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CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE
AND NATURAL HABITATS

Standing Committee

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Specific Sites - File open

**Eradication and trade of the American Grey
squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*) in Italy**

REPORT BY THE GOVERNMENT

*Document prepared by
the Ministry of the environment, land and sea, Italy*

CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE
AND NATURAL HABITATS

Case file “Eradication and trade of the American Grey squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*) in Italy”

Governmental Report prepared by the Ministry for the Environment, Land and Sea

- Updated 14 November 2014 -

Following the 28th Standing Committee of the Bern Convention, a case-file was opened on Italy regarding the “implementation of Recommendation n° 123 (2007) on limiting the dispersal of the Grey Squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*) in Italy and other Contracting Parties”.

The Recommendation n. 123 (2007) asked Italy to:

1. *urge the Lombardia Region and the other competent local authorities to start without further delay the eradication program of the Grey Squirrel in the Ticino Valley, so as to significantly delay invasion of Southern Alps;*

Furtherly, the Recommendation asked the Contracting Party to:

2. *ban trade and possession of the Grey Squirrel;*
3. *eradicate new possible introduced populations of Grey Squirrels.*

This paper reports the state of the play of the issue, in order to give the 33rd Standing Committee the broader information needed to discuss the case-file.

Background

In response to the Recommendation 123(2007) Italian Ministry of the Environment, Land and Sea started a series of activities aimed to achieve the requested objectives, consisting of:

- a memorandum of understanding involving Lombardy, Piedmont and Liguria Regions, Universities and ISPRA (Italian high Institute for protection and research of the environment), to agree on necessary interventions in the field and to share consequent responsibilities and burdens. The MoU was signed in 2009.
- An action in the context of EU CITES Committee to promote community measures limiting trade of Grey squirrel.
- The preparation of a ministerial Decree to ban trade a possession in Italy of specimens of Grey squirrel.

Of all the carried out activities, the Standing Committee has been periodically and punctually kept informed.

National ban of Grey squirrel’s trading and possession

The ban Decree “Dispositions for the control of detention and trade of alien squirrels of the species *Callosciurus erythraeus*, *Sciurus carolinensis* and *Sciurus niger*” was issued on December 24th 2012 by the Minister of the Environment Land and See, in agreement with the Minister of Agricultural, Food and Forestry Policies and with the Minister of Economic Development; the Decree was published on 2nd February 2013 in Official Journal n° 28.

With the Decree it is forbidden to trade, to breed and to detain, in the whole national territory, specimens of three squirrel species (besides *Sciurus carolinensis*, also *Callosciurus erytherus* and *Sciurus niger*), defined as “alien squirrels”.

Regarding the implementation of the Decree, CITES offices communicate that only 4 of declarations of possession of 4 specimens of *Sciurus caroliniensis* have been made by citizens and no notifications for illegal action within the ban decree have been issued.

Control and eradication of Grey squirrel on the ground

The objective of Project LIFE09 NAT/IT/00095 EC-SQUARE "*Eradication and control of grey squirrel: actions for preservation of biodiversity in forest ecosystems*" is to eliminate or, where eradication will be judged impracticable, to control the risks posed by the Eastern grey squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*) to biodiversity, and in particular to the conservation of the native red squirrel (*Sciurus vulgaris*). The project area include the regions of Piedmont, Lombardy and Liguria. In year 2013 a reorganization of the goals achievable during the Project EC-SQUARE was proposed, in order to take into account the increased range of the species in Lombardy and Piedmont and the time of the LIFE project. The new project end date is 31st March 2015.

