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CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE
AND NATURAL HABITATS

Standing Committee
20th meeting

Strasbourg, 27 November – 1 December 2000

Specific file

Conservation of the common hamster
(*Cricetus cricetus*)
in the Netherlands

Report of the Secretariat

*Document established by
the Directorate of Sustainable Development*

The Standing Committee is asked to consider the action taken on this file, which was opened in 1999, and in particular the progress made in implementing Recommendation No. 79 on protection of the common hamster (*Cricetus cricetus*) in Europe.

A. Report of the Secretariat

The purpose of the “files” is to find a satisfactory solution to problems encountered in implementing the Convention and to monitor as effectively as possible the means chosen to resolve them.

I. Background

The common hamster (*Cricetus Cricetus*) is one of the strictly protected species listed in Appendix II to the Bern Convention. In recent decades, the western part of its range has been considerably fragmented. The species is currently endangered in Germany, Belgium, France and in the Netherlands.

According to the Badger to Bear Foundation, the population in the Netherlands is much worse off than in France. According to the 1994 inventory, only 92 hamster burrows remain in the Netherlands, of which only 58 per cent were inhabited. Since then the Netherlands’ population has deteriorated further.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Nature Management and Fisheries acknowledges that even if the highest estimates are taken into account, the national situation can be regarded as alarming. The wild hamster is found only in the province of Limburg. On the basis of the information available in autumn 1998, the hamster population was estimated to be in the hundreds, distributed over a large area. Experts do not agree on the developments since then, as there was no inventory of spring populations for the entire area undertaken in 1999.

The Ministry of Agriculture explains that according to experts, the survival of wild hamsters in their natural habitat in Limburg can only be ensured if optimum conditions are created in 500 ha area (core area and corridors) where sustainability and continuity are guaranteed. The inventory made in 1998 showed that a large area in central and southern Limburg is potentially suitable for hamsters. A large part of these lands however is cultivated and is therefore not under special protection. During recent consultations between the Provincial Council and the Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment a first step was taken to bring this land under some form of basic protection regime. Land use plans in actual or potential hamster habitats will be assessed in the light of this protection regime.

In application of section 22 of the Dutch Nature Conservation Act, the hamster is a protected species in the Netherlands since 1973. Consequently the species may not be captured, killed, or needlessly disturbed nor its burrows destroyed. However, where there is no other satisfactory solution to land use plans, which may threaten the species or its habitats, the Act allows for exemption.

The Ministry of Agriculture has prepared a “hamster conservation plan” for 2000-2004. This plan aims to conserve the species in their natural habitat by providing a protection regime for the remaining hamster populations still found in central and southern Limburg. To that end a strictly supervised breeding and reintroduction programme has been set up, a 500 ha area of coherent hamster core habitat will be realised, comprising eleven core areas each of which will be able to support a hamster population that is likely to survive, and a start will be made with the creation of sustainable arable landscapes in central and southern Limburg, where hamsters have a good chance of survival. The plan has 42 action points that will be realised in the course of 2000-2004.

A captive rearing and breeding programme is also in progress, and contact has been made on possible co-operation with Germany and Belgium.

II. Application of the Convention

Article 4 of the Bern Convention provides that:

1. *Each Contracting Party shall take appropriate and necessary legislative and administrative measures to ensure the conservation of the habitats of the wild flora and fauna species, especially those specified in the Appendices I and II, and the conservation of endangered natural habitats.*
2. *The Contracting Parties in their planning and development policies shall have regard to the conservation requirements of the areas protected under the preceding paragraph, so as to avoid or minimise as far as possible any deterioration of such areas.*

Article 6 of the Bern Convention provides that :

Each Contracting Party shall take appropriate and necessary legislative and administrative measures to ensure the special protection of the wild fauna species specified in Appendix II. The following will in particular be prohibited for these species:

- a. *all forms of deliberate capture and keeping and deliberate killing;*
- b. *the deliberate damage to or destruction of breeding or resting sites;*
- c. *the deliberate disturbance of wild fauna, particularly during the period of breeding, rearing and hibernation, insofar as disturbance would be significant in relation to the objectives of this Convention;*
- d. *the deliberate destruction or taking of eggs from the wild or keeping these eggs even if empty;*
- e. *the possession of and internal trade in these animals, alive or dead, including stuffed animals and any readily recognisable part or derivative thereof, where this would contribute to the effectiveness of the provisions of this article.*

Article 11 of the Bern Convention provides that:

1. *In carrying out the provisions of this Convention, the Contracting Parties undertake:*
 - a. *to co-operate whenever appropriate and in particular where this would enhance the effectiveness of measures taken under other articles of this Convention;*
 - b. *to encourage and co-ordinate research related to the purposes of this Convention.*
2. *Each Contracting Party undertakes:*
 - a. *to encourage the reintroduction of native species of wild flora and fauna when this would contribute to the conservation of an endangered species, provided that a study is first made in the light of the experiences of other Contracting Parties to establish that such reintroduction would be effective and acceptable; [...].*

III. Standing Committee's decision

At its 19th meeting, in December 1999, the Standing Committee decided to open a file to follow up this case and adopted Recommendation No. 79 on protection of the common hamster (*Cricetus Cricetus*) in Europe (Appendix 1).

