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HUMAN-WILDLIFE CONFLICT & COEXISTENCE
/ CASE STUDIES

STRENGTHENING NATIONAL CAPACITIES FOR BETTER LAW ENFORCEMENT TO FIGHT VULTURE POISONING



© WILDLIFE CRIME ACADEMY



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INTRODUCTION

ALTHOUGH ILLEGAL, WILDLIFE POISONING IS STILL WIDESPREAD ACROSS THE BALKAN PENINSULA, SEVERELY THREATENING WILDLIFE AND PUBLIC HEALTH. THE MOST COMMON MOTIVE BEHIND THIS HARMFUL PRACTICE IS TO PREVENT PREDATION OF LIVESTOCK OR GAME SPECIES BY INTENTIONALLY PLACING POISON BAITS TO KILL WILD PREDATORS OR OTHER ANIMALS THAT MAY INFLICT THESE LOSSES.

Exacerbated by population expansion, ineffective compensation systems, cultural acceptance and lack of awareness that this is a criminal activity, this non-selective method of extirpating animals impacts numerous wildlife species, causing population declines and preventing the comeback of many protected and vulnerable species.



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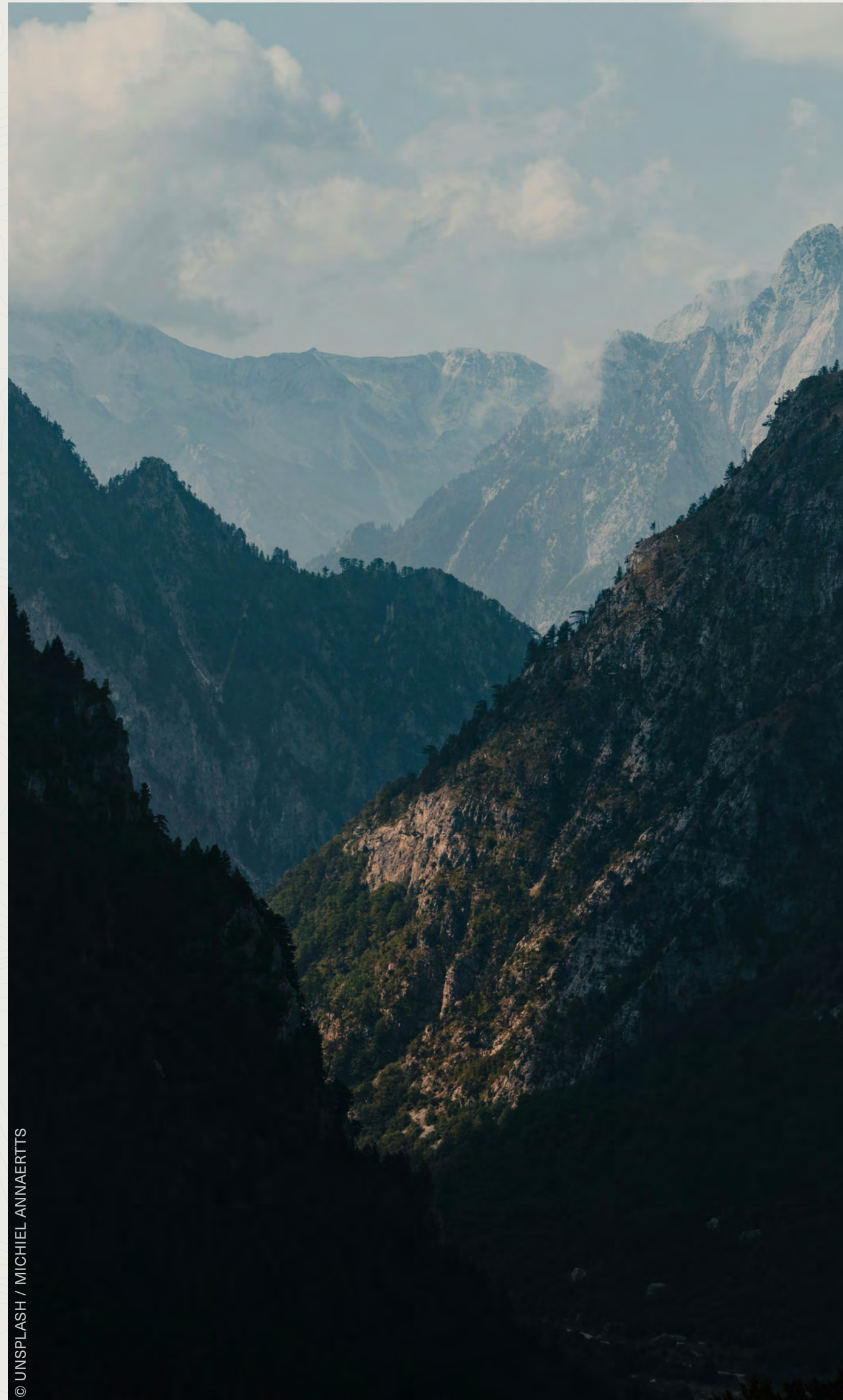
**ALBANIA, BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA,
BULGARIA, CROATIA, GREECE, SERBIA
AND NORTH MACEDONIA**