The LIFE project was planned from the beginning with a specific Communication Action Plan produced by a professional Society, with the aim to raise the image of the native red squirrel as a fundamental part of our heritage and biodiversity. More resources to further increase the communication effort have been allocated within the project, involving other professional societies and a national Environmental Association with a strong connection with animal right groups. Some results have been achieved during these years of the project. Although it is now accepted by the scientific community that Invasive Alien Species are a serious threat to biodiversity, the public is usually poorly informed on the problems associated with introduced species. Therefore, the increase of public awareness is important and could play a key role in the formation of correct thoughts and behaviours in respect to non-native species and the conservation of biodiversity. The LIFE EC-SQUARE project developed a wide-scale relation campaign at a national, regional and local level (stakeholders, public authorities, general public, conservation NGOs and other civil society groups) to provide correct information on the grey squirrel as an invasive species and its impact on the red squirrel and more in general on biodiversity. This involved a great number of meetings, round tables and conferences with stakeholders and the general public. In the school year 2012/2013, 131 classes have been involved in environmental education activities; other 71 were involved in the school year 2013/2014. A video, a brochure and other materials have been used to increase communication. The Project Task Force is trying to provide citizens with knowledge on the issues related to introduced species in general, and the competition between grey and red squirrels. Unfortunately this is not easy in Italy, because media, especially televisions and national newspapers, but also web sites and local newspapers, generally prefer to emphasize the emotional aspects (killing of such cute squirrels that 'certainly do not create problems') rather than explain the ecological damage and the need to protect native species. The Task Force countered negative articles, even with the support of a specialized company in Milan. In addition, the project team has provided, as a proactive action, support to journalists for articles on the project or on related topics (introduced species in general, prevention policies, red squirrel conservation), in order to increase knowledge and awareness. The project does not have up to date data on the propensity of Italians to support the control of exotic species with a 'strong emotional impact'. However, it is assumable that the majority of the population is at present not opposing the eradication programme. The opposition is from a small group of animal rights activists, well connected with local media and thus able to easily amplify a message of contrast to eradication projects. Despite wide-scale communication activities, the project encountered many resistance from some stakeholders and groups of citizens. For this reason, further resources have been identified to strengthen communication. Within the project the Task Force has decided to increase communication activities focusing on restricted areas – e.g. Lombardy and Piedmont, and Liguria, with a different approach – and increasing personal contacts with journalists. Two companies expert in communication strategies were appointed in Lombardy to support the Task Force in the development and distribution of press releases and monitoring of articles published in newspapers and online. In Liguria, specific communication activities started in collaboration with Legambiente, one of the main Italian environmental NGO. Here communication is more critical because squirrels are in an urban park visited by many citizens every days. Some results have been obtained.

- At the beginning of the LIFE project, the opponents to eradication actions easily declared in the media that the fact that the grey squirrel was replacing the red squirrel was not true. Now, after the communication strategy implemented within the LIFE project, the fact that the grey squirrel is driving the red squirrel to extinction is accepted by most of the stakeholders and normally reported by mass media.

- The project has now some good coverage from the main national newspapers ('Corriere della Sera' and 'La Repubblica') and the RAI (the national television network). The activities in Liguria of capture and release of sterilized animals were followed all day by a journalist of the national newspaper 'La Repubblica'; the site of the newspaper was provided with an interview to the Project Manager and the journalist testifies that the animals 'are caught and transported in such a way as to minimize the stress'. RAI produced a short movie on the part of the project regarding Piedmont and Lombardy, with an interview with the Project Manager, that has been repeated in several news broadcasts.
- The Task Force is now conducting a review of all the articles published in newspapers and information web-site regarding the project and more in general the topic of competition between the two squirrel species. The analysis is conducted separately for articles related to the part of the project that involves the capture and killing of animals (Lombardy and Piedmont) and Liguria where squirrels are sterilized. In 2012 the percentage of articles against the project – basically for the killing of animals - was more than 20%, decreased to 11.1% in 2013 and to 0 in 2014. In Liguria, despite the sterilization of the animals, the percentage of articles attacking the project was 53% in 2012, increased to 60% in year 2013 when catches were about to start and decreased to 42% in 2014 when activities were in progress. It is noteworthy that half (54%) of the articles published in 2014 and presenting the project in a negative way in Liguria are from a single reporter. Starting from 2014 the project has created a Facebook page, in collaboration with Legambiente and dedicated to project activities in Liguria. This page has been important for starting a direct dialogue with citizens and to explain the reasons for intervention. As a result, the number of negative comments significantly decreased. Another important point has been the ongoing dialogue that the technicians in charge of trapping have with citizens who frequent the park of Genoa Nervi. As a results of these communication actions, trapping activities are still in progress, apart from some limited acts of vandalism, that nevertheless have not affected trapping activities. Sterilization is conducted by a contracted veterinary structure that is working well with the project. The local opponents are now restricted to 10-15 highly motivated citizens, who consider the squirrels of Nervi as 'their own squirrels' and therefore contrast whatsoever intervention on the squirrels; they can also count on the support of at least one journalist who is committed in publishing critical articles on the project. Although it is assumable that a certain minority part of key stakeholders, will maintain a position of opposition to eradication activities, most of the articles published in the last year have presented the project in a more balanced way and trappers can now work in more relaxed in comparison with the early days.

Conclusions

The entry into force of the prohibition of detaining and trading Grey Squirrels in Italy was an important result and basically stopped the trade of this species. The eradication of Grey squirrel was encountering big obstacles posed by an unfavourable public opinion. To finalize the efforts made by Italy in order to fulfil the international commitments taken, is crucial to achieve public opinion consensus. The Communication activities put in place are increasing knowledge on the issues related to introduced species in general, and the competition between grey and red squirrels in particular. Given that more communication activities must be undertaken, we can register positive signals. In recent years the mentality is changing, and the LIFE project, with its clamor, but also with the continuous repetition of messages, has contributed to this change. The control interventions are accepted by many and eradication activities are now going on with a broad involvement of all the institutions concerned (state, regional, local, research).

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