Evaluation of the illegal use of poison and implementation of anti-poison actions in Bulgaria

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Introduction

In mid XX century the use of poisoned baits was widely and systematically used to control wild predators. In the beginning of 1990-ies Bulgaria ratified the Bern Convention and this practice was finally banned. Recently the use of poisoned baits in Bulgaria is forbidden according to two laws – Biodiversity Law and Hunting Law. However although randomly distributed spatially and temporally, the illegal use of poisoned baits is still practiced as a method for extirpation of wild predators, birds of prey, feral and homeless dogs, and any other unwanted animals (e.g. wild boar, horses etc.). The finding of poison use cases is a function of the search intensiveness.

Historical data on the use of poison in the nature

Data for poisoned wildlife exists yet from the very beginning of XX century, when **cyanide** or **arsenic** was used to kill any predators and birds of prey.

Red Data Book of Bulgaria 1985:
1901 Bearded vulture 1 individual found poisoned near Buhovo – Sofia Dsitrict was brought to National Natural History Museum.
9 February of 1903 Bearded vulture 1 individual found poisoned in Erulska Planina (West Bulgaria)
1958 Bearded vulture 2 individual found poisoned near Dobrinishte - Blagoevgrad District

In mid XX century **strychnine** was introduced and was widely and systematically used by forest officers, veterinary officers and hunters in a nationalized and centralized economy of the country. After 1962 the vultures were listed as protected species, but the main reason for their decline – the use of poison baits was not banned.

No specific survey on poisoned wildlife animals was done until 1990-ies when BSPB project members in Eastern Rodopes started to make toxicological analyses of dead vultures.

But the practice was intensively introduced in the wildlife conservation in Bulgaria since the year 2003 with the appointment of National working group on poisons coordinated by FWFF within the BVAP. The FWFF, Green Balkans, BSPB, BPPS, Balkani Wildlife Society and others work on their own projects and in co-ordination against poison baits use in natural environment.

Current situation in the country

The reasons for use of poison baits in natural environment in Bulgaria are related to elimination of:

1. Wild predators (wolf, bear, jackal, fox) when conflicting with livestock breeders and game keepers;
2. Feral and homeless dogs, that are unwanted in the area of the villages or towns;
3. Shepherd dogs unwanted by hunters because kill their dogs;
4. Hunting dogs as an action against the hunter owning the dog;
5. Aggressive dogs in the villages or the towns, no matter if they are homeless or not;
6. Feral and homeless cats are killed within the villages and the towns sometimes non-deliberately;
7. Wild boar to avoid crop fields or vegetable gardens damage;
8. Free ranging livestock (e.g. horses) to avoid crop fields or vegetable gardens damage,
9. Birds of prey that hunt on domestic doves.

Depending on the reasons shown above, there are several different group members of the society that use poison to kill wildlife, domestic animals or livestock: hunters, game keepers, livestock breeders, dove keepers, farmers, or just people that like to kill (often outsiders of the society).

The situation is very much dynamic. The poison incident may appear randomly in space and time. The most important areas are dose with permanent presence of wild predators (wolf, jackal, bear) especially in areas with extensive livestock breeding. It is more convenient to focus any action against poison to areas where certain conservation dependent species are present. Or nationally covering all target groups, or by target groups.

There is no restriction to season. Poison baits could be used any time of the year, but it seems they have higher impact over conservation dependent species in certain periods, which for the any species differ based on the foraging features.

Strychnine is no longer available, but any category I pesticide taken from the agriculture store is in use. Mostly carbamates and organophosphates. More often etilen glycol (antifreeze) is being used.

The focus here should be given to legally used pesticides in the agriculture, where conservation dependent species may be poisoned in a field where pesticides are applied legally. This should be planned species by species and site by site. Because pesticides that are killing geese may not be too dangerous for eagles (related to the way of application and introduction in the food chain) and vice versa.

The Biodiversity Law and the Hunting Law forbid the use of poison baits to kill hunting species and protected species. The action of setting poison baits on its own is forbidden, but poorly described and thus not applicable. In the Criminal Code the owning of highly toxic substances without permission is considered. However all these measures are not enough and additional texts and justifications should be included in all these laws. On the other hand very well described protocol for action when poisoning incident with wildlife appears or could appear should be established and all actors to be introduced to it.

FWFF – toxicological analyses, monitoring and National data base keeping, searching and promotion of improvement of the livestock breeding practices to avoid conflict with predators, Compensation and prevention programme to avoid depredation of livestock. Established protocol for action when poison incident appears in natural environment, but it is no longer up to date. Public awareness and education. Feeding sites operation.

Entities involved and theirs responsibilities

Green Balkans – toxicological analyses, monitoring and database keeping. Established protocol for action when poison incident appears in natural environment, but it is no longer up to date. Public awareness and education. Feeding sites operation.

BSPB- monitoring and data base keeping. Public awareness and education. Feeding sites operation.

Balkani Wildlife Society – searching and promotion of improvement of the livestock breeding practices to avoid conflict with predators. Prevention programme to avoid depredation of livestock

BPPS - monitoring and data base keeping. Public awareness and education. Feeding sites operation.

Vier Pfoten Bulgaria – Castration of feral and homeless dogs. Public awareness and education.

Future Activities

- Establishing of network of Permanent feeding sites for vultures and eagles
- Improvement of the legislation
- Establishing of commonly agreed and legal protocol for action up to date
- Commonly agreed National Action plan against poison
- Continuing the work on site with livestock breeders, hunters, game keepers
- Introduction of wild ungulates species (Ibex, Fallow Deer, Chamois, Red deer) to provide natural prey for the predators and vultures and to decrease depredation of livestock.
- In certain areas shifting from sheep and goats to cattle raising.
- Campaign among national and regional institutions on the problem of poisoning.