



REGHAB (Reconciling Gamebird Hunting and Biodiversity)

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www.uclm.es/irec/Reghab/inicio.html

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Conclusions from III Workshop Amboise, 30-31 May 2002

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Aims of the workshop

The primary aim of this workshop, the last one to be held within the course of the project, was to present a synthesis of the information and conclusions gathered during the Concerted Action, to discuss more thoroughly some aspects identified as critical elements of the conflict, and to present some external examples about constructive partnerships between hunters and protectionists in different areas.

The workshop was attended by 62 people from all REGHAB countries (see Annex 2), including mainly researchers and representatives of hunting organisations. Unfortunately, very few representatives of conservation NGOs attended the meeting, despite invitations having been issued.

Summary of presentations

The workshop included 16 presentations and general discussions on the main issues highlighted throughout the REGHAB project (see Annex 1).

After an introductory talk to explain the aims, structure and up-to-date results of the REGHAB project, the presentations were structured in four complementary sessions around three main topics.

The first session concentrated on the costs and benefits of different types of management for hunting on agricultural land, namely the protection of wild game through habitat management versus the extensive use of releases for the maintenance of bags of declining species like partridges. Potential problems associated with released game were reviewed, as well as benefits associated with habitat management implemented on farmland to favour gamebirds.

Secondly, the issue of predators and predator control was dealt with in three different sessions. One of them described problems arising from predator control, both in terms of illegal killing of protected predators such as raptors, as well as problems arising when available methods for performing legal predator control are insufficient or ineffective. The latter highlighted both the dissatisfaction of hunters with the administration to respond to their needs, as well as the problems arising from the illegal use of poison that sometimes follows. Another session concentrated on the theoretical context of predator-prey relationships, highlighting the complexity of the systems, and the lack of information in many cases to be able to conclude when (certain) predators are limiting factors for prey (in this case gamebird) populations. A final session presented three case studies of raptor-gamebird systems (the grouse-harrier system in Scotland, the harrier-grey partridge system in France, and the red-legged partridge in Spain), the socio-economic context of each case, the ecological knowledge of the conflict, and an evaluation of the potential solutions for each case.

Finally, one of the sessions dealt with examples of collaborative programmes between hunting and conservation organisations around common objectives. In particular, three examples were presented. A first talk explained the resurgence in Spain in the 1990's of the (illegal) use of poison as a method of controlling predators (both for hunting and farming interests, depending on the areas), after its banning in 1973. This was a consequence of increased demands for hunting, leading to an increasing release of farm-reared small game species (highly vulnerable to wild predators such as foxes, wild cats, martens, genets, etc. or opportunists such as feral cats) to increase the short-term profitability of hunting areas, that along with expanding populations of some predators after implementation of protection, induced a perceived lack of legal alternatives to control such

predators in the hunting sector. Ease of access to highly toxic products, combined with a lack of effective inspections to prevent the wrongful use of these products, meant that poisoned baits were common, leading to an exceedingly high mortality of wildlife. The talk presented the initiatives that have been developed since 1997 against the use of poison, notably the creation of the Antidote Programme (a platform comprising 8 NGOs in a coordinated fight against poison) and actions within two of the Black Vulture Conservation Foundation (BVCF) LIFE Projects. The latter include the promotion of good hunting practices, the promotion of the use of legal methods to control predators among hunters, and the development of a pilot project for ethical predator control for feral cats (one of the most important game predators in the Balearic Islands). The latter has been particularly successful, and represents a step forward in the coordination of interests of hunters and protectionists. It stressed the need to test the efficacy of selective alternative predator control methods to be authorised by the Administration, which could reduce the use of illegal non-selective methods such as poison.

A second talk within this session explained the collaborative approach between the French Ministry of Environment, the LPO (Ligue de Protection des Oiseaux) and local hunting federations for implementing a conservation programme for the Bearded Vulture in the Pyreneans. The action plan involved a contractual approach between the stakeholders, a scientific and technical partnership, communication programmes from the opinion leaders from each group, and application of conservation measures (among others, defined limits for hunting and other recreational activities within sensible areas). The talk detailed the positive and negative aspects of the negotiation, as perceived by the stakeholders, several years after the start of the programme. For example, the fact that the final solution was a compromise between the initial wishes was perceived as positive from the hunters, but negative from the protectionists. Recognition of mutual competence was a critical factor for the success of the programme (particularly the recognition of technical competence by the hunting stakeholders), and although the time needed for the negotiation was overall perceived as too long (particularly from the protectionists), it was hoped that this first experience would speed up subsequent initiatives.

A third talk detailed a programme for the conservation of Iberian Lynx implemented through the collaboration between WWF and hunting associations, through the development of measures to increase rabbit abundance (important game locally, and also prey for the Lynx) and the eradication of non-selective methods for predator control.

