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SERBIA/MACEDONIA: Long-term survival of endangered Balkan Lynx now in the hands of conservationists

Story:

This is the Balkan lynx, Europe's largest cat and the most endangered sub-species of Euro-Asian lynx. Scientists estimate that only about 100 live in the Balkans, mostly in Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro.

However, there is still hope for Balkan lynx, say environmentalists from Macedonia and Albania.

Members of Protection and Preservation of Natural Environment in Albania (PPNEA) together with Macedonian Ecological Society (MES) are monitoring the cat in in the Qarrishte Mountains in eastern Albania.

The groups use camera traps and surveys of local inhabitants to estimate lynx numbers, as well as fighting for more protection for the animal's mountain habitats.

A similar project has established the presence of lynx in the Movrovo mountains in Macedonia, where the animal is seen as an unofficial national symbol and features on the five denar coin.

"We installed 64 cameras in all of Mavrovo national park. The session lasted for two months or to be more exact 60 days. During this session we have managed to take 30 pictures of lynx. Using a special program called Mark program we found out that the population of Lynx in Mavrovo national park is seven individuals plus-minus two," says Dime Melovski from the Macedonian Ecological Society.

The Balkan lynx can grow up to a meter in length (three feet), 65 centimeters in height (two feet) and it can weight up to 25 kilograms (fifty-five pounds). Its main characteristics are short tail and tufts of hair in both ears. It lives a secretive life, mainly hunting at night, preying on rabbits, roe deer, wild goats. It rarely attacks livestock and there are no reports of an attack on humans.

Environmentalists believe that Qarrishte Mountains of eastern Albania can be home of this wild cat. Their daily activities consist of checking for tracks and the cameras for new pictures.

According to Aleksander Trajce, the head of Protection and Preservation of Natural Environment in Albania, there is a mix of threats that is causing extinction of this animal.

"The Balkan Lynx has three threats: One is the habitat degradation, decline of the prey base so the Lynx doesn't have its natural prey on were to feed as well as direct persecution or the direct killing of Lynx," said Trajce.

The Balkan lynx or the "Lynx Lynx Martinoi", has no natural enemies as with bears and wolfs stands on the top of the food chain, the main reason for it extinction is human, says Trajce.

"We as humans are the main threat to Balkan Lynx. We do this by destroying his habitat by directly persecuting him and by reducing his prey.

Therefore we are responsible for its survival as the factors that bring him to extension are caused by us, so people's awareness is a crucial factor that can help us to save better the Balkan Lynx," Trajce added.

An updated "Red List" of endangered mammals says 16,928 species, or 38 percent, were threatened out of a total of 44,838.

Clip 1 of 12

Clip Ref: RTV560909 76



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BELGRADE ZOO, SERBIA, (MARCH, 2009) (REUTERS}VARIOUS OF BALKAN LYNX (LYNX LYNX MARTINOI) IN THE ZOO LIBRAZH, ALBANIA, (MARCH, 2009) (REUTERS}MEMBERS OF PROTECTION AND PRESERVATION OF NATURAL ...A1:

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