



Athens, 15 March 2012
 Ref. no: 468/SG/12

Mr Janez Potočnik
 Commissioner for Environment
 European Commission
 B-1049 Brussels, Belgium

Dear Mr Potočnik,

In February 2012, a large number of raptors were intentionally poisoned in the Natura 2000 site protected area of the Nestos Gorge (GR1120004), in northern Greece.

Ornithologists monitoring the area for many years estimate that the killed birds include up to 30-40 Griffon Vultures and at least 4 Golden Eagles. As far as the vultures are concerned, the largest remaining reproductive colony on mainland Greece was wiped out after the poisoning. This loss is catastrophic because the dead vultures represent 40-50% of the mainland population, which is listed in the Greek Red Data Book as “Critically Endangered”. The survival of the Griffon Vulture in mainland Greece is therefore critically jeopardised.

Moreover, the total reproductive population of Golden Eagles, listed as “Endangered” in the GRDB, has been lost in the Nestos Gorge. Both species are protected under the Birds Directive (2009/147/EC). Thus the incident raises serious doubts about the ability of the Greek competent authorities to fulfill their obligations according to the national and European legislation.

The issue of uncontrolled traffic of agrochemicals and their illegal use for killing wildlife has been known for decades, and is directly related to the livestock damages from large carnivores. Unfortunately, almost no action has been taken to resolve it, and some measures included in the National Programme for Agricultural Development that could have alleviated the situation were never implemented.

In the attached fact sheet you may find a detailed description of the incident as well as our proposals to the relevant Ministries for immediate action.

Yours sincerely,

Arcturos
 Archelon – The Sea Turtle Protection Society of Greece
 Mediterranean SOS Network
 Elliniki Etairia, for the Protection of the Environment and the Cultural Heritage
 Hellenic Society for the Protection of Nature

Hellenic Ornithological Society
Hellenic Bird Ringing Centre
Society for the Protection and Development of Nestos Gorge – Agios Kosmas
Society for the Protection on Nature and Eco-Development
Εταιρία Προστασίας της Φύσης και Οικοανάπτυξης
Callisto – Environmental Organization for Wildlife and Nature
Mom – Hellenic Society for the Study and Protection of the Monk Seal
Natural History Museum of Crete
Management Body of the Nestos Delta – Vistonida and Ismarida Lakes
Management Body of Rodopi Mountain Range
WWF Greece



Fact Sheet: Poisoning of Birds of Prey in Nestos Gorge in February 2012

On 19.02.2012 the wardens of the Management Body of Rodopi Mountain Range discovered **seven poisoned raptors**: four Golden Eagles, (*Aquila chrysaetos*), two Griffon Vultures (*Gyps fulvus*) and one Common Buzzard (*Buteo buteo*) were found next to two shot feral horses in the abandoned village of Kromnikon in the Nestos Gorge, District of Xanthi (NE Greece). The Nestos Gorge is a strictly protected area under European (SPA GR112004) and Greek (Aesthetic Forest) legislation for its biodiversity, natural beauty and rare wildlife, especially large birds of prey.

The local forestry services, the Management Body of the Nestos Delta – Vistonida and Ismarida Lakes, the Management Body of Rodopi Mountain Range, and environmental NGOs were mobilised immediately and collected the birds and the dead horses. Samples from the dead birds and horses were retrieved and sent for toxicological analysis to the Centre of Veterinary Institutions in Athens. First results show that the poison used is a **carbamide ester**, most probably *carbofuran*, an extremely toxic agro-chemical.

According to the Greek Red Data Book, mainland population of the Griffon Vulture is **Critically Endangered**. The Nestos Gorge held the largest breeding colony on mainland Greece. The Golden Eagle is listed as **Endangered**, its numbers declining in recent years. The broader area of Thrace hosts some 20% of the national Golden Eagle population.

At this time, the findings of the ongoing investigation by the staff of the national park bodies and NGOs involved into the management and monitoring of the Nestos Gorge indicate that:

- The two horses were dispatched by gunshots from a relatively close distance.
- The two horses were killed at an interval of about 2-3 weeks. The first was shot around the end of January or the first days of February, and its carcass had been consumed by wild or feral animals; only its skeleton and head remained. The second horse was shot a few days before its discovery on the 19th of February. Its carcass was opened and skinned “expertly” with a knife, the intestines were exposed and the whole surface of the exposed soft and hard tissues was covered by a white powder. Only small parts were visibly eaten by animals.
- Two Golden Eagles, two Griffon Vultures and the Common Buzzard were freshly killed after eating poisoned meat from the second horse. They were

found less than 50 m from the carcass. The two other Golden Eagles were found farther away from the carcasses, between bushes, and were already heavily decomposed; they had almost been totally eaten by scavengers. Their death probably occurred 2-3 weeks earlier, indicating that the first horse had also been poisoned and caused the death of wild animals.

