

Baits, Budget Cuts: A Deadly Mix

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The illegal use of poison baits is the most important non-natural factor in the the extinction of several European vertebrate megafauna over the previous two centuries. Yet the practice continues unabated today. Poison baits represent a serious threat to public health and a serious conservation problem for sustaining biodiversity at both European and global scales.

Spain is home to important populations of several threatened vertebrate species. More than 8000 cases of illegal poisoning were reported in the period between 1990 and 2010, with victims including 53 bearded vultures (*Gypaetus barbatus*), 366 Egyptian vultures (*Neophron percnopterus*), 759 cinereous vultures (*Aegypius monachus*), 117 Spanish imperial eagles (*Aquila adalberti*), 2877 Eurasian griffonvultures (*Gyps fulvus*), 1981 red kites (*Milvus milvus*), 961 black kites (*Milvus migrans*), and 9 brown bears (*Ursus arctos*) (2–5). Several of these species are classified as endangered within the European Union (there remain only 170 pairs of bearded vultures, 323 Spanish imperial eagles, 1889 cinereous vultures, and 1900 Egyptian vultures). Moreover, Spain is home to more than 95% of all European avian scavengers and the world's entire Spanish imperial eagle population. Given this context, the damage to the conservation of European biodiversity caused by poisoning is considerable.

In light of the current economic crisis, the Spanish government has cut funding for research and development, and its Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Environment has reduced investment by 31%with respect to 2011. As a result, research and conservation programs that can minimize the impact of illegal poisoning are at risk. Without the funds to monitor threatened species with satellite transmitters, to analyze animal carcasses found through this and other monitoring methods, and to continue with environmental education programs and research trap selectivity methods, illegal poisoning looms even larger. All the human and economic efforts of the past two decadescould turn out to be futile and biodiversity be put at risk if research and conservation programs are paralyzed.