



Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme

NEWSLETTER

01/2014

Munella

The little mountain that could

When talking about impressive Albanian mountains, names such as the Albanian Alps, Korab, Tomorr and Gramoz come to mind easy, both for their majestic heights and the natural wonders they harbor. Very few people however have heard of Munella, a seemingly small but very conspicuous mountain that lies on the border of Puka and Mirdita districts in Northern Albania. When seen from a distance Munella looks like a tooth rising up from lower surrounding hilly areas and reaching the (not so small) altitude of 1991 meters a.s.l. A single isolated mountain, that even though recently is much more accessible due to the newly built Rrëshen-Kukës highway, it still remains a very remote place, hardly visited by anyone outside of the area itself. It is perhaps because of this geographical isolation of the region that in the former totalitarian regime, one of the most infamous and horrible prisons of Albania was built in one of the valleys nearby – the political prison of Spaç.

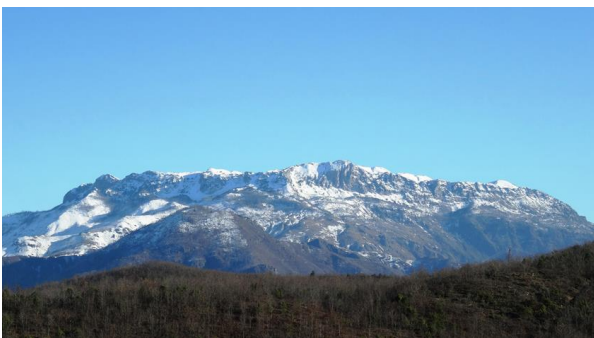
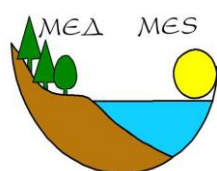


Fig. 1: Munella seen from a distance.

There are however, even more unknown sides of Munella than the mountain itself. The

region has been in the focus of PPNEA investigations since 2007, when within the frame of the Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme, a questionnaire survey was conducted with local shepherds and hunters for assessing the potential presence of the critically endangered Balkan lynx (*Lynx lynx balcanicus*) and other wildlife species. Following the baseline survey, there were a number of indications that pointed at the presence of lynx in the area and because of these, in 2011, PPNEA set a number of camera-traps in the region to explore the possibility of Balkan lynx presence. Noteworthy, up to this moment, no hard evidence of a live lynx was uncovered in Albania, even after intensive investigations in many regions of the country and the species was feared to be extinct altogether. However, shortly after the first camera-traps were set in Munella Mountain, in April 2011, the first photo of a Balkan lynx was taken, thus proving the survival and presence of this highly endangered species in Albania. Up to this time, Balkan lynx were proven to be present only in nearby Mavrovo National Park in Macedonia, therefore this discovery was of extreme importance to further the knowledge of their distribution area and the potential of another sub-population of lynx in the Balkans. In the subsequent years, PPNEA managed to prove the presence of several individuals of lynx in Munella Mountain and adjacent areas. From all the information collected through camera-traps over 3 years of continuous research, a small sub-population of Balkan lynx, consisting of 5-6 different individuals has been found to exist. This marks an extraordinary achievement, which besides proving the survival of Balkan lynx in the country, brings hope for the entire population in the region,



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which amounts to less than 50 individuals in total.

But Munella it not only crucial for lynx. The camera-trapping research conducted by PPNEA indicates that the area is home to a vast array of large mammals – so far Munella has the highest diversity of mammals observed through camera-traps in Albania, including a reproducing population of brown bears (*Ursus arctos*), wolves (*Canis lupus*), Balkan chamois (*Rupicapra rupicapra balcanica*), roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus*), wild boar (*Sus scrofa*), wild cat (*Felis silvestris*) and several other important and threatened species.

