

Report visit Spain and Portugal 14-20 June 2004

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On Tuesday, 15 June 2004, WWF Spain invited other WWF organisations to review the status of the Iberian lynx conservation work and the possible contribution of the WWF network. On recommendation of Magnus Sylvén, WWF International, the Cat SG was invited to attend this meeting. I took the opportunity of this journey to southern Spain to meet with some other key players in lynx conservation and for a brief visit to Portugal to make contacts to Portuguese institutions. One reason was also as I wanted to propose a technical workshop in fall 2004 to review the progress made since the Andujar seminar in October 2002, to identify priorities for the next years and to start to work on a mid- and long-term financial plan.

Monday, 14 June

Visit to Miguel Aymerich (MIMAM). MA emphasis that the work of the Bilateral Commission will continue, but so far, there has been no meeting since the change of the government, as the commission needs to be re-organised. MA will likely remain in his position and hence secretary of the BilCom. We discussed to hold a workshop as a follow-up of the Andujar conference two years after the first seminar. MA thinks that to organise a workshop aiming to develop a comprehensive conservation strategy is a good idea, but that some organisation from the outside, such as the IUCN or the CoE, should initiate it.

Meeting with Luis Suarez and Enrique Segovia at the WWF office and travel to Cordoba. Talk with LS in the train. LS is worried that the work with the conservation breeding is not going fast enough. He wonders why the agreement to remove a cub from a litter of 3-4 young lynx and to integrate it into the conservation breeding has not been continued this year. LS agrees that Portugal will have to be incorporated into the IbLx conservation programme. He knows that Flora and Fauna International is starting a programme in co-operating with the Liga Para a Protecção Da Natureza (LPN), one of the oldest conservation NGO in Portugal. LS agrees that we should organise a workshop as a follow-up of the Andujar conference. The Spanish Action Plan should be revised every four years, and now would be the time to do it.

Tuesday, 15 June

WWF meeting in the Hotel Maciá Alfaros, Cordoba. Participants: Enrique Segovia, Luis Suarez, Jesus Cobo (all WWF Spain), Rebecca May (WWF UK), Pedro Regato (WWF Mediterranean Programme); Urs Breitenmoser (IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group).

Enrique Segovia and Luis Suarez present the current situation of the IbLx, the key players and the WWF Spain involvement, projects, activities, and policy.



Enrique Segovia



Pedro Regato



Rebecca May



Luis Suarez & Jesús Cobo

The history of WWF is closely related to the creation of the Doñana reserve, of which the IbLx has always been one of the symbols. WWF Spain got involved in the IbLx conservation work very early as it funded the first radio-telemetry project in Doñana in 1983. Now the organisation runs field projects in the Sierra Morena and in the Montes de Toledo. These projects are mainly targeted to maintain extant populations of IbLx. (When the project in the MdT started, there was a general believe that an oc-

currence still existed.) The main strategy was to involve the landowners and to sign contracts with them. In these estates, WWF and the owners now share the responsibility for the management of the habitat and the conservation of the IbLx. WWF builds relatively large (compared to other similar approaches) enclosures for breeding rabbits and improves the habitat (see earlier reports). 13,871 ha land are currently under contract. This approach has been taken over by other institutions (mainly GOs), so that the programmes now cover a total of 100,000 ha. Lynx respond very well to the rabbit plots. They had one female with kittens feeding on one of the plots, which was almost depleted.

WWF maintains a monitoring programme by means of photo-traps. They were using lynx urine as an attractant, but run out of lure, so that they now use pigeons.

LS presents a map of potential lynx habitat and Natura 2000 sites and WWF proposals for further sites to be included in the context of IbLx conservation. WWF has made a list of 53 public projects that are a potential threat to the IbLx or its future recovery, respectively. WWF Spain has produced a series of information and educational material (see examples) and wants to do more in this domain. It is agreed that some of the leaflets, procures, etc. with more general contents should be translated into other languages than Spanish in order to raise international awareness.

LS presents a "dot-map" of the key-players. The plot includes also key-players such as the hunters or the landowners, which are not "classical" conservation organisations, but are very important for the conservation of the IbLx. The landowners are not organised, but there is a discussion to do it. The hunters (> 1 million licences in Spain!) are organised in several associations, the most important one is FEC, which is very interested in rabbit work and did already sponsor such projects.

