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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 SITES

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

Document established by
The Dutch Government

Report by the Kingdom of the Netherlands

Introduction

At its 19th meeting (29 November - 3 December 1999) the Standing Committee of the Bern Convention decided to open a file on the conservation of the hamster in the Netherlands.

The Standing Committee has also adopted Recommendation No. 79 which advises the Netherlands and other countries where the hamster population is under threat to continue their efforts to improve the conservation status of the hamster and implement the existing action plans.

In this report the Dutch government informs the Standing Committee about the progress made.

Status of the hamster in the Netherlands

The plight of the hamster in the Netherlands is such that many people believe, not without justification, that before long the hamster in the Netherlands is extinct.

In large parts of nearby Germany and Belgium the situation is not much different and in the rest of Europe, too, hamster populations find themselves in a critical condition.

The main causes for the decline in numbers are the loss and fragmentation of habitats (cereal fields are being turned into grassland and maize fields and many arable fields must make way for housing and infrastructure) and the general deterioration of the arable landscape.

This situation, which is a cause for great concern, is corroborated by an inventory carried out at the joint request of the Ministry of Agriculture and Limburg provincial council in August and September 1999. The inventory covered an area of over 1300 ha of cereal fields in southern and central Limburg where hamsters were still likely to be found. The inventory was carried out by an independent organisation and the verified results were laid down in a report, published in December 1999.

23 hamster burrows were found in 3 of the 11 core habitats: 13 in Heer, 9 in Sibbe en 1 in Ubachsberg south. During the summer of 1999, or during the period the inventory took place, these burrows were inhabited but exact numbers cannot be given. Not much can be said therefore about the overall number of hamsters in southern Limburg.

A second inventory was carried out at the joint request of the Ministry of Agriculture and Limburg provincial council and was completed by September 2000.

Policy on the protection of the hamster

- 1973

The provisions of the Bern Convention and the EU Habitats Directive have been implemented in Dutch law under the Nature Conservation Act.

Under section 22 of this Act the hamster is designated as a protected species in the Netherlands and has been so since 1973.

Consequently hamsters may not be captured or killed, nor must the animals be needlessly disturbed or their burrows destroyed. The Act also provides for derogation to these prohibitions (*Besluit ontheffingen en vrijstellingen Natuurbeschermingswet* (Bulletin of Acts, Orders and Decrees of the Kingdom of the Netherlands 1994, 486) provided there is no satisfactory alternative and the derogation is not detrimental to the maintenance of the populations of the species at a favourable conservation status in their natural range.

Dutch nature policy is laid down in the 1990 Nature Policy Plan which incorporates the policy for Dutch nature areas known as the National Ecological Network.

The protection regime that governs the nature and woodland areas that make up the National Ecological Network does not provide sufficient protection for all species in the wild. For some species to survive the quality of the rural areas as a whole needs to be improved.

- 1994

In 1994 Limburg's *Natuurhistorisch Genootschap*, Limburg provincial council and the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature Management and Fisheries launched the Hamster Protection Plan. An inventory of hamster populations was made and hamster management plans and voluntary agreements with farmers were entered into to protect the species. Nature conservation organisations have also actively promoted hamster conservation. The Netherlands Society for Nature and Environment launched a hamster conservation campaign and carried out further research into the distribution of the hamster. The Limburg Water Company has put a hamster-friendly management regime in place.

- 1996

The Ministry of Agriculture, Nature Management and Fisheries in consultation with other species protection organisations involved drafted a species policy action plan (*Plan van Aanpak Soortenbeleid*) in 1996 for some thirty species. Under this policy special protection plans can be drawn up. These plans allow for the swift introduction of specific protection measures. Under the given circumstances a hamster protection plan was urgently needed. The species policy action plan had been running for some years when on the basis of the experience gained a multi-annual programme for a species-specific policy was drawn up.

- 1999

In September 1999 the Hamster Protection Plan 2000 - 2004 was adopted by the State Secretary for Agriculture, Nature Management and Fisheries. It was presented to the public on 14 June 2000 in Amsterdam.

