

BALKAN LYNX RECOVERY PROGRAMME

Newsletter

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REUNITING FOR THE LYNX

Written by Lisa Leschinski

The Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme (BLRP) team recently gathered for a partner meeting in Peja, Kosovo, from 19–22 June. The in-person meeting held great importance in a transboundary project, providing an opportunity for team members to spend time together and discuss the project.

This meeting welcomed new participants, further enriching the collaborative efforts. Two working groups were formed this year, namely the Communication Working Group and the Policy Working Group. The first day was dedicated to these topics, with Ksenija Putilin (MES) presenting the progress made on communication strategy documents and Bruna Campos (EuroNatur) delivering an insightful presentation on advocacy.

The second day offered an exciting field trip to the mesmerizing Bjeshkët e Nemuna National Park. The local team from ERA guided the BLRP team through the park, where it had the privilege of witnessing the breathtaking landscape that is home to at least one remaining Balkan lynx.

The overall outcome of the meeting was highly fruitful. The Communication Working Group grew closer, fostering enhanced collaboration and synergy within the team. Additionally, a comprehensive evaluation of current activities was conducted on the third day, with a keen focus on identifying the tasks and objectives for the upcoming year. The gathering allowed team members to strengthen their bonds and reaffirm their commitment to the project's shared vision.



Photos from BLRP partner meeting June 2023

STRAY DOG DOCUMENTARY

Written by Dime Melovski

Because of the constant influx and the increasing number of stray dogs in North Macedonia, the problem is getting more and more relevant for wildlife in general and the Balkan lynx in particular. We identified three different processes how rural stray dogs can harm wildlife: 1) some stray dogs form packs that hunt ungulates and other smaller prey, thus putting more pressure to native fauna; 2) stray dogs scavenge other carnivores' prey. We documented several times a Balkan lynx kill being finished by stray dogs; 3) females dogs can mate with male wolves leading to hybridization that can alter wolf's natural appearance and its behaviour. In order to emphasize these problems and raise the awareness among Macedonian officials and public, we produced a documentary called "Wilderness" composed of three episodes. The documentary was done in collaboration with the Institute of Communication Studies.

The first episode, "Danger for the lynx" looks into how the problem has started and the potential solution should be: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fpzD6Y0II4k&t=1s>

The second episode: "Clash of laws" seeks to find solutions in other EU countries. An interview with a researcher from Romania, Teodora Sin, reveals how Romanians are coping with the situation and what needs to change in the laws to start solving the problem: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OSQzec0rpUQ>

The third episode "Human responsibility" is more focused on the dog-wolf hybridization. The interview with the chair of the Large Carnivore Initiative for Europe and leading wolf expert, Luigi Boitani, is very much dedicated to this phenomenon and the role the wolves are playing in the ecosystem, but also the magnitude that this problem reached Italy and the ever increasing gap between scientist/researchers and the animal welfare organizations: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T_0vFds9o4E

CAMERA-TRAPPING AND NON-INVASIVE SAMPLING IN THE CORE OF THE BALKAN LYNX RANGE

Written by Dime Melovski; Melitjan Nezaj and Ilir Shyti

One of the most important activities within the Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme has been the regular systematic camera-trapping sessions conducted in the core area of the lynx distribution range – Mavrovo National Park. After a debacle during the last systematic session in 2021, where we only photographed four different individuals, and the promising non-systematic session last year, this session was crucial to try and see which lynx are still present in the area and try to calculate the density within the park and its surroundings. This year, we opted for 40 instead of the usual 30 sites in Mavrovo in order to increase the capture probabilities and have more recaptures for a sounder statistical analysis. All 40 sites were covered with two units facing each other so that more quality lynx photos will enable accurate identification. We left the cameras in the field from mid-February to the second half of April, ensuring that each camera will operate for at least 60 days. The results point to eight different individuals photographed in 13 out of the 40 sites in the park. The resident lynx B38, B30, B41 and B25 still roam the park, alongside Atidzhe who we first encountered ten years ago while collared in 2020. Lisa and Narcisa, the neighbouring females who were also collared in 2020, did not show on the photos this year.

Parallel to the lynx camera-trapping, MES also conducted a brown hare density estimation study in four different sites inside Mavrovo. Marie Busschots, our intern from Belgium, was in charge of the complete realisation of this study: design, fieldwork, analysis and reporting. We selected both abandoned and active fields near villages where hares graze. We were happy to estimate almost nine hares per square kilometer, so plenty of food for the Balkan lynx. Finally, we did a ten-day non-invasive collection of lynx samples for the upcoming genetic monitoring. For this purpose, we invited two colleagues from Slovenia, Urša Fležar and Teresa Oliviera, who work on the Dinaric lynx LIFE Lynx project.