In spite of this seemingly positive situation, Balkan lynx and other species in Munella are not having a quiet and prosperous time. Forests have been heavily exploited in the past and illegal logging is continuing to date. Vast fires have destroyed much of the vegetation cover. Illegal hunting has been rampant in the area for many years. Therefore, it comes as a great surprise that even under all these human-induced threats, Balkan lynx have managed to survive miraculously in this corner of Albania. These amazing natural values call for urgent measures of protection in Munella, as the area does not have a protected area status and is largely unknown by the nature conservation community and the public. Through continuous research and active local involvement, PPNEA is paving the way towards the protection of this magnificent, yet hidden gem of Albanian nature.

Aleksandër Trajçe, PPNEA

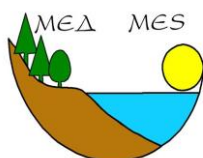
Extensive monitoring for lynx

Camera-trapping in Puka-Mirdita and Librazhd regions, Albania 2014

PPNEA conducted an extensive monitoring season for Balkan lynx from December 2013 to 30 May 2014. 44 camera-traps were set in two study areas: Puka-Mirdita region and Librazhd region, respectively, in North and East of Albania. Most of the camera-traps were set in Puka-Mirdita as main potential area of Balkan lynx presence in Albania. Both study areas covered more than 400 km² and the distance between camera-traps varied from 1 km to 2 km. Besides PPNEA researchers, five volunteers from the respective regions took part in the setting and checking of the camera-traps. The aims of this monitoring season were to verify the continuous presence of lynx, collect distribution data and get reproduction evidence of Balkan lynx. Another purpose of this study was to gather data on prey species of lynx such as *Lepus europaeus*, *Capreolus capreolus* and *Rupicapra rupicapra* - as main elements for lynx survival.

We obtained 963 photographs of wildlife species, including 27 photos of *Lynx lynx balcanicus*, 28 *Martes foina*, 1 *Martes martes*, 42 *Felis silvestris*, 49 *Meles meles*, 227 *Vulpes vulpes*, 1 *Mustela putorius*, 6 *Sus scrofa*, 496 *Lepus europaeus*, 21 *Canis lupus*, 55 *Ursus arctos*, 6 *Capreolus capreolus*, 1 *Erinaceus europaeus*, 3 bird spp.

The 27 lynx pictures were taken in Puka-Mirdita region respectively in Munella Mountain and Runja Mountains (Thirra). These photos were taken from 13 different camera-trapping sites. Compared to the previous camera-trap surveys in Munella Mt. in 2011 (1 lynx picture at 1 site), in 2012 (4 lynx pictures at 3 different sites), and in 2013 (13 lynx pictures at 7 different sites) this is a much



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higher number of lynx photographs and a higher number of positive sites. The possible reason for the higher number of lynx photographs is because we covered a wider study area with a higher number of camera-traps.

For the first time we have pictures of lynx in an adjacent mountain (Runja) with a distance of 8.5 km from Munella Mountain. This evidence proved that lynx is not only present in Munella Mountain but that its distribution seems wider in the region.



Fig. 2: Balkan lynx on its way in the Munella Mts. in April 2014.

Through picture comparison we were able to distinguish 5-6 different individual lynx, of which two were photographed for the first time this year. However, we were unable to prove reproduction in the area, as no mother with cubs, or two individuals together were pictured. The identification of two new individuals being photographed for the first time in 2014 could be an indication for possible reproduction of Balkan lynx going on in Munella Mountain. If this can be confirmed, this would make Munella the second area after Mavrovo National Park in Macedonia to have reproducing Balkan lynx. Munella is therefore of crucial importance for the future of this subspecies.

Bledi Hoxha, PPNEA

No lynx pictured

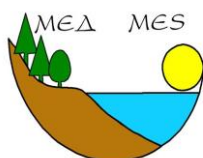
Camera-trapping in PA Jasen and Pelister NP, Macedonia

According to the annual plan for monitoring of the Balkan lynx in the peripheral areas of its distribution (outside the core area of NP Mavrovo), this year the MES lynx team focused on PA Jasen and NP Pelister where lynx presence was confirmed previously.

The main goal of the studies was to re-confirm the presence of the Balkan lynx in these two areas using camera-trapping. Then, to make population estimations (if the data allows), to get information on other large mammals in the area, especially potential lynx prey species, and to improve and to strengthen the mutual cooperation between the organizations involved in the studies.