A fourth talk described the hunting management regime implemented by the administration in a region of Spain (Navarra), with the purpose of maintaining sustainable hunting and nature conservation. The implementation of such a regime has had positive effects both on game and other species populations. This presentation also noted the negative effect that CAP is having in the maintenance of wildlife on farmland habitats.

Finally, a presentation about lead poisoning in raptors concluded that most information available is unsatisfactory, especially out of wetlands, and that more research is needed to obtain a complete view of the extent of the problem. The Spanish Hunting Federation presented a plan financed by hunters to study the feasibility of replacing lead shot by a less toxic alternative in Spain.

Discussion points

Following the presentation of the talks, a general discussion dealt with all issues. Simultaneous translation between French, English and Spanish facilitated and stimulated the intervention of participants from all countries in the general discussion. The main topics and conclusions that arose from the discussions were as follows.

In relation to game releases, it was emphasised that there is a big difference between releases with the aim of recovering declining populations, and short-term shooting releases for intensive hunting. There were many voices, even among hunters, that considered that releases, when performed for short-term increases of hunting bags, devalue the image of hunting, as they represent quantity (as opposed to quality) hunting. This was particularly true in relation to partridge releases in France and the Iberian Peninsula, less so for pheasant releases in the UK. Releasing farm-reared birds has increased in importance in recent years because of different economic and social reasons (the increase in hunting demands, the decline in wild farmland game populations, the need for farmers in areas like the UK to diversify their revenue through shooting because of the collapse in prices of agricultural produce, etc.). Releases were seen as negative by many participants because they are perceived as the least-effort solution to the decline in wild populations of game, and because in many instances they are a substitute for habitat management (particularly in the case of small local federations, with limited economic resources, which only have money to invest in either buying farm-reared birds or implementing habitat management, not both). The increasing scientific evidence that poorly managed releases can be very negative to wild game populations and potentially to other species, for a variety of reasons (e.g. genetic or behavioural quality of released birds, sanitary problems, or overshooting of wild populations) also raises concerns. However, game farms and game release activities are an unavoidable fact, and the discussion centered on how to improve the conditions in which it is carried out. For example, it was strongly demanded by the participants from the Iberian Peninsula (including hunters, protectionists and scientists) that regulations should be in place to forbid releases of farm-reared birds that are not identified as such (for example, by rings), that stronger veterinary and genetic control should take place in game farms, and that intensive hunting in lands with massive releases should be strictly limited. Also, it was recognised that carefully planned releases, along with other management actions, may help to recover depleted wild stocks, and that in some cases (e.g. pheasant and red-legged partridge in UK), gamebird releases are associated with habitat management that benefits other species.

On the other hand, there was general agreement about the positive effects that habitat management for hunting interests may have not only on game, but also for conservation of overall biodiversity on farmland. There was also agreement in the conclusion that it is habitat changes (primarily due to the CAP) that have caused declines in the gamebird (and other bird) populations on farmland. Modifying habitat in ways that counteract the negative influence of intensification is very positive. However, hunters are not always owners of the land where they hunt, so their action on habitat can only be carried out through the constraints of farming needs. Another of the conclusions was that farming stakeholders should be present in these types of meetings, and that common documents should be sent to specify how negative the CAP is for the environment in general, and for the maintenance of wildlife and game populations (thus hunting) in particular.

Finally, it was also concluded that most solutions to manage sustainable hunting on farmland demand a great economic investment. As in previous workshops, it was suggested that a good way to overcome this would be to give tax incentives (rather than subsidies) to land owners or game managers, and also to promote funding to test sustainable strategies (quality versus quantity hunting). Research on habitat management on farmland in UK has resulted in the inclusion of several management techniques within agro-environmental schemes. The maintenance and increase of the application of agro-environmental measures in areas of conflict, and where small game is

prey of endangered predators, could also be a positive way to improve the situation. The negative perception of Natura-2000 by some stakeholders within the hunting sector (who see it as a threat rather than as an opportunity) was also discussed. Part of the problems seem to arise from the lack of information or clarity about the implications of Natura-2000 for hunting within designated areas, because it seems clear, from demonstration projects or working documents issued by the European Commission, that the Natura 2000 network need not necessarily be detrimental for hunting interests. Thus, it was proposed that more effort should be made in the future to improve dissemination of information about the consequences of the implementation of Natura 2000 network for hunting interests.