Urša's trained dog Ruby was key in finding several lynx signs: scats, food remains and lynx hairs along the defined transects and three lynx kills. The material will be sent to Ljubljana for further genetic analysis. As always, all fieldwork has been supported by the Mavrovo NP officials, offering help in terms of logistics and game-warden service. Volunteers, interns and colleagues from abroad made the session smoother and more fun.



In Albania, the intensive camera trapping study was carried out with the parallel placement of two cameras in 30 locations, most of them within Munella Nature Park. PPNEA carried out the monitoring in cooperation with the Administration of Protected Areas, starting from December 2022 until May 2023. The monitoring season resulted in the photographing of two individuals of the Balkan lynx. A total of 89 photos of lynx were taken in 12 locations. From the preliminary data analysis, abundant presence of lynx prey was observed as well, mainly roe deer, brown hare and red fox. Other carnivores such as the brown bear, grey wolf and golden jackal were also present in the bio corridors used by lynx.

In parallel with the camera-trap study, the collection of genetic material was also conducted. In total, 14 genetic samples were collected from the monitoring group (1 prey-remain and 13 scat samples). The collected material was stored for further analysis.

HUMAN DIMENSION SURVEY 2023 IS ONGOING IN ALBANIA, NORTH MACEDONIA, AND KOSOVO

Written by Aleksander Trajçe and Bledi Hoxha



At the onset of the Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme (BLRP), in 2007–2009, we conducted our first Human Dimension Survey, in the mountain regions of Albania and North Macedonia. Based on the local opinions, using questionnaires in the communes and municipalities with large carnivores, we gained insight into the large carnivores' attitudes, presence, distribution, damage, and management. This knowledge was crucial to identify areas of high importance for the presence of the Balkan lynx, its prey, and other large carnivores, such as the wolf and the bear, and also to design objectives for the prevention of threats and the recovery of the Balkan lynx population in the Balkan Peninsula.

The second Human Survey is ongoing during 2023, now including Kosovo, where this study is being done for the first time. This questionnaire was developed following similar human dimensions research studies in other European countries. The first draft plan of the survey was prepared at the beginning of 2023 by Aleksander Trajçe, expert on the Large Carnivores Human Dimension at PPNEA, and finalized after the feedback from the training workshop organized on 23–24 February in Tirana.

Eighteen volunteers/students and 4 BLRP members from three countries were trained to implement the questionnaire in the field. Questions are organized around general topics such as attitudes, beliefs, knowledge of species, management, personal experiences and socio-demographic information. Also, reinforcement-specific questions were integrated in the current form. Attitudinal items are based on a 5-point Likert scale and scored from 1 (strongly disagree/dislike) to 5 (strongly agree/like).

We aim to achieve at least 400 questionnaires in every country by respecting a gender-balanced representation and interviewing residents above the legal adult age (older than 18 years). Face-to-face interviews have been chosen for the study. The online survey was not preferred due to limited internet access in the rural areas. The questionnaires have been translated in the respective language. Since April 2023, the group of experts and volunteers has been in the field, conducting interviews in the regions where the Balkan lynx is present in the three countries. This phase of the survey is expected to be finalized in December 2023. After that, the experts will analyze the data and the results will be included in the feasibility assessment and risk analysis, a strategic document which will help in the genetic reinforcement of the Balkan lynx population.

BLRP CELEBRATES LYNX DAY

Written by Aleksandar Pavlov and Dime Melovski

The Macedonian Ecological Society (MES), one of the range-country partner organisations, celebrated in Mavrovo's Bunec Safari Park. Our 'target audience' were the sixth-graders from the Kocho Racin Primary School in Kumanovo, a school situated in a non-lynx area. We deliberately chose it, as we also wanted to give the educational opportunity to schoolchildren from beyond the lynx lands. A group of 30 curious heads took an educational tour through Bunec, where Mavrovo National Park staff and MES representatives guided them through the magical world of wildlife, permeating with the story of the Balkan lynx. To our thrill, we were bombarded with questions and were more than happy to answer. We also 'lynxed around' a bit, playing hide-and-seek with an active collar. The task was to find the hidden volunteer using an antenna and a receiver. Perfect exercise in fieldwork! At the end of the tour, schoolchildren were all given a practical task of roaming around and detecting different flora and fauna species, either through sighting or through tracks and signs. This was to show them the intricacy of wildlife and how it all connects, but also how national parks can easily be hotspots of diversity.

As part of the educational kit, we also decided to celebrate the lynx day with the first-graders of Lazo Angelovski Primary School from Skopje with whom we already started the first two chapters of the EduKit. Around 150 schoolchildren visited Vodno Mountain, close to the capital, to find an ideal tree and set a camera-trap. After walking a nice hiking trail, children were all happy to set the camera and get themselves camera-trapped while pretending to be bears, wolves, lynx, hares or maybe foxes. They were thrilled to look at the pictures on the laptop later on while exploring a model of a lynx skull. Lastly, we split into two groups and played hide-and-seek using an antenna and a receiver. Happy with the knowledge they gained, the kids later on had a nice picnic where they enjoyed their snacks and favourite games.



