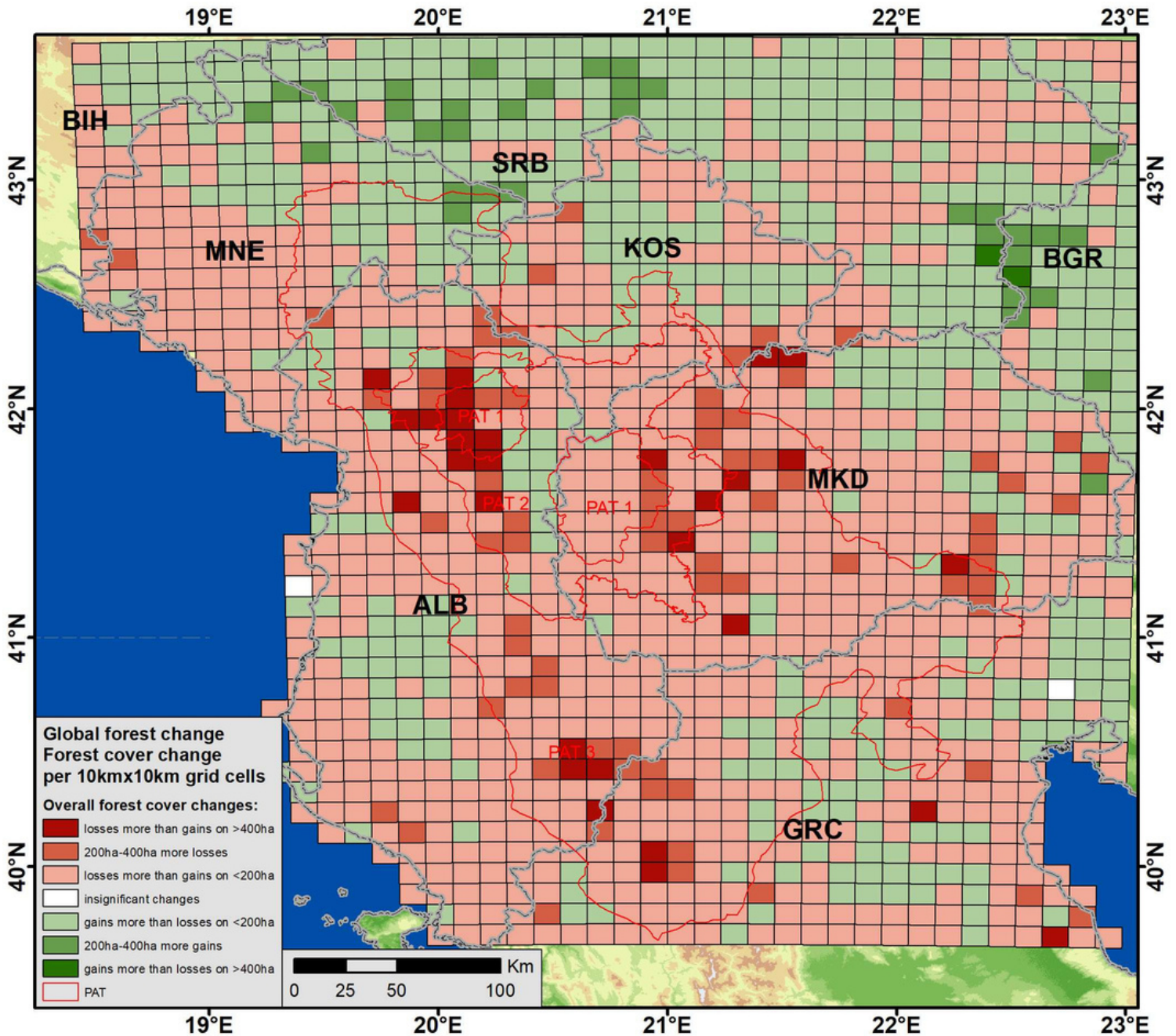


Cut and burned forest - Munella area
(Albania)



Example for a poorly managed forest - Plakenska Mountain
(N. Macedonia).

Change in forest cover 2000-2012



Map showing the forest cover changes per 10x10 km grid cells in Balkan lynx range countries over the period 2000-2012.

Red cells indicate forest losses more than forest gain on >400ha area. Orange cells indicate forest losses more than gains on 200-400ha area. Pink cells indicate forest losses more than gains on <200ha area. White cells indicate insignificant changes of the forest cover. Light green cells indicate forest gains more than losses on <200ha area. Green cells indicate forest gains more than losses on 200-400ha area. Dark green cells indicate forest gains more than losses on >400ha area. Red lines define the Priority Area Type for the Balkan lynx recovery.

Reforestation action in Munella Mountain

Written by Ilir Shyti and Roland Lleshi



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The actual situation of forests at Munella Mountain is at peril due to decades of extreme timber harvest (planned and illegal), persecution and poaching of big fauna combined with intense forest fires. The consequences of degraded settings put nature and man at risk with less resilient natural habitats, more erosion, less water retention, and extended climate crisis.

The restoration of natural habitats is fundamental for a sustainable future of forests and wildlife. One core instrument to tackle the status quo is reforestation.

