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Common Press Release

Environmental Crime of International Importance at Nestos Gorge, NE-Greece!

Six poisoned large raptors have been recovered in the vicinity of two shot feral (wild) horses in Nestos Gorge, an area of European importance for large raptor conservation, included in the NATURA 2000 network. It is the most serious raptor poisoning incident in recent years, exposing Greece internationally.

Wardens of the West Rhodopes Management Body recovered four poisoned Golden Eagles, (*Aquila chrysaetos*) two Griffon Vultures (*Gyps fulvus*) and a Common Buzzard (*Buteo buteo*). The local forestry services and the Nestos Delta – Vistonida and Ismarida Lakes Management Body mobilized immediately and collected the birds that will undergo toxicological tests in the Center of Veterinary Institutions in Athens, so as to identify the substance employed. The Management Bodies staff, Forestry Serviced and Conservation charities continue the investigations to date, as there are signs the consequences of this wildlife crime are far greater.

The illegal use of poisoned baits is unfortunately a widespread practice in Greece and this particular incident is gravely serious as it included the carcasses of large ungulates that a lot of rare species fed upon. Poisoned baits aim in the extermination of large carnivores such as wolves and brown bears, for the damages they may inflict on livestock and agriculture. The conflict is intensified through the insufficient government actions in covering damages, insufficient wardening of protected areas and the lack of support to farmers for damage prevention as well as any system to control the use of (forbidden) agro-pesticides. [1].

The griffon vulture is critically endangered in continental Greece according to the latest national Red List update. Less than 30 breeding pairs survive in the continental part of the country and Nestos Gorge hosted the largest breeding colony. It is of particular concern that since the latest count in January due to the recent incident at least 30 % of the total population seems to be lost, as investigations carry on.

Concerning the golden eagle whose population is declining in the last years, recent data on Thrace estimate the local populations to approximately 30 pairs corresponding roughly to 20% of

the national population. The species is particularly vulnerable to the loss of three adult and an immature bird, the entire breeding population of Nestos Gorge. It is also worth mentioning that this is the third subsequent incident of horse shooting in the last few years.

In the present financial crisis the sustainable development of rural areas is a pressing need, and the natural heritage of the area is on the spearhead of these efforts. In this respect, EU funding instruments have invested more than 2M € for the conservation and management of the raptor populations and their habitats, while Greece is included in the Balkan Vulture Action Plan with neighboring countries. The consequences of this incident have therefore acquired an international perspective, as it undermines EU and Balkan countries efforts on the conservation of these species [2] .

The management bodies of the protected areas and the conservation charities are in close cooperation with the relevant local authorities and are expecting the immediate discovery of the perpetrators and their exemplary punishment. This should be the last in a series of disgraceful events poisoning the Greek wildlife.

Further Information

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Notes for Columnists

[1] Illegal poisoning is also employed in settling scores between shepherds, farmers and other civilians, as well as against stray animals and foxes. The unchecked use of poisoned baits in continental Greece has led the populations of the Griffon and Egyptian Vulture, which is Globally Endangered and Critically Endangered in Greece, to critical low levels, and the bearded vulture to extinction. Similar incidents have been recorded in the past, like the mass poisoning of griffon vultures from the 1950s to the 1980s in the area of Zagori that extirpated the species from the renowned Vikos Gorge, the death of 30 griffon vultures in Meteora from a strychnine laced cow in the 1970s and in Tsaritsani in Thessaly where an entire colony was destroyed. The latest incident happened in 2007 in the vicinity of Kaimaktsalan Mt where 21 griffons were found dead.

[2] a.) The EU has conducted intensive efforts in large raptor conservation in the Balkans throughout the last decade. Indicatively in Greece the following Projects have been implemented: Within the Balkan Vulture Action Plan the Society for Nature Protection and Ecodevelopment (EPO) and HOS are systematically monitoring the griffon population in Nestos Gorge. The “Green Balkans” NGO is currently running a LIFE project on the Griffon Vulture restoration in Bulgaria. Marked griffons from all over the Balkans have been recorded In Nestos Gorge.

b.) A Life Nature project run between 2002-2006 from Regional Authority Drama-Kavala-Xanthi, NAGREF Insitute, Kavala and Xanthi Forestry Services, EPO and the Hellenic Society for Nature Protection. It created the basis for ecotourism development in the area with the creation of an organized vulture restaurant and other ecotourism infrastructure.

c.) The EU is also funding intensive efforts to counter the illegal use of poison in Greece. In Greece two relevant projects are running, the Life-Nature “Urgent measures to secure the survival of the Egyptian vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*) in Bulgaria and Greece”, run by HOS in cooperation with WWF-Greece, the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds and the RSPB in two countries. And the Life+ biodiversity “innovative actions against illegal poisoning in eu mediterranean pilot areas” coordinated by the Gypaetus Foundation and including Quercus, CEAI, ARCTOUROS and the Natural History Museum of Crete-University of Crete.