SLOVENIAN LARGE CARNIVORE KNOW-HOW PRESENTED BEFORE MACEDONIAN STAKEHOLDERS

Written by Aleksandar Pavlov

A three-day study visit cannot do wonders, but it can surely be an eye-opener to all willing to take in from such valuable experience! In the period of 24–26 May, the Slovenian Forestry Service hosted a team of representatives from the Macedonian institutions relevant to the Balkan lynx conservation, sharing their knowledge and presenting the current state-of-affairs in the country's hunting, forestry and conservation. The study visit was organised by the Macedonian Ecological Society.

With such a diverse and full agenda, participants, coming from the Ministry of Environment and Spatial Planning, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy, the National Forests Public Enterprise, and Mavrovo National Park, had a unique opportunity to tackle a variety of topics – all intertwined with the issue of lynx conservation.

Day one focused on presenting the work of all participants in their respective fields. The Slovenian hosts offered an overview of the work and organisation of Slovenia Forest Service, the forest and hunting management in Slovenia, but also the implementation of the LIFE Lynx project. The Macedonian participants also painted a picture about the situation in the country, providing vivid presentations about the organisation and current activities within the abovementioned institutions.

Day two revolved around site visits. We began with the Dina Pivka Centre of Large Carnivores – the creative hub of transboundary cooperation between Slovenia and Croatia on large carnivore (LC) conservation and space to sensitise the public about the importance of these animals. Then followed a visit to the peaceful Juršče village, where a local farmer shared his experience on LC damage prevention and the use of livestock guarding dogs, giving us a view into his livelihood as a shepherd. Up next was the lovely Mašun Forest House serving as an LC museum. There we were welcomed by the President of the Jelen Hunting Ground, where he explained the situation with hunting in Slovenia and the region.

Then we made a stroll along the Mašun Educational Forest Path – creatively executed space where education peers through the natural setting of the beech-dominated habitat. We rounded off the day with a visit to the Privat cabin, a lonely cabin in the woods often visited by lynx and bear, where rubbing behaviour has been established. The cabin is used by the LIFE Lynx researchers as a camera-trapping site to do lynx monitoring.

On our final day of the study tour we visited the gorgeous Triglav National Park, starting with their headquarters and a meet-and-greet with the director and some rangers. We continued to the lynx enclosure in Pokljuka, where participants were explained about the soft- and hard-release methods for lynx, as part of the LIFE Lynx project activities for lynx reintroduction. Such visits are truly beneficial to important stakeholders, as they gain critical insight into the more elusive aspects of conservation work. Only through proper informing and transparency can we hope to gain institution-wide support and commitment for saving the Balkan lynx.



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PROPOSAL FOR THE INCLUSION OF THE EURASIAN LYNX AND THE BALKAN LYNX IN THE APPENDICES OF THE CONVENTION ON MIGRATORY SPECIES (CMS)

North Macedonia as proponent, Uzbekistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania as co-proponent have submitted a proposal for the inclusion of the Eurasian lynx (*Lynx lynx*) in Appendix II and Balkan lynx (*Lynx lynx balcanicus*) in Appendix I of CMS, the Convention on Migratory Species: https://www.cms.int/bukhara-deer/sites/default/files/document/cms_cop14_doc.31.4.1_listing-proposal-lynx-lynx_e.pdf

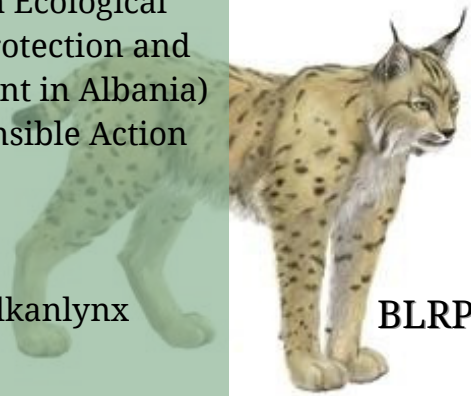
The decision will be taken at the 14th Meeting of the Conference Of the Parties, taking place in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, February 2024.



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>



Environmentally
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Action

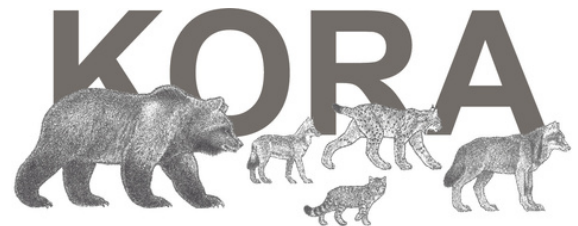


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