

The Threat of Extinction of the Iberian Lynx

Statement by the core group of the IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group on the status of the Iberian lynx (*Lynx pardinus*)

Andújar, 1 November 2002

In 2002, the Iberian lynx became the first wild cat species to be listed as Critically Endangered in the World Conservation Union's Red List of Threatened Species. From there to extinction requires just one small step. The IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group therefore suggested to several governmental and private organisations in Spain and Portugal and to international institutions that an emergency meeting on the conservation of the Iberian lynx be convened. The response to this call was very positive, resulting in a seminar in southern Spain, 29-31 October 2002, co-organised by the Spanish Ministerio de Medio Ambiente, the Junta de Andalucía, the Council of Europe/Bern Convention, Adena/WWF, the Doñana Biological Station (National Research Council), and the IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group, and hosted by the Municipality of Andújar in Andalucía's Sierra Morena. More than 100 people participated, representing most organisations, but also private landowners from Spain and Portugal, involved in conservation of the lynx, as well as international institutions such as the European Union and the Large Carnivore Initiative for Europe.

The IUCN Cat Specialist Group is very grateful for this meeting, which allowed all partners an opportunity to review the present status of the lynx and its conservation. However, we are seriously concerned about the future of the Iberian lynx. Only now, during this seminar, was it realised that the status of this cat species endemic to the Iberian Peninsula is even worse than we assumed when last year the decision was made to list the Iberian lynx as Critically Endangered. The once continuous distribution of the Iberian lynx from Portugal across central and southern Spain became increasingly fragmented during the 1980s. This was a consequence of habitat deterioration, infrastructure development, the decline of its major prey, the rabbit, and continued illegal killing. It appears that, as a consequence of isolation and increasing pressure, many of the remaining sub-populations have collapsed in recent years. Only two reproducing, but separated populations – in the Coto Doñana and near Andújar – were identified in the most recent survey, with a combined total of not more than about 150 lynx. These two populations are insufficient for the survival of the species in the long term.

We strongly believe that the extinction of this species can still be averted, and that we have sufficient knowledge and the tools to do it. However, it is a race against time. Over the past decade, the decline of the lynx has been faster than the build-up of conservation efforts. We now need to gather all our forces and improve our efficiency. Each action taken must have a tight timeline. In order to identify and correct possible errors without delay and to promote successful measures, an adaptive management process, including constant reviews of the Action Plans and their implementation, must be established.

To accelerate the conservation of the Iberian lynx and to make it more efficient, we would like to stress the following points:

1. Political commitment is vital, and political responsibility must be clearly separated from technical responsibility. Politicians involved at the highest level need to guarantee international and inter-regional co-operation, and need to create an environment, in which administrators, scientists and interest groups can work together in a professional manner. The conservation of the Iberian lynx does not seem to suffer from a lack of co-ordination, but rather from "over-organisation" and too many parallel structures. A clear, efficient and powerful organisation is needed at both the political and technical levels.
2. A broad commitment of all people concerned in Spain and Portugal is needed, given the fact that most lynx habitat is located outside protected areas. A partnership among all interest groups, including landowners, hunters and many more, is crucial. Everybody has to make his or her contribution to the survival of the lynx. Habitat restoration and rabbit recovery – the ultimate conditions for revitalisation of the lynx population – will not be possible without at least temporarily limiting privileges. In order for interest groups to accept such limitations, they need to be involved in the conservation process.
3. Restoration of the rabbit population and of the habitat to allow the lynx to recover must now receive the highest priority, especially in areas where the density of rabbits has fallen below the level to sustain lynx reproduction. Additionally, it is important that the lynx can re-colonise areas where it has recently disappeared. The best areas with habitat and prey base for the reintroduction of captive-bred lynx must be identified, and, corridors established between meta populations must be created.
4. The captive breeding programme must be accelerated. We are convinced that, without the ability to increase lynx numbers and expand distribution as quickly as possible into the range that existed in the 1980s the Iberian lynx will not survive. We are furthermore convinced that such a recovery will not be possible without translocation and reintroduction. A minimum of 12 breeding founders, as recommended in the action plan, should be immediately integrated into the captive population. The captive population must be appropriately managed in genetic, demographic, and behavioural terms, and must be extended if needed.
5. Scientific knowledge must be incorporated pragmatically into all conservation action. Scientists must use the best available information to explain the decline of the lynx and to guide practical conservation planning, even if many details are lacking and some explanations remain hypothetical. Scientists must furthermore participate in the continued review process, so that success of the Action Plans is critically reviewed and new knowledge incorporated into the process.
6. At the operational level, the protection and expansion of the two remaining breeding populations has a high priority. These populations require immediate conservation action with scientific work continuing to fill in knowledge gaps. Only intensive radio-telemetry will allow the incorporation of new findings immediately into the conservation action. Outside these areas, a co-ordinated, sensitive monitoring of the distribution of the lynx, and also of its major prey species, the rabbit, and of potential lynx habitat, has to be continued and expanded wherever needed. In a Critically Endangered species, every single lynx is important and should be protected, both in the wild and in captivity, in order to contribute to the recovery of a viable Iberian lynx population throughout its historic range.

7. Conservation actions need to be coordinated between regions and groups, and we strongly recommend that rigorous measures of results (measures prior and post conservation action) are an integral part of conservation plans. Using this type of adaptive management and experimental approach will provide a mechanism for rapid assessment of conservation action and speed the recovery process. Measures that work should be encouraged; those found not to work should immediately be given up.

We are very satisfied to learn that both national and international funding, mainly through European Union Life Projects, is now available to implement all actions and measures proposed in the Action Plans. However, we must remember that the recovery of the species will not be possible within a few years. It is therefore important to lay firm foundations now for long-lasting conservation activity, monitoring, and research.

The IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group is eager to assist in this process. We will strengthen our membership base in Spain and Portugal, and we offer the collective expertise of the group wherever needed. We offer our help in the continued review process and adaptation of existing Action Plans, and we are ready to intervene in the conservation process wherever outside facilitation is considered important.

We thank the Junta de Andalucía for the hospitality demonstrated in Andújar. The Andújar seminar took place in a very open-minded and self-critical spirit, demonstrating the eagerness of all participants to co-operate for the sake of the lynx. We hope that this spirit can be put into conservation action, and that Andújar will be remembered as the turning point in recovering the Iberian lynx from the brink of extinction.

The co-chairs and the core group of the IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group:

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Note: This statement is also available in a Spanish and Portuguese translation, produced by IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group members Rosa García-Perea (Spain) and Margarida Lopes Fernandes (Portugal).