

Establishing a meta-population of the Bearded Vulture in South Western Europe - a new strategy for the long term survival of this threatened species.

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As from 1986 more than 150 Bearded Vulture offspring of an international breeding network including 35 zoos and 5 breeding centres have been released into the Alps. The 35 founders of this European Breeding Project derive mainly from Asia and to a smaller part from Greece and Spain. The goal of this international project including all Alpine countries, under the supervision of the Foundation for the Conservation of the Bearded Vulture (FCBV) is to establish a self sustaining population in the Alps when this species was extirpated about 100 years ago.

In 1997, the first Bearded Vulture nestling hatched and fledged successfully in the wild. Up to 2007, the number of breeding pairs in the wild increased to 13 and more than 40 offspring have hatched in the past 11 years. Within the next years the goal of this project will be reached and no more releases will be necessary.

Nevertheless, the FCBV is developing now a strategy to ensure the viability of the Alpine population for a long period of time. Links between the Alpine birds and the autochthone ones in Corse and the Pyrenees are of greatest importance to ensure gene-flow. The results of a genetic analysis of Bearded Vultures covering the existing European populations, the extinct Alpine population and birds from Asia, revealed that there was a gene flow between these populations although distributed over a large area on a small level.

Keeping in mind the comparatively small genetic variability of the Bearded Vultures population of the Pyrenees (compared to the situation before the bottle-neck at the end of the last century), an exchange with birds from the Alpine population could be an important enrichment for the future. One possibility to establish this link is a transfer of the existing release sites from the Central and Eastern Alps to the Western French Alps and furthermore to the Cevennes. A viability study is being proposed considering the carrying capacity of this area where Griffon and European Black Vultures have been reintroduced already, whereas the Egyptian Vulture returned by itself.

Furthermore it is planned to reintroduce this species to Sardinia, by this way implementing another link between Sardinia, Corsica and the Alps.

The overall goal of these efforts should be the building up of a meta-population of Bearded Vultures, covering the area between the autochthonous population of the Pyrenees and Corse and the reintroduced birds of the Alps.

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