



Strasbourg, 13th October 2023

T-PVS(2023)27

CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE
AND NATURAL HABITATS

Standing Committee

43rd meeting

Strasbourg, 27 November – 1 December 2023

**11th meeting of the Group of Experts
on the Conservation of Amphibians and Reptiles**

Tuesday 26 September 2023

(Strasbourg / hybrid)

- Meeting Report -

*Document prepared by
the Secretariat of the Bern Convention*

The Standing Committee is invited to:

- take note of the report of the 11th meeting of the Group of Experts on the Conservation of Amphibians and Reptiles which took place on the 26th September 2023;
- take note of the information provided by Parties on national activities and initiatives on the conservation of amphibians and reptiles;
- take note of the information provided by Parties on national measures to control the spread of *Batrachochytrium salamandrivorans* chytrid fungus (Bsal) and the need to strengthen international pressure against Bsal as well as communication, and that all Parties to the Bern Convention should be made aware of the EU Animal Health Law and how it is implemented in practice;
- take note of the proposals by the Group to reinforce its collaboration with the Group of Experts on invasive alien species for a better fight against alien pathogens and pathogens spread by IAS and e-commerce and IAS.

1. Opening of the meeting by the Chair

The Chair, Ms Annemarieke Spitzen-van der Sluijs (The Netherlands), opened the meeting, welcomed the participants and wished the Group of Experts a fruitful meeting. The Chair reminded the Group that she was not in a position to continue chairing the Group due to recent changes in her professional life and anticipated that elections would be held under agenda point 8.

2. Adoption of the agenda

The meeting agenda was adopted with no amendments.

3. Reports by parties on national activities and initiatives on the conservation of amphibians and reptiles

The Group of Experts was informed of activities and initiatives implemented on herpetofauna conservation in six Contracting Parties to the Bern Convention.

The representative of **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, Mr Dejan Radosevic, gave an overview of national efforts for monitoring and conserving herpetofauna species, in particular through a Decree on protected species. He highlighted the 8 criteria for selecting the species to be protected and the difficulties to implement the protection in practice. The slides of Mr Radosevic's presentation are accessible at this [link](#).

The Secretary of the Bern Convention, Mr Mikaël Poutiers, read the notes sent by the representative of **France**, Ms Cathy Ferlaux in her absence. It was stressed that, as for regulatory protection, France was revising, with IUCN's assistance, the list of protected species in order to develop new protection decrees. Several action plans for reptile and amphibian species have been launched while others were being prepared. The written presentation of Ms Ferlaux is accessible at this [link](#).

The representative of **Hungary**, Ms Eva Fejes, shared an example of good practice on the conservation of European Pond Turtle in Ipoly valley whereby the protection of nests combined with the selective eradication of the red fox and badger has made it possible to preserve around 500 turtle nests in 10 years, thus ensuring the survival of around 5000 young animals while the nests were previously almost completely predated. The written presentation of Ms Fejes is accessible at this [link](#). In addition, Mr Bálint Halpern (in his capacity of Project manager in *Magyar Madártani és Természetvédelmi Egyesület* (MME) – Birdlife Hungary) presented the Hungarian meadow viper program which his organisation implemented, and which permitted reintroduction of vipers in their habitat. He also presented the amphibian and reptile mapping program in Hungary. The slides of Mr Halpern's presentation are accessible respectively at this [link](#) and [here](#).

Mr Ronald Zollinger, on behalf of **the Netherlands**, presented the most recent balance of distribution trends and trends in populations size of the Dutch Amphibian and Reptile species. He also informed the Group of Experts on recent activities and actions, more particularly that a new Red List on Amphibians and Reptiles was nearly ready to be published, which demonstrates that three species (European treefrog, Common spadefoot, and Yellow-bellied toad) improved in status due to captive breeding and reintroduction programs but that the common toad has come into a long-term decline. He added that habitat improvement for amphibians, especially pond digging and management, gets a lot of attention. The slides of Mr Zollinger's presentation are accessible at this [link](#).

The representative of **Switzerland**, Mr Benedikt Schmidt, informed the participants that the new Red Lists for amphibians and reptiles in Switzerland was expected to be published at the end of 2023. He also presented the results of a study on amphibians' recovery which demonstrated very good signs

of recovery even if the levels remained low. The slides of Mr Schmidt's presentation are accessible at this [link](#).

The representative of the **United Kingdom**, Ms Sarah Scott, presented first the activities that can apply across Great Britain or the United Kingdom as a whole highlighting in particular that a revision of the herpetofauna chapter in the guidelines for designating Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) was published in 2022 and that a project has been initiated to develop criteria and a preliminary list of Important Herpetofauna Areas for amphibians and reptiles. She then detailed amphibian and reptile conservation initiatives across the four countries (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) which have evolved to cater for the different policy and legislative requirements and species in each country. The slides of Ms Scott's presentation are accessible at this [link](#) and her written presentation [here](#).