Pedro Regato (WWF Mediterranean Programme) informed about the landscape protection initiative in S Portugal. He sees a clear potential for synergetic work regarding the IbLx conservation, e.g. in habitat management and restoration. After last year's fire, there is now a revision of the landscape protection approach. The aim is to have a mosaic of forest, open landscapes etc. A management for the landscape will provide provisions to the farmers if they manage the sites accordingly. There are many local NGOs in Portugal with a high potential for local projects. The WWF MedPrg now co-operates with a local NGO in the Guadiana basin, with much experience in rural development. A potential sponsor for further work could be the Communal Agricultural Policy of the EU according to the Forest & Landscape Restoration Guidelines; Life will probably decrease over the coming years.

Rebecca May informed on the planned activities of WWF UK. They want to support international awareness and information campaigns, fund raising, etc. They had discussed the conservation of the IbLx within their working group. RM proposes to create a WWF core group for the IbLx.

UB explains the involvement of the Cat SG: As the Red List Authority, we need to review the status of the species on a regular basis. The Red List assessment could also be used to determine intermediate goals regarding the recovery of the species. From the outside, it is clear that not all the actions and activities proposed at the moment by the different regions and institutions have the same priority in regard to the immediate survival of the species. We would like to see a list of short-, mid- and long-term priorities in order to be able to concentrate resources and funding accordingly.

Wednesday, 16 June

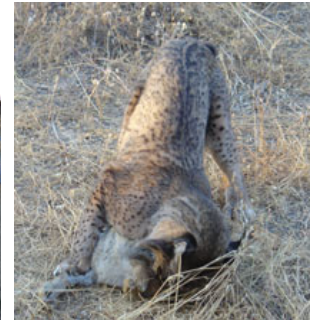
Meeting with Alejandro Rodriguez (CSIC) in Sevilla. We discussed (1) the DBR project and the funding. Most of the project is covered by a Life grant, other parts by private sponsoring. An application with the Spanish government is pending. The monitoring part and the control measures are not yet secured and need additional funding. The project will be the first one to study the habitat ameliorations, the rabbit reintroduction and management measures on the individual lynx, on the lynx population and on the community level. (The group intends to monitor fox and mongoose populations and the impact of the assumed lynx recovery on these species. This is an important aspect not only from a scientific, but also from a practical point of view. It was often mentioned by hunters that they believe that the presence of lynx has a positive impact on rabbit abundance, as it acts as a super-predator.). AR emphasises that so far, nobody really knows the effect of the habitat and prey enhancement measures on the behaviour, movements and land tenure of lynx and its effect on the population level. The DBR project aims to close this important gap of knowledge. I agree that many of the possible effects are not yet un-

derstood and could potentially be counterproductive, e.g. for dispersal. The situation however calls for urgent measures, so that we have no choice than learning by doing. AR argues that the Doñana population has been stable for many years and that their monitoring indicates rather a shift in the areas used by the lynx within the different parts of the whole protected area than a decrease in numbers.

Discussion on the future of the lynx conservation, the captive breeding programme and the idea of a workshop: AR does not really believe in the necessity of the captive breeding and in the need to reintroduce lynx from the captive breeding. He thinks that captive born animals are not suited to survive in the wild. He thinks that reintroductions will have to be made using lynx from the extant populations. He also fears that the conservation breeding programme will divert both, attention and funding from the *in situ* projects. I disagree in so far as in my opinion, the wild populations need a genetic management, too, and this can best be done through a conservation breeding programme. From the experience with Eurasian lynx, I am absolutely convinced that captive born lynx can relatively easily adapt to the wild and quickly learn to catch wild prey. If this is possible with ungulates, it should be even easier with rabbits, where lynx can be trained in captivity. But there can be no doubt that the conservation breeding programme is to serve the *in situ* conservation and that we need to find ways to secure long-term funding for both sides. This is exactly why we need to define priorities.

We then discussed the necessity and procedure of a workshop. AR agreed that we indeed should talk about priorities and come up with a financial plan. He proposed to have a workshop with as few people as possible, maybe only with the Cat SG members. The group should remain small to be operational, but I argued that we should have at least the representatives of the most important institutions and key players who will later have to accept the position paper. AR promises his support.