In its 1999 nature policy document *Nota natuur en landschapsbeheer 2000-2010* Limburg provincial council also places great emphasis on the protection of endangered species. The hamster was made a priority species, which meant that attention and resources would be focused primarily on the conservation of the hamster and its habitat in Limburg.

- 2000

On 13 July 2000 Parliament adopted *Natuur voor Mensen, Mensen voor Natuur; nota natuur; bos en landschap in de 21e eeuw* (Nature for People, People for Nature, policy document on nature, forest and landscape in the 21st century). This policy document of the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature Management and Fisheries outlines the new nature policy for the coming decade with a view to 2020. Although it is a strategic document it also contains a programme of goals and measures. One of the goals is that before 2020 the conditions must be in place for the long-term survival of the species and populations that were found in the wild in the Netherlands in 1982 (the year the Netherlands ratified the Bern Convention).

The hamster protection plan 2000-2004

At the annual meeting of the Standing Committee of the Bern Convention (29 November - 3 December 1999) the Netherlands announced the adoption of the Hamster Protection Plan 2000-2004. The hamster plan's objective is to safeguard the hamster for the Dutch fauna. To this end

1. a coherent hamster core habitat is created in which a viable hamster population should be able to survive;
2. a contribution is made to help hamster conservation groups to create sustainable arable landscapes in central and southern Limburg in which hamsters can survive.
3. what is left of the hamster populations in the southern and central part of the province of Limburg is protected and a hamster breeding programme is in place to enable the re-introduction of the species.

The objective is worked out into **forty-two actions** to be realised during the 2000-2004 planning period.

The main actions are given below:

1. A total of 500 ha consisting of 11 core areas will be devoted to the rehabilitation of the hamster: 150 ha will be designated as areas of special conservation and the other 350 ha will come under management contracts. To achieve this: management contracts will be agreed with farmers in the 350 ha core area 150 ha land will be bought to be designated as areas of special conservation;
2. An emergency scenario is in place for the protection of the remaining populations and a hamster breeding programme is in place;
3. Nature policy and spatial planning are being harmonised;

4. Measures taken for land outside core habitats: Hamster tolerance packages are agreed with farmers and management packages are agreed with other land owners (for field margins and along roads);
5. Research: genetic research, ecological, research on hamster habitats and effects of hamster-friendly management. More research is needed as too little is known about the hamster itself, its habits and its movements in the landscape.

An amount of EUR 1.04 mln. (NLG 2.3 mln) has been set aside for the implementation of the Hamster Protection Plan for the period 2000-2004.

This amount does not include the resources earmarked for land acquisition (150 ha) and management contracts (350 ha) on land that is part of the National Ecological Network which will come down to approximately EUR 5.7 mln (NLG 12.5 mln).

Parties involved in the implementation of the Hamster Protection Plan include Limburg provincial council, research institutes, nature conservation organisations, farmers' organisations and other land owning bodies such as the Limburg Water Company.

All parties are represented in the hamster consultation group which is now formalised into Hamster Overleg Limburg. The group chaired by the Ministry's Regional Department South meets regularly to discuss hamster conservation matters.

Results of the hamster protection plan 2000-2004 to date

Since the adoption of the Hamster Protection Plan in September 1999 the following actions have been carried out:

- Measures in hamster core habitats

The boundaries of the 500 ha of land that make up the 11 hamster core habitats have been established. This year hamster management packages have been agreed on 66 ha of land. No progress has been made in acquiring land for areas of special conservation in spite of efforts to that effect.

Hamster management packages have been evaluated on the basis of experiences so far. Although it is not easy to integrate such packages in regular farm management they do remain the best possible option for hamster-friendly management. After some more years of experience the management package will be reviewed again.

Limburg provincial council and *Limburgse Land- en Tuinbouwbond (LLTB)* have launched a trial on a 30 ha area to find out whether alternative forms of hamster management will also benefit the hamster.