- The colony of Griffon Vultures living in the Nestos Gorge was decimated by the incident. The colony has been systematically monitored for more than 12 years and was considered the largest of this species on mainland Greece. Counts in 2011 recorded about 16-17 breeding pairs that fledged 11-12 youngsters. In January 2012 – prior to the poisoning incident – a number of Griffon Vultures similar to that of the previous year had begun breeding activities. By the end of February 2012 **no more breeding Vultures** could be found in the whole area of Nestos Gorge. Two birds observed still incubating immediately after the incident also abandoned their nests (probably because their mates were poisoned). Since then, only single birds have been seen flying in the Gorge.

Conclusions

These facts lead us to the following conclusions:

With the two poisoned horses, the largest part of the Nestos Gorge vulture colony was exterminated – experts estimate the death count at 30-40 vultures and at least 4 Golden Eagles. This means that the mainland Griffon Vulture population has been reduced by 40-50% and the whole reproductive population of the Golden Eagle in the Nestos Gorge area has been eliminated.

It is likely that the perpetrator removed most of the carcasses (mostly vultures) of the first poisoning incident, to conceal the act. An intensive search of the surrounding area did not produce any more dead birds, or any other signs (scattered bloody feathers, etc). The immediate discovery of the second poisoning prevented the removal of carcasses that could have resulted in the incident going completely undetected.

This is a devastating blow for the Griffon Vultures on mainland Greece, pushing the population to the brink of extinction. It must be noted that, while western European populations of this species are stable or increasing (because of strict protection, alternate feeding and reintroduction schemes), the situation is quite different in the Balkans. In most countries the populations have severely declined, some to the point of extinction, and there are strong efforts to support the remaining birds or reintroduce them. Indeed, such incidents of poisoning could jeopardize the projects of neighbouring countries such as Bulgaria and Croatia, since birds from these countries regularly migrate to Greece.

Regarding the possible motives of this criminal act of poisoning, two different groups of “users” and two different motives may be discerned. On one hand, the setup and location indicate that the bait might have been placed by herdsman, and intended for wolves, responsible for an unusually high number of assaults on livestock in the past

winter. The fact that there were no livestock present in the area at the time of the incidents (during wintertime most animals are kept in the villages at lower elevations) supports this possibility; because of this, the baits would not endanger the dogs of the herdsmen. On the other hand, hunters are also actively hostile against the wolves that sometimes kill their dogs and live on the same “prey”. The timing of the incident, coinciding with the end of the hunting season, could also support the later possibility, because his way no hunting dogs would be put to threat. Finally, we cannot rule out the possibility that the birds of prey may have been the real target of the poisoning, not the wolves, as they are often perceived as a “hindrance” to the future development of the area.

During the last two decades almost no action has been taken to resolve the problem of poisoned bates, an illegal killing of wildlife. Therefore, the signing NGOs and National Park Authorities demand:

That the responsible authorities use all means at their disposal for the prosecution and exemplary punishment of the perpetrators, and

That they implement, without delay, legislative and policy measures at a national and regional level that will effectively deal with the problem.

Legislatory and Policy Measures

Nation wide:

- *Strict control of pesticide trade, possession and use,*
- *Prohibition of products that are already legally banned in other countries, such as carbamides (e.g. carbofuran).*
- *Effective wardening of protected areas, especially Natura 2000 sites, with emphasis on wardening and monitoring of protected areas via the Forestry authorities and the increase of jurisdiction and rights of management body wardens.*
- *A nation-wide anti-poisoning campaign, directed at the causes of the problem, (e.g. unsatisfactory reimbursement amounts and procedures for livestock breeders following carnivore attacks).*
- *Increase communication / cooperation between all involved stakeholders, such as herdsmen, hunters, local authorities, etc.*
- *Revision of compensation procedures and reimbursement amounts so as to cover the full value of any animal lost to carnivores.*
- *Reactivation of stalled measures within the framework of the National Programme for Agricultural Development for the prevention of carnivore damages to livestock (e.g. provision of purebred Greek shepherd dogs, maintenance subsidies, electro-fencing of pens and temporary stables) and the supplementary feeding of scavenging birds.*
- *Revision of measures within the framework of the National Programme for Agricultural Development for the support of traditional pastoralism, and its inclusion as “tool” in the management of protected areas.*

Regional

- *Inclusion of the Nestos Gorge under the jurisdiction of one of the Management Bodies of nearby protected areas, and involvement of their staff in the wardening.*

- *Enlargement of the protection and non-hunting zones in the Nestos Gorge area to avoid further conflicts with hunters on the border of the protected site.*
- *Implementation of programmes for sustainable development and protection of the Nestos Gorge area, including feeding schemes, automatic remote-camera systems, eco-development measures with nature trails, wardens and information centres.*
- *Planning of a reintroduction program for vultures in the Gorge, provided that all threats would be effectively addressed.*

Annex

Pictures from Nestos Gorge

Golden Eagle at the feeding place



Vultures at the feeding place



The dead birds