Finally, Mr Bálint Halpern (Societas Europaea Herpetologica (SEH) - European Herpetological Society) informed the meeting participants on the role of his organisation in and activities related to herpetofauna conservation in Europe. The slides of Mr Halpern's presentation are accessible at this [link](#).

4. Green toad terrestrial habitat, the EU green new deal and renewable energies

Mr Vincent Clément, Research fellow in herpetology, *France Nature Environnement*, presented the results of a study carried out on two slag heaps in Eastern France as an example of spatial ecology and terrestrial habitat selection of the Green toad (*Bufo viridis*). As Europe is heading toward new sources of renewable energy, in Eastern France solar farms are under study on most of the slag heaps. The first aim of this study was to target conservation needs in the mitigation hierarchy as the green toad is to be strictly protected under Appendix II of the Bern Convention. The slides of Mr Clément's presentation are accessible at this [link](#).

5. Prevention and control of the *Batrachochytrium salamandrivorans* chytrid fungus (Bsal)

5.1. Impact and management of the *Batrachochytrium salamandrivorans* chytrid fungus

Mr Frank Pasmans, Professor at Ghent University, presented an update of his presentation made during the previous meeting of the Group of Experts. He informed the Group that the main outbreak of Bsal occurred in Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and Northern Spain, which could lead to the local extinction of the salamanders in these areas. Although difficult because of their impact on the ecosystem, mitigation measures can be taken. He highlighted that rapid detection of Bsal cases and rapid response were essential. He called for 1) proper implementation and enforcement of the Animal Health Law, which includes the requirement of a health certificate upon importation of urodeles; 2) structural funding, not only project funding, for disease control, at least to cover monitoring costs and actions inscribed in action plans and 3) the development of sustainable disease mitigation measures. The slides of Mr Pasmans' presentation are accessible at this [link](#).

5.2. Reports by parties on national measures to control the spread of *Batrachochytrium salamandrivorans* chytrid fungus (Bsal)

The Group of Experts was informed of measures to control the spread of *Batrachochytrium salamandrivorans* chytrid fungus (Bsal) in six Contracting Parties to the Bern Convention.

The representative of the **Czech Republic**, Mr Vojtech Baláž, informed the Group of experts that there were no cases of Bsal in his country. Bsal testing and surveillance were available. Diagnostics were possible and the aim was to increase the number of laboratories able to perform them. He however pointed out that legislation was difficult to follow by small scale breeders and importers notably since the treatment of salamanders according to published protocols was not possible due to limited availability and the cost of recommended medication. The slides of Mr Baláž's presentation are accessible at this [link](#).

The Secretary of the Bern Convention, Mr Mikaël Poutiers, read the notes sent by the representative of **France**, Ms Cathy Ferlaux in her absence. It was specified that health surveillance should be strengthened because there was very little data available on this disease. It was added that the French Biodiversity Office (OFB) was responsible for assessing the risk of Bsal through a network of specialists and the coordination of stakeholders with a view to adopting and then implementing biosecurity measures. The written presentation of Ms Ferlaux is accessible at this [link](#).

The representative of **Germany**, Mr Timm Reinhardt, informed the Group of Experts that Bsal was present in at least 3 states, even though the mortality is not necessarily high. He added that all states were aware of the necessity to control the spread of Bsal and some were in the process to develop action plans to fight it. The written presentation of Mr Reinhardt is accessible at this [link](#).

The representative of **Hungary**, Ms Eva Fejes, reported on actions and initiatives at national level to control the spread of Bsal. She detailed an example of investigation of infectious diseases threatening amphibians in the Bükk National Park as a good practice. The written presentation of Ms Fejes is accessible at this [link](#).

The Chair of the Group, representing **The Netherlands**, Ms Annemarieke Spitzen-van der Sluijs, presented the early warning system put in place (which runs until early 2025) to rapidly detect outbreaks, isolate them, and restrict the distribution of Bsal. She also explained that eDNA surveillance is a good tool to detect Bsal distribution and informed the Group of Experts on a multiple year research project that monitors a Bsal-infected newt meta-population and aims to define concrete mitigation measures and setting up policy advice. The written presentation of Ms Spitzen-van der Sluijs is accessible at this [link](#).

The representative of the **United Kingdom**, Ms Sarah Scott, informed the Group of Experts that following the establishment of the Wildlife Disease Policy Coalition in August 2021 to enable a coordinated approach to policy ownership of wildlife disease, a plan for England was being developed with support structures to respond to Bsal. This benefited from the experiences gained in the management of two credible reports of suspected Bsal which appeared to be negative after testing. The written presentation of Ms Scott is accessible at this [link](#).