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**KEY INSIGHTS &
LESSONS LEARNT**
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Vultures, being mostly obligate scavengers, regularly fall victim to wildlife poisoning, either by directly consuming the bait or feeding on poisoned animals' carcasses. In the framework of the BalkanDetox LIFE (LIFE19 GIE/NL/001016; October 2020- September 2025) project, nine organizations work together to fight this threat by raising awareness and strengthening national capacities across Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, North Macedonia and Serbia.

This case study shows how building institutional capacities for improved law enforcement across seven Balkan countries can help reduce the harmful practice of poison baiting driven by human-wildlife conflict.

PROCESS OF DEVELOPING THE PLAN

This project emerged from a smaller initiative, the 'Balkan Anti-Poisoning Project', which found that wildlife poisoning is still widespread and entrenched among several stakeholder groups. The findings also indicated the issue could worsen without proactive action, highlighting the need for a broader, more comprehensive approach, prompting the launch of this project.

STAKEHOLDER MAPPING CLEARLY IDENTIFIED TWO PRIMARY STAKEHOLDER GROUPS ESSENTIAL TO ADDRESSING WILDLIFE POISONING - THE FIRST GROUP COMPRISED GOVERNMENTAL INSTITUTIONS RESPONSIBLE FOR ENFORCING LEGISLATION, INVESTIGATING WILDLIFE POISONING INCIDENTS, AND ENSURING ACCOUNTABILITY UNDER THE LAW. THE SECOND GROUP INCLUDED STAKEHOLDERS ASSOCIATED WITH PRACTICES THAT COULD LEAD TO POISONING, SUCH AS LIVESTOCK BREEDERS, FARMERS, AND HUNTERS.

Understanding the roles, responsibilities, and motivations of these groups was crucial for developing targeted interventions and fostering cooperation to address wildlife poisoning effectively.



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To understand the current scope of the problem, the project conducted a thorough analysis by collecting, compiling and analysing all available data about this practice.

Likewise, to get a clear understanding of the current capacities of relevant law enforcement authorities to tackle the issue of wildlife poisoning, the project made an effort from the outset to analyse their needs, restraints and challenges through an inclusive multi-disciplinary process. Therefore, National anti-poisoning working groups were formed, and a common goal was found – to reduce the catastrophic effect that poisoning has on vultures and other wildlife as much as possible.

These working groups identified the concrete operational problems that each relevant national authority is facing, while the project provided potential solutions, based on best practice experiences in combating wildlife crime in Europe. Creating an atmosphere where potential solutions are proposed, openly discussed and analysed, rather than imposed, is imperative to maintain engagement and keep the motivation going towards the final goal.



PROBLEM ANALYSIS

The use of poison has historically been culturally and legally accepted as a method to control populations of undesirable animals, particularly predators, across the Balkan region. Until the 1970s, this practice was not only legal but also actively sponsored by governments as a means of predator eradication. Therefore, cultural tolerance towards the use of poison baits remains in the region. Balkan countries all share common causes, methods, and toxic substances, making the illicit cross-border trade of banned materials a significant and alarming concern.

In an attempt to resolve human-wildlife conflicts, farmers and hunters often resort to poisoning to eliminate animals that may damage crops, livestock or game species. Poison baits typically consist of pieces of meat or entire carcasses laced with lethal substances like pesticides, including illegal ones such as Carbofuran, banned across Europe. This practice is indiscriminate, resulting in the slow and painful death of not only the intended targets but also any other animals that encounter poison baits. In extreme cases, poisoning is used as a preventive measure, even in the absence of actual damage caused by wildlife. Worsening the issue, animals ingesting poison baits can venture as far as into neighbouring countries, meet their end there, and trigger secondary poisoning, which sets off a dangerous ripple effect on the whole ecosystem.



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VULTURES ARE AMONG THE MOST SEVERELY AFFECTED BY THIS ILLEGAL PRACTICE. ALTHOUGH NOT THE INTENDED TARGETS, THEIR ROLE AS NEAR-OBLIGATE SCAVENGERS REGULARLY FEEDING ON DEAD ANIMALS, INCLUDING ON POISONED CARCASSES, MAKES THEM FREQUENT VICTIMS. BEING ECOLOGICALLY CONFINED TO THIS FOOD SOURCE MAKES VULTURES ALMOST OBLIGATE VICTIMS OF WILDLIFE POISONING EVENTS IN ALL AREAS WHERE THEY ARE PRESENT, EITHER FOR BREEDING OR FORAGING.

