

International Seminar on the Iberian lynx in Andujar, Spain, 29-31 October 2002

The present situation of the **Iberian lynx** (*Lynx pardinus*) is critical and the species is the most endangered feline species in the world. According to the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, (updated in October 2002), the current status of the species has been changed from “Endangered” to the “Critically Endangered”. This means that it was officially stated that an observed, estimated or suspected population decreased by 90% over the last 10 years or three generations, the actual population size does not exceed 250 mature individuals, and the quantitative analysis shows the probability of extinction in the wild as at least 50% within 10 years or three generations (see definition).

Faced with this alarming situation, more than 100 specialists from Spain, Portugal and all over the world gathered for an **International Seminar on the Iberian lynx, in Andujar, Spain from 29-31 October 2002.** The Seminar was organized by the Regional Government of Andalucía (Miguel Angel Simón), General Directorate for Nature Conservation, Spanish Ministry of Environment (Borja Heredia), ADENA/WWF (Jesús Cobo), Doñana Biological Station, National Research Institute (Miguel Delibes), IUCN, Cat Specialist Group (Urs Breitenmoser) and the Council of Europe (Eladio Fernández-Galiano). Spanish regional and national government authorities responsible for environmental protection and conservation were numerously represented, as well as leading Spanish, Portuguese and international NGOs. IUCN Cat Specialist Group, recognizing the Iberian lynx situation as extremely urgent, decided to organize its Core Group meeting in Andujar in the days preceding and following the Seminar. The LCIE was represented by Eladio Fernández-Galiano, Urs Breitenmoser, Juan-Carlos Blanco and Agnieszka Olszanska.

Short overview of the species status

The Iberian lynx has been strictly protected in Spain since 1973 (in Portugal since 1974). In 1989 it was included in the National Catalogue for Threatened Species as “endangered”. The National Commission for Nature Conservation (Comisión Nacional de Protección de la Naturaleza), comprising the Ministry of Environment and the Regions, coordinates the recovery actions for endangered species in Spain. An Iberian lynx conservation working group has been launched, composed of the Ministry of Environment, Regional Governments authorities and qualified experts. The working group has elaborated guidelines for species recovery, which are equivalent to the national strategies for the species conservation. The multitude of different Spanish authorities and decision-making bodies was sometimes hard to comprehend for non-Spanish participants of the seminar.

Miguel Delibes presented an overview of the present knowledge about the species. According to the current data scientists agree that the Iberian lynx is “naturally” a very vulnerable species (with very reduced range, a few historical bottle necks and the fact that it depends on only one prey species, the rabbit, which population has decreased dramatically since few decades). Its numbers have diminished over the last 150 years and at the present time we can only be certain about two small reproducing populations of lynxes in Eastern Sierra Morena and in Doñana. In 2001/2002 Spanish and Portuguese monitoring programmes were carried out to assess the number of remaining animals. The very intensive surveys, including camera trapping, box trapping, linear transects, scat molecular analysis, and a dead animals census produced dramatic results. According to Nicolas Guzman (Dirección General de Conservación de la Naturaleza – Ministerio de Medio Ambiente) the Spanish population does not exceed 150 animals, grouped in only two areas, Coto Doñana and East Sierra Morena (Andujar-Cardena). Some remaining individuals can probably be found in the East Montes de Toledo, West Sistema Central and West Sierra Morena. Pedro Sarmiento from the

Portugal Instituto da Conservação da Natureza said that according to the 2002 survey there is no proof of Iberian lynx presence in Portugal.

A similar census conducted in the late 1980s estimated the Spanish population as 880-1150 individuals, in 48 fragmented areas, and the Portuguese population as 40-50 individuals in three areas.

Miguel Delibes said: “The risk of extinction of the Doñana population is very high, because of low recruitment and very high mortality. We know little of the demographic patterns in Sierra Morena, where the risk should be lower... In very small populations, an undetected source of mortality can cause collapse in a short time (especially due to reduced genetic variability). We know that fragmentation increases the extinction risk of every population and we know enough about the dispersal requirements to design suitable corridors for the species. We know that society in general, the managers with responsibility for conservation and many land owners, are sensitive to the fate of the lynx, but we don't know if this social success has some negative effect. We know that captive breeding is not the best solution, but it can be the last guarantee and we must try it as soon as possible... We think that translocating lynxes to generate new populations in more suitable places (with rabbits and protection) is a real possibility that can be tried, but we don't know to what extent this measure will be effective. The habitat of the lynx must be preserved in many places, not only where the lynx is currently present. Spanish and Portuguese authorities must preserve the potential lynx habitat for eventual re-population.”