In PA Jasen a total of 20 camera-traps were set in 20 different locations from 22 January to 11 February 2014. At each chosen site we installed one camera unit. The cameras were removed from the field between 9 and 13 May 2014.

The camera-trapping in Pelister NP started on 10 February 2014 with the first cameras set above village Brajcino where a lynx was photographed in September of the previous year (see Newsletter 02/2013). 22 camera-traps were set “one at a site” mostly inside NP Pelister but a significant number also outside the park (11 locations). In total, 24 camera devices (few owned by the NP Pelister) were set on 29 different locations (some camera-traps were shifted during the survey). The extensive session lasted until 29 April when the last cameras were removed from the field.



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Fig. 3: Two roe deer taken by a camera-trap in Pelister National Park.

Compared to the survey in 2010 when two different lynx were pictured, in 2014 we did not get any photo of lynx in PA Jasen. The possible reason for this could be: lynx moving at higher altitudes and inaccessible sites due to the weather conditions (mild winter without snow), lynx migration (due to forest fires, searching for partners etc.) or other factors. From the other large mammals in PA Jasen, most of the pictures were from roe deer – 600 (499 at feeding site, the rest on the other sites), hare (139), fox (119), wild boar (92), chamois (87), marten (50), brown bear (40), red deer (34), wolf (24), wild cat (10), fallow deer (3), badger (3) and mouflon (2 photos).

The results from the camera-trapping study in Pelister NP were satisfactory but we couldn't confirm lynx presence. The most abundant animal on photos is the fox. Concerning the photo material from animals of our interest (lynx, its prey and competitors) we have roe deer (137 photos), wild boar (119), wild cat (55), hare (44), bear (12), wolf (8). Besides lynx, it is evident that chamois is also lacking on the photos although tracks were found in snow during setting of camera traps. Very low presence of chamois is explained by rangers as a consequence of poaching but also because NP Pelister's chamois population is more or less isolated from other national

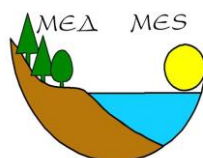
parks where chamois is more abundant. We can't point out a specific reason why we were not able to camera-trap a lynx on Pelister. The prey base is available in most of the survey area and rangers and local hunters claim that lynx is not a preferable game for poachers. One reason prevails over others and that is if the photographed individual (from previous September) is a vagrant male, it has probably returned to the territory of females for the mating season. The rangers could not believe that the lynx they photographed last year just disappeared and they will continue setting their camera-traps on the most promising sites hoping that what goes around must come around.

Gjorgje Ivanov & Aleksandar Stojanov, MES

Chestnut fair

Promoting the chestnut forest on Shara Mountain

Using almost everything it can offer, the humans have exploited the chestnut tree throughout history. Historical facts prove that the chestnut originates from ancient Persia, from where, with the development of civilizations, it was brought to the European continent, and from here transported through other parts of the world. Because of its highly usable nutrition characteristics and values, the chestnut had an enormous importance in the past where in some mountain regions it represented a basic source of nutrition for at least six months of the year. Nowadays the wood from the chestnut is considered one of the best quality materials for producing furniture. Furthermore, thanks to its strongly expanded roots, the chestnut forests help in prevention of erosive processes. The chestnut forests in Macedonia are used extensively, which is probably the best way of simulta-



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neously using them and maintaining their biological value.

The distribution of the chestnut forest is scattered and natural populations can be found on the mountains of west and south Macedonia. The threats to the survival of these forests are both human and naturally caused. Intensive timber extraction has brought the already small populations into even smaller patches, whereas the natural threat is a disease of the chestnut caused by a fungus (*Cryphonectria parasitica*). The fungus attacks the shell of the chestnut, causing it to dry and fall out, which is followed by withering and dying of the leaves and branches above the place of infection.



Fig. 4: Participants of the chestnut fair in Jeloshnik.

