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CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE
AND NATURAL HABITATS

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CONCLUSIONS OF THE INTERNATIONAL HAMSTER WORKGROUP

18th Meeting

(Strasbourg, France, 14-17 October 2011)

Document
prepared by
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ORGANISATION

The 18th meeting of the International Hamster workgroup in Strasbourg from October 14-17 2011, was organised by the Institut des Neurosciences Cellulaires et Intégratives (INCI), Neurobiologie des Rythmes, CNRS – UPR - 3212, Université de Strasbourg, France in cooperation with:

- Association Sauvegarde Faune Sauvage
- Office National de la Chasse et de la Faune Sauvage
- IPHC DEPE CNRS Université de Strasbourg
- Centre de Réintroduction des Cigognes et des Loutres
- Groupe d'Etude et de Protection des Mammifères d'Alsace

and with the support of:

- RÉGION ALSACE
- COMMUNAUTÉ URBAINE DE STRASBOURG
- DIRECTION RÉGIONALE DE L'ENVIRONNEMENT DE L'AMÉNAGEMENT ET DU LOGEMENT ALSACE (DREAL)
- CENTRE NATIONAL DE RECHERCHE SCIENTIFIQUE (CNRS)
- UNIVERSITÉ DE STRASBOURG (UDS)
- IFR DE NEUROSCIENCES DE STRASBOURG
- INSTITUT DE NEUROCHIMIE CELLULAIRE ET INTÉGRATIF (INCI)
- INSTITUT PLURIDISCIPLINAIRE HUBERT CURIEN STRASBOURG (IPHC)
- OFFICE NATIONAL DE LA CHASSE ET DE LA FAUNE SAUVAGE (ONCFS)
- CENTRE DE RÉINTRODUCTION DES CIGOGNES ET DES LOUTRES
- ASSOCIATION SAUVEGARDE FAUNE SAUVAGE
- GROUPE D'ETUDE ET DE PROTECTION DES MAMMIFÈRES D'ALSACE (GEPMA)

89 Persons from 9 Countries registered for the meeting and exchanged latest research and monitoring results as well as latest advances in conservation measures.

The meeting was organised in 8 sessions accompanied by a poster session with free subjects.

Session 1: Physiology and behaviour

Session 2: Ontogeny

Session 3: Methods

Session 4: Habitat

Session 5: Monitoring and Population Dynamics

Session 6: Evolution

Session 7: Ecology and Behavior

Session 8: Conservation and Management

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The Standing Committee is invited to take note of the conclusions of the congress.

Monitoring

Monitoring is a one of the key aspect of the conservation policy for the species. Newest data show weak populations in Western Europe and dramatic declines in Eastern Europe as Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Byelorussia and the Ukraine. In the latter the European hamster is now on the red list of the country. This is especially dramatic in the view of newest phylogeographic studies, which showed that the Ukraine was, regardless of warm ages or ice ages, always the core area of hamster distribution. This and the dramatic decline in other Eastern European countries strongly indicate that the decline in hamster population is not a regional but a global problem.

These findings support that we still don't know the reason for extinction in the European hamster.

Specific recommendations:

- To monitor closely in regular intervals the population sizes and the geographical distribution through appropriate mapping systems in the whole distribution area.
- To support an international data base for monitoring data and the biology of the hamster
- To encourage all countries within the hamster distribution area which contract to the Bern Convention to participate at a regular monitoring process.
- To offer more financial support for monitoring, since a lot of the work is done by volunteers, though the States should be in charge of it
- To urgently support longterm fundamental research on the European hamster to find the reason for extinction.

Research:

Conservation measures can only be effective when the reason for extinction of the European hamster is known. However, the reasons are complex and by far not understood yet. The classical strategy of animal protection, i.e. the reduction of the (anthropogenic caused) mortality, is not sufficiently fruitful for the European hamster. Indeed a slow-down of the decline could be achieved with such measures, however, it could not be stopped. Measures were for example the interdiction of hunting and pesticides or the installation of small fields and a late and/or incomplete harvest to increase the period of food availability and cover. Even in such hamsterfriendly managed fields the populations are declining except they are stabilised by reintroduction.