IT IS WELL DOCUMENTED THAT FROM THE YEAR 2000 TO 2020, AT LEAST 468 VULTURES PERISHED IN THE BALKAN PENINSULA AS A RESULT OF ILLEGAL WILDLIFE POISONING.

Considering that only up to 20 per cent of poisoning incidents are discovered and documented, it is estimated that around 112 vultures are poisoned each year in the Balkans, with over 2,300 vultures having died from poisoning in the region over the past 20 years.

Such losses exert a heavy toll on the vulture populations of the region. The indiscriminate nature of poisoning has led to catastrophic declines in vulture populations, and in some cases, has caused national extinctions, such as the Bearded Vulture in continental Greece in 2004 and in North Macedonia in 2006, the Griffon Vulture in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1991 or the Egyptian Vulture in Serbia in 2005.

POOR LAW ENFORCEMENT REMAINS A SIGNIFICANT BARRIER TO EFFECTIVELY TACKLING WILDLIFE POISONING AND IS DIRECTLY RELATED TO POOR OPERATIONAL CAPACITIES OF THE RELEVANT INSTITUTIONS, AS WELL AS THE PERCEPTION THAT WILDLIFE POISONING IS A PHENOMENON THAT OCCURS SPORADICALLY AND WITH LITTLE CONSEQUENCES FOR BIODIVERSITY. IT IS BECAUSE OF THESE CIRCUMSTANCES THAT POISONING AND WILDLIFE CRIME IN GENERAL ARE OF LOW PRIORITY FOR THE LAW ENFORCEMENT AUTHORITIES.



Insufficient operational capacities are mainly attributed to the unclear jurisdictions of responsible law enforcement authorities, lack of clear investigative procedures, experience in recognizing the signs and patterns related to wildlife poisoning and other types of wildlife crime, as well as lack of equipment and technical capacities of referent national toxicology laboratories to process samples from wildlife.

Compounding the issue is the underreporting of poisoning events; estimates suggest that only 10-20 per cent of incidents are documented. In many cases, evidence is lost quickly due to natural processes, as carcasses decay or are scavenged before they can be examined. Even when investigations are thorough and cases are properly documented, less than 1 per cent of incidents result in court trials, highlighting a systemic gap in the legal response to this ecological crisis.

While awareness campaigns have been launched to discourage the use of poison, these efforts have had limited success in curbing poisoning incidents. This problem extends beyond the Balkans and is prevalent across Europe, reflecting a widespread failure to mitigate its impacts. It is important to recognize the fact that proper law enforcement is the best and most important deterrent measure for this type of criminal activity.

ACTIVITIES

Project activities are implemented around two main approaches to increase the capacities of institutions mandated to investigate wildlife crime: enhancing regional and institutional collaboration and reinforcing institutional capacities.

NATIONAL ANTI-POISON WORKING GROUPS WERE ESTABLISHED AT THE BEGINNING OF THE PROJECT. THEY CONSIST OF REPRESENTATIVES FROM ALL RELEVANT NATIONAL STAKEHOLDERS. IT IS THROUGH THESE WORKING GROUPS THAT THE OFFICIAL PROCEDURES FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF POISONING INCIDENTS ARE IMPROVED BY:

• ANALYSING NATIONAL LEGISLATION:

the first step towards improvement to precisely define the roles and responsibilities of all relevant national institutions in the investigation process and develop a clear scheme of jurisdictions which ensures that evidence is processed correctly along the chain of custody.



• DEVELOPING AND ENDORSING STANDARD OPERATIONAL PROTOCOLS (SOP) FOR INVESTIGATION OF WILDLIFE POISONING:

the second step was to develop clear investigative procedures for the relevant law enforcement authorities. This was done based on detailed performance analysis of existing operational protocols and best practice examples from the environmental services of the Junta de Andalucía in Spain to increase the efficiency of institutions in managing poisoning incidents. During the project so far, these SOPs have been officially adopted by the relevant national law enforcement authorities in Greece, North Macedonia and Albania.

• DEVELOPING, UPDATING AND ADOPTING NATIONAL ANTI-POISONING ROAD MAPS:

finally, providing a strategic framework of actions for combating wildlife poisoning, endorsed by the relevant national authorities, ensures the continuation of work on addressing this conservation issue long after the project itself ends. Some countries decided to prepare a national action plan or annex to an existing action plan, depending on national circumstances and legislation, while others (Greece, Bulgaria) reinforced already initiated similar processes. The National action plans have so far been adopted in Albania, and submitted for adoption to the authorities in North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, while Croatia integrated its work into a broader National Action Plan against Wildlife Crime.