In relation to predators and predator control, the discussion mainly turned around ethical issues and perceptions. A protectionist expressed that the problem arose because hunters do not accept any predation. It was viewed that no discussion was possible until hunters accepted that some predation had to occur, that fauna (including game) belongs to everyone, and that some must be left for predators. On the other hand, hunters expressed that hunters are managers of the environment, and that predators are controlled, not exterminated. The problem is exacerbated by the declining situation of game populations, which makes that any individual predated (or hunted) is perceived as a loss. The unit of debate is the individual, not the populations, which explains a certain degree of sentimentalism. Some hunters also mentioned that part of the problem also arose because protected species were never delisted, even if the reasons for their initial listing have disappeared. The need was again stressed for scientific information on the effects of predators on gamebird populations, and on methods to control predation, including selective control methods for generalist predators. The representative from Spanish Hunting Federation contended that complete protection of predators, along with prohibition of many predator control methods, and lack of legal alternatives, are the main factors that have induced the use of poison in Spain. It was also stressed that the Administrations should be more clearly involved in the payment of farm losses induced by game species where they are important for the maintenance of endangered predators (e.g. rabbits in Spain).

Finally, and as in previous workshops, participants from Finland observed that the situation in Fennoscandia was extremely different than in the rest of Europe, because of the lack of conflicts there. The whole sociological approach to hunting in Finland explains these differences, but it is difficult to give proposals about how to extend their views to other areas.

Concluding remarks

Communication between scientists, hunters and protectionists must be continuous and fluent, and some already existing European Organizations should take the role of maintaining the exchange of information and discussion between these sectors, which is critical for biodiversity conservation.

From several points of view, we are in a critical moment to improve the collaboration between farming, hunting and conservation interests. This is a promising line of action that may allow an optimisation of the use of natural resources in agricultural lands (thus on most of European land), while improving biodiversity conservation, and maintaining rural populations.

Selective predator control, when necessary, should be considered as a good alternative to the illegal use of non-selective methods, such as poison. On the other hand, hunters must recognise that a percentage of losses to predators is inevitable, while protectionists must accept that predators can harm game stocks and the need for predation control when necessary.

Governments must rectify the negative consequences of CAP policy on farmland biodiversity, including gamebirds, which is the single biggest root of the conflict. They should implement measures, such as tax incentives, promoting “good hunting practices” (e.g. maintenance of healthy wild populations vs. intensive hunting based on massive releases), as a way of conserving nature through “wise use”.

Three main lines of research must be promoted to obtain information critical for the resolutions of this kind of conflicts:

- Socioeconomic framework of hunting and conservation conflicts, in some cases to fully understand the origin of conflicts, in others to seek solutions.
- Effect of predators on gamebird populations, particularly in southern countries, where predator-prey communities are more complex and less investigated.
- Effect of game management on other species than gamebirds.

ANNEX 1 - PROGRAMME

Thursday

9.30 registration and coffee

10.30- 11.30 The REGHAB project : presentation and conclusions of previous work (B. Arroyo)

Session 1. Hunting in agricultural land: protection of wild game versus releases (Chair: B. Arroyo).

11.30-1200 Game farming and game releases: problems, perspectives (P. Beja)

1200-1400 Lunch

Session 1 continued

1400-1430 Sanitary problems of released birds (C. Gortazar)

1430-1500 Habitat management for game in agricultural land: a tool for wildlife enhancement (N. Aebisher)

1500-1600 General discussion of session1 (Chaired by P. Beja and B. Arroyo)

16.00-16.30 coffee

Session 2. Problems arising from predator management (Chair: S. Redpath)

1630-1700 Raptor illegal killing: a review (S. Mañosa)

1700-1730 Predator control : the view of the hunters (A. Gracia).

1730-1800 Constraints in legal predator control: efficacy of methods of fox and crow control, and alternatives for the future (P. Fasolo).

1830 – 1930 Film presentation

« Predators » by L. Charbonnier

“Red-legged partridge hunting in Spain” by ACTI

Friday

Session 3. Predator / prey relationships within an ecological context (Chair: P. Migot)

0930-1000 Raptor prey dynamics: the state of the art (V. Bretagnolle, J. Valkama)

1000-1030 Predator / prey relationships with mammalian predators : selected case studies (X. Lambin)

1030-1100 The role of predation: experimental and simulation studies (J. Clobert)

Session 4. Combining hunting and conservation interests: solution examples (Chair: J. Vinuela)

12.30-1430 Lunch

Session 4 continued

1430-1500 Managing endangered predators: voluntary agreements between hunters and conservation ONGs (L. Suarez Aranguena)

1500-1530 Examples of hunting management in Navarra. (E. Castien)

1530-1600 Hunting and lead poisoning in raptors (Jordi Prieto)

16.00-1630 coffee

Session 5: Raptors as game predators: case studies (socioeconomics, ecology, the conflict and solutions). (Chair: V. Bretagnolle)

1630-1700 Red Grouse in Scotland (S. Redpath)

1700-1730 Grey Partridge in France (E. Bro)

1730-1800 Red-legged Partridge in Spain (J.A. Blanco)

1800-1900 General discussion sessions 2-5 (Chaired by S. Redpath, J. Vinuela, V. Bretagnolle & B. Arroyo)

1900-1930 Conclusions and perspectives for the future (J. Vinuela)

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