IV. Follow-up to the implementation of Recommendation No. 79

Information from the Badger to Bear Foundation

According to the information, provided by the Badger to Bear Foundation, in their letter dated 17 April 2000, it was only under great pressure of the NGOs that the Dutch government grasped its last opportunity to preserve the field hamster by setting up a breeding programme and drafting a species protection plan. The first results of a DNA-study indicate that the genetic variation between the last remaining Dutch hamsters (that had been captured for the breeding programme) is extremely small. Moreover the hamsters show signs of possible inbreeding.

Incidentally the survival of the hamster is still not safeguarded. In fact it already appears that the species protection plan as published in October 1999 is not being implemented in accordance with agreements and time schedule.

Information from the Dutch Government

This case file was discussed at the Bern Convention Bureau meeting on 27 April 2000. The Chairman, Mr Boere, speaking on behalf of the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature Management and Fisheries of the Netherlands, confirmed that the case has received a lot of attention from the Dutch government. A government report on this case file will be submitted to the Standing Committee.



Appendix 1

Convention on the Conservation
of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats

Standing Committee

Recommendation No. 79 of the Standing Committee (adopted on 3 December 1999) on protection of the common hamster (*Cricetus cricetus*) in Europe

The Standing Committee of the Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats, acting under Article 14 of the convention;

Having regard to the aims of the convention, which are to conserve wild flora and fauna and their natural habitats;

Considering the common hamster (*Cricetus cricetus*) to be a fundamental part of the European natural heritage because of its symbolic, scientific, environmental, cultural, recreational, aesthetic and intrinsic value;

Noting out that the common hamster (*Cricetus cricetus*) is one of the strictly protected species of fauna listed in Appendix II to the convention;

Noting that Article 3, paragraph 1, of the convention requires each Contracting Party to take steps to promote national policies for the conservation of wild flora, wild fauna and natural habitats, with particular attention to endangered and vulnerable species;

Noting that all forms of deliberate capture, keeping and deliberate killing of the species listed in Appendix II are contrary to Article 6 of the convention, except if the conditions of Article 9 are fulfilled;

Reaffirming that the species protected under Appendix II require *in situ* protection where they are naturally present and that the transfer of individuals to other habitats in order to meet the requirements of Article 11, paragraph 2.a., of the convention must be carried out with due regard for the obligations stemming from Articles 4 and 6 of the convention.

Noting that the common hamster is seriously endangered throughout western Europe, that it has disappeared from the territory of many Contracting Parties and that an unprecedented decline in its population has been noted in a number of central European countries;

Noting that the Netherlands invited Germany and Belgium to work on the breeding programme of the possible subspecies of the west European common hamster, in co-operation with France.

Concluding that the loss of habitat, the fragmentation of its range and the loss of suitable areas in agricultural zones are the main reasons for the extinction of this species in western Europe; and of the great fall in its numbers in central Europe;

Referring to Recommendation No. R (85) 15 of the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers on the reintroduction of wildlife species;

Reminding the Recommendation No. 68 (adopted on 4 December 1998) on protection of the common hamster (*Cricetus cricetus*) in Alsace (France);

Referring to Recommendation No. R (94) 6 of the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers for sustainable development and use of the countryside with a particular focus on the safeguarding of wildlife and landscapes;

Having regard to Article 4 of the convention, Standing Committee Resolution No. 1 (1989) on the provisions relating to the conservation of habitats and Recommendation No. 16 (1989) on areas of special conservation interest;

Recalling Standing Committee Recommendation No. 58 (1997) on the reintroduction of organisms belonging to wild species and on restocking and reinforcing populations of such organisms in the environment;

Referring to the report on the conservation status of *Cricetus cricetus*, *Cricetulus migratorius*, *Mesocricetus newtoni* and other hamster species in Europe (document T-PVS (99) 38);

Noting that the French and Dutch governments have set up hamster conservation plan 2000-2004 — observing that the Dutch subpopulation occurs inbetween the neighbouring subpopulations which means that even temporary extinction in the Netherlands leads to an extra risk for the survival of the subpopulation of neighbouring countries.

Aware of the need to take urgent measures to prevent the extinction of this species;

Recommends that the Contracting Parties to the Bern Convention with small or declining common hamster (*Cricetus cricetus*) population and especially Belgium, France, Germany and the Netherlands:

- a. continue their efforts to improve the conservation status of the hamster;
- b. continue their efforts to implement the existing action plans and adapt them if necessary to physical planning – and other new threats which could occur;
- c. detail during the next five years the results of the efforts made for these aims in an annual report to the Convention;
- d. facilitate the exchange of information on measures for the recovering of the hamster populations in organising at least one meeting of the concerning Parties and the organisation concerned;
- e. improve implementation of agri-environmental measures for this species within the common agricultural policy;
- f. recommend the Netherlands in particular, to ensure an even distribution of interconnected hamster reserves across the whole of the former hamster area of distribution and keep the reserves and connecting corridors in sustainable order.