Since a dramatic decline became recently evident also in Eastern countries it is more and more unlikely that "the modern agriculture" in general -as it is claimed unfortunately by politics and the media- is the reason for extinction. In spite of European agricultural policies we have still a huge diversity in historically grown agricultural structures in the 16 countries in which we know that the population sizes are strongly declining. Hamster populations are declining in areas and countries with small fields as well as in ones with big monocultures; they are declining in areas with high and low tech management. In contrast, sometimes they appear in towns and are doing quite well there.

To find out what benefits the hamster and what the cause of its extinction is, fundamental research in controlled and wild conditions should become a main column in hamster protection. However, this kind of research is not "main-stream" and of very low priority in research policies. It is extremely difficult to get scientific funding for this kind of research at a time when zoological institutes are closed all over Europe. Moreover in the guidelines of nature conservation funds, which are adequate as well to finance research for species protection, research is strictly forbidden, as in the EU Life+ program. However, research is the only way to ensure the survival of the hamster, since nearly all obvious potential reasons for extinction can be excluded.

These difficulties leads regularly to the loss of our most experienced hamster experts to other jobs or subjects, since there is no longterm perspective for researches on such a subject. To skill always new

student to replace experienced researchers costs valuable time which we don't have in the race against the hamsters' extinction.

Specific recommendations:

- To financially support fundamental research on the European hamster to find the reason for extinction.
- To offer longterm perspectives for researchers, that they can continue with hamster research
- To support international networking
- To finance regular scientific meetings
- To support international comparative research and cooperation

Conservation measures and agriculture

On the political level: While it is trivial and well known that habitat degradation and loss is threatening for the European hamster on the local scale, there is no measurable effort on the political level to stop the use of "hamsterland" for construction work. Here it should be pointed out that the European hamster settles always in the best soils. These best soils are also of highest importance for the human food production and should for that reason be protected with highest priority from urbanisation or infrastructural projects anyway. The European hamster can be used as marker for these soils.

Since we still don't know the complex reasons for extinction, the third column of protection should be the continuation and expansion of "time winning" measures as mortality reducing measures, hamsterfriendly field management and breeding and reintroduction programs. It is certain that the latter can stabilize wild populations and maybe even increase them on the short scale as long as captive bred hamsters are added. However, it is unlikely that this alone will lead to a sustainability of the populations, since the reintroduced hamsters and their offspring suffer the same factors which led the wild hamster in huge parts of Europe to the brink of extinction. However, without knowing the reason(s) for extinction these measures are at the moment of highest importance since they can stabilize the remaining populations long enough to find the reason(s) of extinction.

In hamster protection farmers are among the main actors. However, they are often discouraged by the media due to the regular general statement that their land management is the reason for extinction of the hamster. While it is undisputed that certain aspects of modern agriculture are more dangerous for the hamster than in traditional hamster management, other aspects are beneficial, as the use of fertilisers, which increase plant growth and thus food and cover for the hamster. In addition, the progress in hamster protection is slow because the hamster is a prey species. In combination with the bad press for the farmers it is difficult to keep them motivated to continue with hamsterfriendly management in spite of the financial incentive. .

Specific recommendations:

- To classify the agricultural areas with the best quality soils, as for example loess soil, as valuable areas and put them under legal protection for the benefit of the European hamster and our own benefit.
- To promote an active conservation of the habitats by minimizing land use in these areas and through agreements with the farmers for a sustainable use of appropriate farmland, permitting hamster populations use its natural habitat.
- To avoid land use also in areas which are important for the connections of habitats.
- To promote an agricultural policy on the European level, which supports more diversity in the crop production.
- To support hamsterfriendly field management and reintroduction programs to gain time
- To support research on whether and which agricultural practices are really dangerous for the hamster to stop the unjustified accusations of the farmers and to refine protection strategies.

- To avoid general accusations against the farmers in all press communications.

General conclusions:

Hamster protection should be based on 3 columns: Regular Monitoring to be updated about current population dynamics, research to find the reason for extinction and time gaining protection measures including better habitat protection. Only when these 3 columns are run in parallel we have a chance to protect the hamster. While Monitoring and Conservation measures are already on a good way, research has to be profoundly strengthened.

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