The reduced abundance of rabbits, fragmentation of habitat and human caused mortality seriously accelerates the decline of lynx population and the chance for spontaneous and natural recovery and recolonisation in potentially suitable areas is now almost impossible.

Conservation strategies, projects and campaigns

The Spanish and Portuguese specialists presented the conservation strategies and action plans endorsed at the regional level. Iñigo Sánchez presented the objectives of the Spanish captive breeding programme, approved in February 2001 by the Ministerio de Medio Ambiente, with agreement between Ministerio and Jerez Zoo, with prepared captive breeding centres (like El Acebuche at Doñana, Centro de Cria de Malcata in Portugal, Centro de Recuperacion Los Hornos). An official Captive Breeding Committee has been established. At the moment there are 4 females held in captivity. Morena: 13 years old, Esperanza: 1,5 year old and two 6 months old (Aura and Sally) and only one male, who was found with several serious wounds and almost blind. The CB Plan considers a minimum of 12 founders from both populations. Yet, no decision on implementing the plan has been taken.

Conservation projects and campaigns were presented by Miguel Angel Simón (responsible for the LIFE project in Regional Government of Andalucía), Javier Moro from National Parks Authority, Jesús Cobo from WWF/ADENA and Javier Oria from LIFE Project of CBD-Habitat Foundation. The reports show that many positive actions have been taken in the last few years, concentrating mainly on the habitat improvement and conservation of the Mediterranean shrubland, rebuilding rabbit populations decimated by viral diseases, as well as management agreements with several private hunting estates and land owners. Both, governmental and non-governmental organizations also work on raising awareness, education and political lobbying for the species and habitat conservation.

Results and conclusions of the Seminar

On the second day, six working groups were established, to work on different topics:

- 1: Rabbit and habitat recovery: (a) requirements and (b) methods and techniques.
- 2: Economy *versus* ecology? How can we integrate regional and local development into the conservation of the Iberian lynx: habitat management and network, EU funding, NATURA 2000, territorial policies, rural development.
- 3: Monitoring: How do we survey (a) the lynx population and (b) the effect of our work and activities?
- 4: Public involvement and education: (a) conflicts (human dimensions in Iberian lynx conservation), (b) public involvement, (c) partnership and networking, (d) lynx and hunting.
- 5: Gaps in our knowledge: What do we need additionally for the conservation of the Iberian lynx?
- 6: *Ex situ* conservation: (a) genetic considerations, (b) captive breeding programme, (c) reintroductions/restockings.

After few hours of hard and stormy discussions the list of recommendations for Spanish and Portuguese governments was prepared ([see conclusions in Spanish](#)) and all of them were defined as a matter of urgency!

All the specialists, experts and authorities agreed that protection and conservation of the still existing populations is crucial. The immediate implementation of the captive breeding plan approved by the Spanish Environmental Ministry and the Andalusia Regional Government was one of the most important and pressing tasks and should be started before the next breeding season (i.e. December 2002/January 2003).

Delegates also decided that;

- the protection and restoration of Mediterranean shrubland and the prevention of habitat fragmentation should be not only a national, but also European matter.
- The vast rabbit recovery program, aimed at repopulating the areas where the lynx still survives with inoculated rabbits and also in the former “lynx areas”, should be implemented.
- The intensive monitoring of the species in its known 1995 range should be carried out and the possible “wandering” animals should be included to the captive breeding program.
- Management agreements with the land and hunting reserves owners should be continued in order to change human attitudes towards lynx and its conservation.
- Controls on poaching, illegal hunting and trapping in all areas of lynx presence should be strengthened.

All the participants of the Seminar recognized the current Iberian lynx situation as dramatic and seriously urgent. Spanish and Portuguese national and regional governments, as well as non-governmental organizations, researchers and conservationists agreed that the actions for the species have to be taken now and without any delay. We heard frankly expressed criticism, bitter and sometimes harsh opinions and examples of the failure in some other areas of species conservation due to a lack (or a surplus) of coordination. We know also that some actions for the conservation of the species are taken and the coordination of those improves. But we have no more time to waste. There are no more than 150-200 lynxes with approximately 40 breeding females. All Spanish, Portuguese and international efforts should, and hopefully shall, concentrate on the protection and recovery of the species.

The Seminar took place in a church and we all hope that Providence and Divine intervention will inspire and motivate the decision taking bodies and save this most vulnerable feline species.