Meeting with Alex Sliwa (Cat SG and EAZA Felid TAG) on Sevilla airport and journey to the Doñana NP. Visit with Astrid Vargas in El Acebuche breeding station to feed the lynx. First meeting and discussion with Astrid's team. They are currently re-arranging the Acebuche office and laboratory and doing renovation work in the breeding enclosures. All of the fences will be re-painted and the observation towers renovated. A video survey system covering all enclosures and the breeding pens is now installed. All lynx are doing well. Esperanza and Garfio are very fond of each other; the socialisation went really well, and Garfio has had little problems to adapt to the life in El Acebuche. Astrid thinks that Esperanza went through a pseudo-pregnancy. It is not absolutely impossible that she could still breed this year. The IbLx reproduction is less seasonal than e.g. the Eurasian lynx' and mainly determined through availability of food.



Alex Sliwa and Astrid Vargas in the Acebuche breeding centre. Garfio feeding on a rabbit.

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Thursday, 17 June

Discussion with Astrid Vargas on various topics: Transfer of male "Jacinto" from Los Villares to El Acebuche (recommendation of the Cat SG), conservation compendium, workshop, etc. AV informs me on the modelling of the captive population done with Bob Lacy. To fulfil all genetic requirements is basically impossible under the constraints of (i) limited supply from the wild, (ii) the urge to build up the population as fast as possible and (iii) the demand to be able to start reintegrating animals to the wild as soon as possible. There is a clear need for a compromise, and the emphasis must be on the recovery of the species in the wild. Many of the parameters included into the model base on assumptions, and the most important thing now is to start the breeding and to gain experience. First, we need demonstrate that the captive breeding is working and that captive bred animals can be reintegrated into the wild.

Alexander Sliwa reviews with Juana Bergara and Fernando Martinez different animal care procedures in the centre.

Field trip with Eloy Revilla and Jacinto Román to the DBR to visit the different sites planned or already built for the lynx/rabbit conservation programme. The programme aims to increase the rabbit population with a tightly controlled approach, but also to artificially raise critical resources such as



J. Román and E. Revilla at an artificial water hole made from a barrel.



A. Sliwa looking at hollow cork oak as a supplemental lynx breeding den.



Rabbit breeding enclosure with feeding pen and lynx ladder.



J. Román controlling an artificial rabbit warren made from pallets.

water holes and breeding dens. As an emergency measure, supplemental food (chicken and rabbits) are provided in pens. The only female rising young this year in DBR feeds on such artificial feeding stations.

Brief meeting with Blanca Ramos (conservation director Doñana NP) at El Acebuche station. The rabbit breeding programme in the station is going well.

Eduardo Gonçalves and Siobhan Mitchell arrive from Portugal, and later a German film crew (Ingo Rudloff and two colleagues from Irrlicht-Film) producing a film on the fate of the Iberian lynx for the TV channel Vox. They film at the Acebuche station and ask us to give some brief statements regarding the fate and conservation of the Iberian lynx and the need for international co-operation.

Discussion by phone with Miguel Angel Simon (Junta de Andalucía). Astrid helped with translation. MAS is still interested to come to Switzerland to visit the translocation project. Discussion on the planned workshop. MAS agrees and offers his help organising the logistics and the places in Andalucía. We agree that Andalucía would be the place to hold the meeting because this is where the lynx and the lynx folks are.

Friday, 18 June

Meeting at the SOS Lynx office in Lisbon. Filipa Maria Lopes Lacerda (LPN), Pedro Sarmento (ICN/RNSM), Rodrigo Serra (ICN/SMV), Paul Hotham (FFI), Stephen Hugman (SOS Lynx), Eduardo Gonçalves (SOS Lynx), AS und UB.



Paul Hotham, Felipa Lacerda, Eduardo Gonçalves, UB, Pedro Sarmento

Pedro Sarmento gives an overview on the situation of the IbLx in Portugal and on the work of ICN. The situation of ICN is at present very bad; they had such a rigorous budget reduction that they cannot longer do any field-work. He now tries to create a network for the monitoring of the lynx, and he maintains close relationship with Nicola Guzman (national co-ordinator for the monitoring in Spain). PS supports logistically and with advice a group of the university of Évora who runs a camo-trap project in the SE of Portugal. They now start to look for possible reintroduction sites, and they have created a captive breeding team, of which Rodrigo Serra is a member (he is also integrated in the Spanish captive breeding group). Portugal depends entirely from Spain to receive animals. In order to train the captive breeding team, they consider to breed bobcats. For a future reintroduction, Pedro Sarmento favours a soft release in the Malcata NP, where he thinks is the best place for many reasons.