- Emergency scenario and the hamster breeding programme

When in 1999 hamster experts indicated that a critical limit had been reached or might even have been crossed the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature Management and Fisheries authorised the capture of hamsters to start a breeding programme to prevent the hamster's extinction and the loss of genetic material.

In May 1999 the State Secretary for Agriculture granted an exemption for the capture of a number of hamsters from the wild in the surroundings of Heer (L) to start a breeding programme supervised by Blijdorp Zoo and supported by a committee of experts.

Following the recommendations of the committee of experts 14 animals were used for the breeding programme. After having been taken from the wild, the animals were examined, sexed and chipped and placed at two locations. Veterinary examinations have shown that most of the animals were related, which, given the scarcity of numbers still found, is not surprising.

This led to the recommendation from IUCN to involve animals from abroad (NordRhein-Westfalen, Flanders) in the breeding programme and to do this at short notice, preferably before hibernation.

The State Secretary for Agriculture of the Netherlands approached the relevant ministers abroad with the request to co-operate in the hamster conservation efforts and provide some of their hamsters for the Dutch breeding programme. All three gave their objections in writing.

On the basis of recommendations from the Supreme Court for Nature Conservation of Flanders the Flemish Minister Dua was reluctant to make hamsters available given the genetic risk and possible damage to the Flemish hamster population. Without further research there could as yet be no co-operation in this area.

State Secretary Griese of Nordrhein-Westfalen also said it was impossible to make hamsters available for the Dutch breeding programme

The Walloon Minister Happart said that hamsters were no longer found in the Walloon province of Belgium but co-operation in the area of information exchange was a good idea.

Both in Flanders and in Nordrhein-Westfalen the situation for the hamster is critical and conservation measures are being worked out.

In the Netherlands **34 young hamsters** (17 male and 17 female) were born in captivity over recent months. This number will probably rise over the weeks to come. The breeding programme has thus proved successful. Next month the support committee will report to the Ministry and give further recommendations.

The animals are to be re-introduced in their natural habitat in southern Limburg. This will probably be done in the spring of 2001. Efforts are now being made to prepare the ground. The location where the animals are being re-introduced must have the best possible conditions to guarantee the long-term survival of hamster populations. The hamster core habitats are the obvious choice. All activities in this respect are to be carried out in accordance with the IUCN-guidelines for reintroduction.

The foregoing begs the question what the implications are for the conservation of the hamster core habitats when all the animals currently found in the province of Limburg are captured. The Hamster Protection Plan after all has a dual approach: it also includes an emergency scenario to protect remaining hamster populations. All efforts must now be

focused on creating the best possible conditions for the hamsters from the breeding programme to ensure their survival.

- *Harmonisation of nature policy and spatial planning*

When important land use changes in rural areas and around cities are proposed nature interests, such as the protection of the hamster and its habitat, are now being considered more strongly both by the authorities that must evaluate the planning decisions and by the initiators of such land use plans. This is partly the result of legal dossiers which have been opened in the context of national and international regulations.

Limburg provincial council has made such considerations obligatory for spatial planning decisions.

- *Measures for land outside the core areas*

The measures proposed for the land outside the core areas are being worked out further and where possible integrated in the actions currently being implemented.

- *Research*

On 30 March an international workshop was organised in Maastricht (L) where participants had the opportunity to exchange experience and knowledge in the area of hamster protection. All participants agreed that the workshop was a very valuable experience and further contacts were established for the exchange of information at the international level.

In co-operation with Germany and Belgium the research group Alterra started research into the genetic differences between the various hamster populations. They also want to find out in what other areas of research they can co-operate more closely.

Conclusion

Since 1994 specific activities have been carried out to protect the hamster and its natural habitat. The Hamster Protection Plan continues and intensifies these hamster protection activities.

With the implementation of the Hamster Protection Plan the Netherlands fully meets the requirements laid down in Recommendation No. 79 (1999) of the Bern Convention.