



Conservation of three threatened vertebrate species in the Pyrenees (french part) - III phase

LIFE95 NAT/E/001164



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Contact details:

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Project description:

Background

Until recently a remote and inaccessible area, the Pyrenees represented one of the last refuges in Europe for some of our most spectacular and endangered mammals and birds, including the brown bear (*Ursus arctos*), the Pyrenean ibex (*Capra pyrenaica pyrenaica*) and the bearded vulture (*Gypaetus barbatus*). Even in the Pyrenees, all three had suffered dramatic losses as a result of direct impacts from hunting and poaching or through more diffuse human pressure on their habitat and the loss of genetic variability. The planned construction of a motorway along the Vallée d'Aspe in the early 1990s crossing the habitat of the last brown bears in the Pyrenees led to bitter confrontations both on-site and through political and judicial channels.

At the start of the project, these large fauna species had disappeared from many areas and were confined to the most inaccessible areas of the mountain chain. The bear population had fallen from 20-30 in 1984 to 9-11 by 1992, while the 10-12 ibex left had not bred since 1987. At 70 pairs, the plight of the bearded vulture was only marginally better.

This alarming situation could only be addressed by immediate concerted action on both sides of the French-Spanish border. This project was part of a two-phase, multi-beneficiary approach involving the national authorities of France and Spain, and three Spanish regional authorities. The relevant projects were:

LIFE93 NAT/E/011800 and LIFE95 NAT/E/000624 (Spanish Environment Ministry)

LIFE93 NAT/E/011801 and LIFE95 NAT/E/001160 (Aragon)

LIFE93 NAT/E/011802 and LIFE95 NAT/E/001159 (Catalonia)

LIFE93 NAT/E/011803 and LIFE95 NAT/E/001162 (Navarra).

LIFE93 NAT/F/011804 and LIFE95 NAT/F/001164 (French Environment Ministry)

The two-phases of the French project are presented as one below

Objectives

The overall multi-beneficiary approach aimed to conserve and recover the three target fauna species through habitat improvement and targeted species protection. Planned actions included:

application of less damaging forms of forestry

captive breeding of the ibex and re-introduction to the wild

preparation of new habitats and feeding sites for the bear and reintroduction of individuals from Slovenia

increased availability of prey and protection of nesting sites for the bearded vulture

The French and Spanish authorities aimed to collaborate on a package of sub-projects covering nearly 4 000 km² to pull the populations of the three species back from the brink of extinction. The project plans were in accordance with the recovery plans designed by the regional and national authorities.

Scientific research and monitoring of the species as well as awareness-raising towards land users and local authorities were to be permanent supporting actions.

This particular sub-project, co-ordinated by the French Environment Ministry, was focused on conservation actions to benefit all three target species in the French Pyrenees.

Specific objectives for each species were as follows:

Bearded vulture - increase the breeding population by designating statutory protected sites, habitat improvement, and by improving feeding opportunities to reduce juvenile mortality.

Brown bear - habitat improvement and protection measures to conserve a

remnant population – estimated at 9-11 individuals in 1994 - at Bearn (western Pyrenees) and the reintroduction of three bears from Slovenia to the central Pyrenees from where they had died out, but which offered suitable habitat. These actions would be supported by measures to protect and compensate farmers affected by bear attacks and a public awareness campaign. Pyrenean ibex - technical support to the project's Spanish partners' captive breeding plans, by undertaking the genetic analysis of the remaining animals and by co-operating on the preparation of a re-introduction plan. The sub-species had disappeared from the French Pyrenees in the 19th Century.

Results

Overall, the multi-beneficiary project had mixed results. The greatest successes were for the bearded vulture, which saw increases in population, distribution and survival, and the elaboration of a national strategy. Measures were implemented to improve bear habitat and management, which should benefit the species in the long-term. A lasting benefit of the projects was greatly increased knowledge of the biology of these species and the boost given to coordinated action between the regional and national players. However, the projects were too late for the Pyrenean ibex, which sadly became extinct in January 2000.

This nationally coordinated French sub-project made an important contribution to conservation efforts for the bearded vulture and successfully reintroduced bears, although the overall results of this were not certain. As part of futile efforts to save the ibex sub-species it pioneered genetic analysis as a conservation tool to identify individuals and their genealogical relationships to one another. The actions and results of the project are as follows:

Bearded vulture

This was an overall successful result, with the breeding population in the French Pyrenees increasing from 17 pairs in 1993 to 22 pairs in 1998, and recolonization of three French departments. The provision of supplementary feeding sites in winter proved to be a particularly effective measure to increase juvenile survival and attract potential breeders to new areas. The breeding population in the western Pyrenees is now no longer isolated from the main central population and nesting couples are now also colonising the eastern Pyrenees, largely due to immigrants from the expanding population on the Spanish side.

Brown bear

Three bears - one male and two pregnant females - were introduced from Slovenia to the central Pyrenees. Following the births and one accidental death,

six bears were living in the wild by the end of the project. This was a promising start, but it will take twenty or more years to determine whether the re-introduction is a permanent success. Bear attacks on livestock caused significant problems for social acceptance of the reintroduction. To counter these, the project introduced measures - fencing and compensation payments - to support stockbreeders, along with an awareness and communication campaign. Environmentally sensitive forest management practices were introduced to protect the bear's habitat.

The remnant population in Bearn declined from 9-11 individuals at the start of the project to only six in 1998, despite the birth of two cubs during the project period. The population's dispersal area also contracted dramatically. However, significant progress was made in protecting the bear's habitat, with the introduction of environmentally sensitive forest and wood pasture management practices, which should improve the prospects for the population's long-term recovery.

Pyrenean ibex

The project did not succeed in saving the Pyrenean ibex with the Spanish partners because the situation was already too critical at the start. Only three females were located and a revised plan to hybridise them with males from the closest sub-species, the Spanish Ibex (*Capra pyrenaica hispanica*), both in the wild and in captivity, failed as the animals were too old. The last surviving Pyrenean ibex died in Ordesa in January 2000.

However, this sub-project made important advances in the use of genetic typing as a conservation tool to identify individuals and their genealogical relationships to one another. Lessons learned from the experience will be invaluable for any future plans to introduce the closely related Spanish ibex into the Pyrenees.

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Environmental issues addressed:

Themes

Species - Mammals

Species - Birds

Keywords

endangered species, protected area, nature conservation, mountainous area

Target EU Legislation

- Nature protection and Biodiversity
- Directive 92/43/EEC - "Conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora" (21.05.92)
- Directive 79/409/EEC - "Conservation of wild birds" (02.04.79)

Target species

Capra pyrenaica pyrenaica Gypaetus barbatus Ursus arctos

Natura 2000 sites

Not applicable

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Beneficiaries:

Coordinator	Ministère de l'Environnement - Direction de la Nature et des Paysages
Type of organisation	National authority
Description	French Ministry of Environment, Directorate for Nature and Landscapes

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Administrative data:

Project reference	LIFE95 NAT/E/001164
Duration	01-SEP-1993 to 31-DEC -1998
Total budget	486,533.00 €
EU contribution	364,900.00 €
Project location	Aquitaine,Midi-Pyrénées,Languedoc-Roussillon

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