Programmes to improve habitat and prey base have started in different sites. The experience with rabbit restocking was first not good, because the released animals died soon from RHD. They now apply

a different release protocol with rabbits already exposed to RHD, and this seems to work better, but the new project just started. There is no systematic survey of the rabbit diseases in the whole of the country, but a working group at the university of Porto works in rabbit diseases, and a specialist group is being created at the veterinary faculty of Lisbon University.

ICN is also involved in a huge forest recovery plan. They produce now more than two million trees a year, and they can influence what trees are replanted in what area.

The ICN Action Plan for the IbLx is finished, but has not been approved yet by the political authorities in charge. PS does not know what will happen with it.

Paul Hotham presents the FFI project in collaboration with LPN. They concentrate mainly on work with private landowners in the south, in the Algarve and in the Guadiana area. The aim is to create a large area of good habitat with sufficient prey connected to the Sierra Morena range in Spain. This includes the recreation of corridors. FFI/LPN makes contracts with land-users, which are associations of landowners. In Portugal, most private land are small parcels, and for the use of the land, e.g. for hunting, associations are formed that include several properties. The NGOs in Portugal have generally a better relationship with private land owners/users, and are better suited to make contracts. Paul and Felipa will send us more material on their projects.

Eduardo Gonçalves presents the goals of SOS Lynx. The NGO concentrates mainly on rising awareness on both, national and international level through public information and providing information and materials to specific groups, including international conservation institutions. Their main concern is communication and a human dimension approach. People living in the countryside should understand that conserving lynx means helping them to maintain their traditional lifestyle and to conserve the landscape.

SOS Lynx has submitted a Life project to work with private landowners in the S. Mamede natural park. The proposal includes the development of a management plan for this area. The target species are the IbLx and Bonelli's eagle. The aim is to support IbLx recovery through protected area management. Paul Hotham asks what the incentives for the landowners are. This is a key point, as so far, nobody has a concept of how to convince the landowners to take part in such a programme with the exception of direct payment.

Saturday, 19 June



SOS Lynx members discussing with Paulo Rosa, president of the local hunter's association.

Excursion into the SW Algarve (Sa de Montchi-que) with five members of SOS Lynx and with Paulo Rosa, the president of the local hunter's association (Zona de Caça associatium de Esgravatadouro, Montes Velmos. E outras; 1200 ha). The hunter's association has participated in a four-years Life project carried out by the ICN. Several associations have improved the habitat for rabbits through clearing brush land (mainly *Cistus*) and seeding grass or weed. They have built rabbit warrens in small enclosures and stocked them with rabbits. All together, they have created about 100 warrens, using old car tires and car wreck parts, pallets, and cork and rock combinations. Only one was in an enclosure, because, according to the Ministry of Agriculture, these enclosures were illegal without their specific permission. Furthermore, the hunters have opened and maintained fire strips and created water ponds. The Life project is now over, and as the ICN is lacking funds, there is no follow up. Rosa's association would still be interested to continue the work, and at least one plot we have seen was cleared last winter only. Rosa explains that the hunters are in favour of conserving the lynx also their main interest is small game hunting – rabbits and partridges – because they think that the lynx also kills foxes and mongooses, which harm the small game populations considerably more than the lynx. While we

visited an artificial water pond, the game warden of the association joins us. The man of about 70 years tells that he had once seen a black lynx, so a melanistic form of the Iberian lynx. The old hunter also remembers that in the old days, he never stepped out of his house without seeing rabbits. They have now all disappeared, and he claims this also to the fact that the weather today is much drier and hotter than it used to be. Indeed the soils look very exhausted and eroded. These areas were all planted with wheat during the dictatorship, when Portugal tried to become self-sustaining in food production. The clearing of all brush and forest has enhanced the erosion, and topsoil is basically lacking, even here on the west slope exposed to the Atlantic winds.

Discussion with the members of SOS Lynx on strategies to conserve the Iberian lynx and the specific contribution of Portugal. The main problem in Portugal seems to be that there is a lot of activities at least planned (little is going on because of the lack of funding) in areas where it is more than doubtful that lynx still exist. Many proposed actions, which would make perfectly sense if there are still some lynx around (such as the buy out of rabbit hunting rights from the hunters, which costs, on private land, 100-120 €/ha-year), are a waste of funds under the assumption that the lynx indeed has disappeared. SOS Lynx is collecting lynx observations according to a rather detailed protocol. However, all indications are direct observations, and there is no hard fact or at least confirmed observations.

Urs Breitenmoser, 24.06.04