The Chair concluded the item by emphasizing the importance of an increased fight against Bsal and the essential role played by the Bern Convention system in this regard. She recalled that the Group of Experts considered that international pressure against Bsal must be strengthened, as well as communication, and that all Parties to the Bern Convention should be made aware of the EU Animal Health Law and how it is implemented in practice.

6. Important herpetofauna areas: identifying hotspots and protection gaps

Mr Ronald Zollinger, Strategic advisor at Reptile, Amphibian and Fish Conservation the Netherlands (RAVON) and Chair of Reptile and Amphibian Conservation Europe (RACE), presented an interim report on the Important herpetofauna area (IHA) project to the Group of Experts (The report is accessible at this [link](#)). He highlighted that there is no recognised map of the most important areas for reptiles and amphibians in Europe while defining such IHAs is of great importance, in particular for directing conservation action, ensuring sufficient site safeguards, raising stakeholders' awareness of biodiversity and ascertaining whether sufficient conservation attention is being given to key biodiversity hot spots. The project started with an assessment of the information available using information from the Natura 2000 and Emerald network databases. It then defined a road map to move forward with identification of IHAs, using the Key Biodiversity Areas (KBA) approach to identify IHAs and other distribution data sources. The last step was to use other sources of information (including citizen science data) to speed-up attribution of species to sites. Finally, Mr Zollinger stressed that the process for identification of IHAs in Europe is not over and should be further developed. The slides of Mr Zollinger's presentation are accessible at this [link](#).

7. Collaboration with the Group of Experts on invasive alien species

7.1. Presentation of the relevant recommendations on alien pathogens and pathogens spread by IAS and e-commerce and IAS

Mr Riccardo Scalera, Expert on biodiversity and nature conservation, environmental policy and legislation, presented [Recommendation No. 215 \(2022\)](#) on alien pathogens and pathogens spread by Invasive Alien Species adopted by the Standing Committee of the Bern Convention at its 42nd meeting on 2 December 2022 and the [related report](#). Mr Scalera expressed a few ideas for possible follow-up such as the:

- Creation of a horizontal working group on wildlife pathogens under the umbrella of the Bern Convention, to identify and engage with relevant stakeholders, networks and organisations; connect research initiatives across countries and fields of expertise; analyse current policy and legislation gaps which prevent an effective management of the problem; formulate priority research topics;
- Circulation of a questionnaire to Contracting Parties and the chairs of the main working groups to ask for relevant information, and assess needs and expectancies in relation to future activities on wildlife pathogens and alien species;
- Organisation of one or more dedicated workshops (including a preparatory meeting of a selected group of experts to plan the details of the agenda and scope of such workshops);
- Development of an action plan for wildlife pathogens, including the identification and discussion of key management tool;
- Development of a communication plan for the dissemination of material in multiple languages.

The slides of Mr Scalera's presentation are accessible at this [link](#).

Mr Andrea Monaco, applied scientist, ISPRA, highlighted the increased risks of introduction and spread of pest and IAS through online shopping. He presented [Recommendation No. 210 \(2021\)](#) on e-commerce and Invasive Alien Species adopted by the Standing Committee on 3 December 2021, and the [related Guidance Document](#). Mr Monaco referred to the following five Guiding principles:

- Raise awareness on biological invasion risks associated with e-commerce, among all relevant subjects and institutions;
- Adopt and enforce national legislation regulating invasive alien species, and make the lists of regulated species easily accessible to all subjects (sellers, buyers, platforms, custom organisations, environmental protection agencies, etc.);
- Collaborate with the main platforms and actors of e-trade of plants and animals to prevent the e-commerce of invasive alien species;
- Ensure that sellers and buyers are provided with key information and warnings on the species they sell or buy, including on their potential invasiveness;
- Monitor e-commerce of invasive alien species at all scales.

The slides of Mr Monaco's presentation are accessible at this [link](#).

7.2. Proposals to the Standing Committee for a collaboration with the Group of Experts on invasive alien species

After a fruitful discussion, the Group of experts acknowledged that a reinforced collaboration with the Group of Experts on invasive alien species was essential for a better fight against alien pathogens and pathogens spread by IAS and e-commerce and IAS since all these issues were interlinked. It therefore agreed on the following approach:

- Contact the Chair of the Group of Experts on invasive alien species and inform him on the outcome of the current discussion;
- Put in place a small group to dig in the issue on the basis of the discussions held during the meeting and the proposals made by Riccardo Scalera and Andrea Monaco;

- Present the outcome of this 11th meeting of the Group of Experts on the Conservation of Amphibians and Reptiles to the 43rd meeting of the Standing Committee;
- Organise an online meeting of the small group referred to above, possibly in May 2024 to come up with proposals for action;
- Report to the Bureau of the Standing Committee in June 2024 for discussion and possible follow-up.