Having said that, the monitoring, protection and promotion of the chestnut forests are an important element in preserving the remaining population. Because of the importance and the degree of the threats, the chestnut in our legislation is announced as a rare species of tree in a forest. Besides that, designated areas for protection of the chestnut forest in Macedonia are established. In the future, national park Shar Planina includes the previously suggested “Reserve of sweet chestnut”, village of Tearce. The chestnut forests are or will be preserved as parts of the protected areas, for example the Mavrovo National Park, protected area Vodno, Nature

Park Belasica etc. In this direction and within the protected area component of the BLRP project, Bela Vista NGO from Tearce organized the second Chestnut fair on Shara Mountain in November 2013. More than 700 guests and participants from the region attended the promotion of the chestnut. Also, measures for the prevention and remediation from the disease that attacked and drastically decreased the chestnut trees the last few decades have been elaborated. Such promotions of the chestnut tree are taking place throughout the country where the species is distributed and are very important propagators for its protection and raising of people’s awareness.

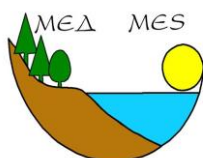
Dime Melovski, MES

Stakeholder forums

Strengthening cooperation with local stakeholders

For various reasons, the conditions imposed or practices used, have led human activities to be unsustainable in environmental terms, especially when we mention natural resources use.

We believe that if no measures will be taken to change human attitude towards environmental resources use, the biodiversity and for nature in general, negative impacts will increase. For these reasons, PPNEA, in the frame of the Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme, organized a series of meetings during 2013-14, aiming to strengthen the capacity and cooperation with local stakeholders and to bring together different stakeholders in order to identify and share local sustainable practices in targeted areas. The very first meetings were held in the areas of Librazhd, Fushë-Arrëz and Mirditë. Based on our data collected after several years of monitoring,



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these can be considered the main areas with presence of Balkan lynx in Albania. Representatives of communes, representatives of Forest Service Directorates, prefecture, local authorities and civil society have participated in the meetings.

Fostering the cooperation of local stakeholders and their active involvement in the discussions concerning the environmental issue was one of the objectives. Highlighting alternatives that offset the negative impacts generated from non-sustainable use of natural resources has been a further focus of the meetings.



Fig. 5: Stakeholder forum in Reps town, Mirdita region.

Firstly, through brief presentations, the importance of collaboration to preserve the natural values of our country has been stressed. In addition, a summary of the BLRP and the respective micro-projects component implemented by local organizations, has been presented as a success story in active local involvement for sustainable development.

According to the participants, the most significant problems that the areas face are illegal hunting, massive forest logging, overharvest of medicinal plants, etc. Regarding these, many ideas were given from the participants to be addressed with future actions. Amongst

the most urgent measures proposed are: developing and implementing an awareness campaign, improving hunting management, creating possibilities of plant cultivation for local people, proper management of animal husbandry and ecotourism development. With regard to cultivation and harvesting of medicinal plants trainings should be carried out focusing on the establishment of sustainability standards.

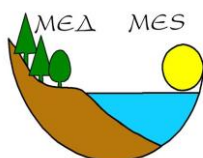
In continuation of these meetings, we intend to identify the key local actors and organizations and point out the best ideas for sustainable use of natural resources. The next meeting is planned to be organized in Tirana where key local actors, taking part in previous meetings, will gather and further discuss future actions. The main aim of this meeting is to increase the capacity of the participants on how to write a project proposal and how then to develop a micro project on the sustainable use of natural resources and nature conservation.

Bekim Trezhnjeva, PPNEA

From idea to a successful project

Stakeholder workshop in Ilinska-Plakenska

The Macedonian Ecological Society organized a one-day workshop-training on the topic “From idea to a successful project”. The workshop was organized on 29 May in the secondary school “Krstev Petkov Misirkov” in Demir Hisar, as part of the project activities for strengthening the capacities in nature conservation and the cooperation with and between the local partner organizations and institutions from the area of Ilinska and Plakenska Planina Mts. There were 22 participants from 14 different organizations from



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the municipalities of Demir Hisar, Kichevo, Ohrid and Struga at the workshop.