That is why PPNEA initiated the reforestation action at Munella Mountain (above Mesul village at 1100 m altitude) a critical habitat for large carnivores such as the Critically Endangered Balkan lynx (*Lynx lynx balcanicus*).

More than one thousand black pine (*Pinus nigra* subs. *nigra*) saplings (two-years old) were planted on the third and fourth of December 2021.

The native saplings were taken from a tree nursery in the Puka region to maximise adaptation and acclimatisation. Volunteers from Puka, Tirana, PPNEA staff, touristic guides and the local community from the villages around actively joined the planting. The designation of the planting site and the follow up monitoring is coordinated with the local authorities of Puka municipality. The ultimate aim is to turn this action into a recurring (annually) activity with the involvement of relevant stakeholders in the sector.

Through a crowdfunding call and backing from the BLRP programme (PPNEA), the financial means were met to realise the planting successfully. Donors for this initiative are Albanian diaspora people mainly living in Berlin/Germany and elsewhere. Another important group of donors came from different countries of the world. Gratitude goes to all supporters. Nature knows no borders. KUDOS to all of you!



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BALKAN LYNX EDUCATION CORNER AT THE NATIONAL SCIENCES MUSEUM IN TIRANA

Written by Klaudja Koci

In the continued efforts of the PPNEA and BLRP partners to protect the Balkan lynx, since the end of last year, an interactive education corner thematic to Balkan lynx has been established at the National Museum of Natural Sciences “Sabiha Kasimati” in Tirana. The education corner was designed for the engagement and excitement of little children from the early ages throughout primary school levels. Children accompanied by their parents or teachers, have the opportunity to learn about the Balkan lynx ecology and distribution, in different entertaining ways, such as the information displayed on the banner next to the real size Balkan lynx statute, or from reading “The story of Hope, Balkan lynx”, on the outdoor wall.

Because playing is so important for children, we prepared playful activities. They can explore the “forest inhabitants” with the binocular with scrolling images, test their knowledge with the lynx Origami facts and curiosities, and for the super active ones, there is the opportunity to craft the lynx track with plasticine, using the real size track model produced by PPNEA.

The education corner is not only attractive to children, but also to any other visitor who enters the science museum and would like to learn about the Balkan lynx.

According to the National Museum staff, who were trained to interpret the education corner by PPNEA, the Balkan lynx corner received children visitors regularly, even during the school close down period of last spring. We have seen their joy when we celebrated the International Lynx Day, on 11 June 2021 with school children visitors from the “World Academy of Tirana”. Most of the children had never heard of the Balkan lynx before. Nevertheless, after we introduced them to its home, favourite food, as well as the dangers it faces, they were thrilled to learn more.

The education corner will continue to stay open at the Museum of Sciences, until it is transferred to another education hub, and our team is thankful to the National Museum staff who are guiding all the children visitors every time to explore the Balkan lynx education corner.



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GALICHICA NATIONAL PARK: A FLICKER OF HOPE FOR THE BALKAN LYNX

Written by Andrej Gonev



At the onset of the Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme (BLRP), little was known about the distribution of the Balkan lynx. The three national parks at the time (Mavrovo, Pelister and Galichica National Parks) were among the main suspected candidate areas, because of the well-preserved habitats, prey availability and control over hunting. Furthermore, historically, the lynx once inhabited all of western N. Macedonia, where all of the country's national parks are located.

However, following the results of the Baseline Survey on lynx, its prey and other carnivores in Macedonia in 2007, it seemed that only Mavrovo National Park – now known to be the core reproductive area of the lynx – showed the highest likelihood to accommodate the felid, while the other parks lacked hard evidence, in spite of the reported sightings from tourists and locals that date back to the 1980s. This was even further backed up by the numerous camera-trapping sessions over the years, which failed to confirm lynx presence.

But then, in late 2020, rangers from Galichica National Park managed to make the first-ever camera-trap photo of a Balkan lynx on Galichica Mountain. Shortly after, MES conducted an opportunistic camera-trap session in the Prespa region, photographing the individual yet again. A few additional photographs followed throughout the year and again in 2021, indicating that the individual is a resident in the park.

Bearing in mind the alarming state of the Balkan lynx, this news came as a welcome surprise to the team. It furthermore stresses the importance of and need for well-preserved corridors that connect the core area with the dispersal and recolonisation areas. Good habitat connectivity is one of the key factors that will promote a healthy Balkan lynx population. The support from Galichica National Park is invaluable for the conservation of this critically endangered subspecies. Concluding on a positive note, we hope that the lynx will become more than just a rare camera-trap photograph in this national park and that first signs of reproduction will soon follow.

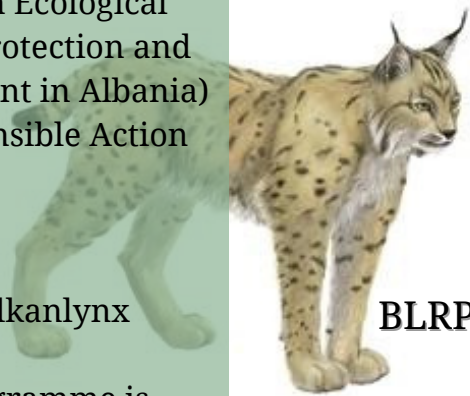
Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme

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>

The Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme is financially supported by MAVA Foundation, Switzerland.



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