8. Next meeting of the Group of Experts

The Chair informed the Group of Experts that the next meeting will be held in late September / early October 2025 in Strasbourg, possibly with a field visit organised jointly by the Secretariat and Association BUFO.

9. Election of the Chair and Vice-Chair

The Group elected Ms Eliška Rolfová as the new Chair and re-elected Mr Schmidt as the Vice-Chair of the Group of Experts.

The Group thanked Ms Annemarieke Spitzen-van der Sluijs for her chairing and wished her the best in her new role.

10. Any other business

No other business was raised.

11. Closing of the meeting

The Chair thanked the members of the Group of Experts for the productive meeting, expressed her best wishes to the Group for its work in the coming years, and declared the meeting closed.

Appendix - List of Participants

Contracting Parties	
BELGIUM / BELGIQUE	<p>Mr Philippe GOFFART Attaché scientifique, Observatoire de la Faune, de la Flore et des Habitats (OFFH), Département de l'Etude du Milieu naturel et agricole (DEMna), Service Public de Wallonie (SPW) - DGO3 - Direction de la Nature et de l'Eau</p>
BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA / BOSNIE HERZEGOVINE	<p>Mr Dejan RADOSEVIC Head of the Department for Biodiversity, Institute for Protection of Cultural, Historical and Natural Heritage of the Republic of Srpska</p>
CROATIA / CROATIE	<p>Ms Maja PAVLINIĆ Department for Species, Habitats and Geodiversity Management Planning Institute for Environment and Nature Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development</p>
CZECH REPUBLIC / REPUBLIQUE TCHEQUE	<p>Mr Vojtech BALÁŽ Dep. of Ecology and Diseases of Zoo-animals, Game, Fish and Bees Faculty of Veterinary Hygiene and Ecology University of Veterinary Sciences Brno</p> <p>Ms Eliška ROLFOVÁ Unit of International Conventions Department of Species Protection and Implementation of International Commitments Ministry of the Environment</p>
GERMANY / ALLEMAGNE	<p>Mr Timm REINHARDT Scientific Officer Federal Agency for Nature Conservation (BfN) Department of Wildlife Conservation</p>
HUNGARY / HONGRIE	<p>Mr András SCHMIDT Head of Natura 2000 Unit Department for Nature Conservation</p> <p>Ms Éva FEJES Biodiversity expert</p>
NETHERLANDS / PAYS-BAS	<p>Ms Annemarieke SPITZEN-VAN DER SLUIJS (CHAIR) Senior project manager and researcher Reptile, Amphibian & Fish Conservation Netherlands, Reptile, Amphibian & Fish Conservation Netherlands (RAVON)</p> <p>Mr Ronald ZOLLINGER Strategic advisor, Chair Reptile Amphibian Conservation Europe</p>

POLAND / POLOGNE	Mr Tomasz ŁACHNIK General Directorate for Environmental Protection Department of Nature Conservation
SWIZERLAND/ SUISSE	Mr Benedikt SCHMIDT Info Fauna Karch & University of Zurich
UNITED KINGDOM/ ROYAUME-UNI	Ms Sarah SCOTT Senior International Biodiversity Adviser Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) Mr Finn EATON Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs Ms Olivia EUESDEN Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs
Observers	
Association BUFO, federated by France Nature Environnement	Mr Vincent CLEMENT Chargé d'étude
Infra Eco Network Europe (IENE)	Mr Lazaros GEOGIADIS Biologist - Environmental Consultant
Reptile & Amphibian Conservation Europe (RACE)	Dr Tony GENT Chief Executive Officer Amphibian and Reptile Conservation
Societas Europaea Herpetologica (SEH)	Mr Balint HALPERN Chair of the conservation committee
Terra Cypria- The Cyprus Conservation Foundation	Ms Kyriaki Michael Acting Executive Director
Invited Speakers	
Ghent University	Ms An MARTEL Mr Frank PASMANS Professors Faculty of Veterinary Medicine Department of Pathology, Bacteriology and Poultry Diseases
Istituto Superiore per la Protezione e la Ricerca Ambientale (ISPRA)	Mr Andrea MONACO Applied scientist
IUCN/SSC Invasive Species Specialist Group	Mr Riccardo SCALERA Independent consultant

Reptile, Amphibian & Fish Conservation Netherlands (RAVON) Reptile Amphibian Conservation Europe (RACE)	Mr Ronald ZOLLINGER Strategic advisor at RAVON; Chair at RACE.
Secretariat, Council of Europe	
	Mr Mikaël POUTIERS Secretary of the Bern Convention
	Mr Marc HORY Project Manager
	Mr Eoghan KELLY Project Officer
	Mr Michaël NGUYEN Administrative and Project Officer