Fig. 6: Participants generating project ideas.

The aim of the workshop was to train the participants on how to transfer their ideas related to nature protection, promotion of natural values and sustainable use of the natural resources from their region into a good project proposal, as well as how and where to look for appropriate foundations for submitting a proposal.

The workshop was divided into two sessions. The first session was theoretical introduction into project proposal preparation, including the analysis and writing of complete project proposals. During the second session, the participants had the chance to practice the things they learned from theory through concrete tasks and group work. The results of the group work were presented and discussed in plenum.

Aleksandar Stojanov, MES

Gaining experience in Switzerland

Lynx monitoring training course

The training course in Switzerland from 3-8 March 2014 included two main components:

practical and theoretical. Field training took place in the Jura Mts. in western Switzerland and the Simmental valley in the Swiss Alps. Presentations and meetings were held in the KORA office in Muri, Bern.

There we had the chance to hear and learn from experts and their experience: We learned how we can use camera-traps for behavioural studies (Kristina Vogt), the biology and ecology of lynx in Switzerland (Christine Breitenmoser), spatial concepts and principles for camera-trap based monitoring of lynx in Switzerland (Fridolin Zimmermann & Urs Breitenmoser).

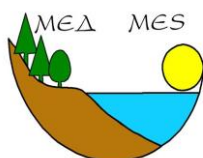
Participants in this training were Azem Ramadani from NGO "FINCH" Kosovo, Aleksandar Perović from CZIP Montenegro and Parësim Sanaja from ERA group Kosovo.

On our first day in the field we were together with Urs and Tabea and went to the Jura Mts. During the time of the training, an intensive camera-trapping study was ongoing there. On the first camera we checked, we saw a lynx picture. We were informed how camera-traps are working.



Fig. 7: Checking a camera-trap in the Swiss Jura Mountains.

Camera-traps were checked for functionality and when it was needed batteries and SD



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cards were changed. In one case we had to change the whole camera because something was not working. All participants had the possibility to check, set and program a camera-trap. And for each camera-trap we had to fill the particular form.

Together with Liz from Canada we went to the Alps to check box traps at two different sites and we tried telemetry with one of the lynx that was GPS-collared. That day we went to see a roe deer that was killed by lynx about three days before. We saw lynx tracks and how the kill looks like, but Liz decided not to put the foot snares. Later we had information about a freshly killed roe deer and we saw that it was killed by lynx that day. We had the chance to practice and to participate in setting up the foot snares and alarm system. Later that night, a female lynx was caught and a GPS-collar was put on her neck.

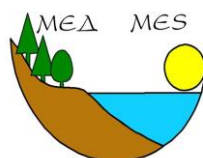
From this training I learned a lot. My personal interest was to get more knowledge regarding field work because that is what I like most about this project. I had the opportunity to go and check two important sites in the Swiss mountains where camera-trapping surveys were conducted. Other than camera-trapping, a great opportunity was to see and identify how a lynx kill looks like and what should happen when you see a kill, for instance how you decide if you want to set up the foot snares (determined by what lynx had left from the kill).

I had the chance to practice a little bit of telemetry, how the device works, and we were able to hear the signal of one of the collared lynx that was very close to us. We visited two box traps where we had to remove the snow from the string, and in one of them we had to create a path in the snow that lynx can use as a walking route. In general it was an amazing

unforgettable experience, and it was much more than I have expected. I learned a lot from this training, and I'm looking forward to practice this knowledge that I gained in Switzerland here in Kosovo.

Parësim Sanaja, ERA

The „Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme” is jointly implemented by EuroNatur Foundation, KORA (Carnivore Ecology and Wildlife Management), MES (Macedonian Ecological Society), and PPNEA (Society for the Protection and Preservation of Natural Environment in Albania). Activities in Kosovo are carried out in co-operation with NGO Finch and ERA (Environmentally Responsible Action) group and in Montenegro in co-operation with CZIP (Center for Protection and Research of Birds of Montenegro) and National Parks of Montenegro. The Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme is financially supported by MAVA Foundation, Switzerland.



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