SECONDLY, TO BUILD PRACTICAL CAPACITIES OF STAFF IN RELEVANT INSTITUTIONS FOR INVESTIGATION OF WILDLIFE POISONING (LAW ENFORCEMENT, VETERINARY, FORESTRY, RANGER SERVICES), THE PROJECT FOCUSED ON THE FOLLOWING CAPACITY BUILDING PROGRAMMES:

**I. WILDLIFE CRIME ACADEMY:
THE WILDLIFE CRIME ACADEMY (WCA) IS A SPECIALIZED TRAINING PROGRAMME FOR THE INVESTIGATION AND MANAGEMENT OF WILDLIFE POISONING INCIDENTS.**

The Academy was established in Spain with the cooperation of the Junta de Andalucía, Ministerio para la Transición Ecológica y el Reto Demográfico, Mava Foundation and Vulture Conservation Foundation. It focuses on the three key components in managing wildlife poisoning incidents: investigation, forensic pathology and toxicology, delivered through a three-level course structure. The programme is tailored to professionals from diverse academic disciplines working in conservation, law enforcement and forensic science.

Level 1 covers all aspects of the illegal practice of wildlife crime (poisoning, poaching, trapping and trade, electrocution and collision with energy infrastructure). Participants are provided with the skills to investigate wildlife crime, starting from first responses in the field, initiating the investigation procedure, to the final procedure at the court.



Level 2 provides in-depth training on each key component—investigation, forensic pathology, and toxicology. Specialized advanced courses are tailored for law enforcement personnel involved in wildlife poisoning investigations, as well as for staff from veterinary institutes and toxicology laboratories responsible for conducting necropsies and toxicological analyses.

Level 3 focuses on advanced expertise in forensic investigation and criminal profiling, including the strategic planning of investigative procedures in wildlife poisoning cases, tailored for relevant national enforcement agencies.

THE TRAINING COURSE METHODOLOGY COMBINES THEORETICAL CONCEPTUAL MODULES WITH PRACTICAL WORKSHOPS AND EVALUATION SESSIONS THROUGH FIELD PRACTICE IN REAL SITUATIONS.

Participants who successfully complete the training programme of the WCA receive certificates from the Spanish authorities, allowing them to conduct the basic training courses for the investigation of wildlife crime as official trainers in their home countries.

66 PARTICIPANTS WHO CAME FROM 13 DIFFERENT COUNTRIES COMPLETED ALL THREE TRAINING MODULES AND BECAME EXPERTS IN WILDLIFE CRIME INVESTIGATION AND ANALYSIS.

II. NATIONAL ANTI-POISONING TRAINING PROGRAMMES: THE NATIONAL TRAINING PROGRAMME COVERS ALL THE FUNDAMENTAL ASPECTS NEEDED FOR SUCCESSFUL INVESTIGATION OF WILDLIFE POISONING INCIDENTS, FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF PLANNING, POLICE AND FORENSIC TECHNIQUES.

The training programme equips attendees with the theoretical and practical skills needed to carry out effective investigations in their own countries.

National courses aim to secure real and continued engagement of the relevant national authorities against illegal poisoning and other types of wildlife crime and increase their capacity to counteract it.

TWENTY-ONE TRAINING COURSES HAVE BEEN IMPLEMENTED BY THE GRADUATES OF THE WCA IN ALBANIA, BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA, CROATIA, GREECE, NORTH MACEDONIA AND SERBIA, WHERE 576 PEOPLE FROM THE RELEVANT NATIONAL LAW ENFORCEMENT AUTHORITIES WERE TRAINED.

Incorporating these training programmes into the teaching curriculum of relevant national stakeholders, such as the Faculty of Security (Albania, North Macedonia), further ensures that these best practices will be implemented in the future, long after the project finishes.



Targeted capacity-building workshops on the investigation and prosecution of wildlife crime were conducted for public prosecutors and judges from Balkan countries. To date, over 100 participants - working in the field of wildlife crime prosecution - have been trained under 10 specialized workshops. Despite proper investigations, fewer than 1 per cent of poisoning cases reach trial. This highlights the critical need for ongoing collaboration with the judiciary to effectively combat wildlife crime in the long term.

To build support for the planned conservation actions, the project implemented a robust media campaign throughout its duration. The primary goal of the campaign was to shift key stakeholders' perception and attitudes towards wildlife poisoning, but also of the general public, labelling it a socially unacceptable behaviour which has well-documented, devastating effects on biodiversity and the environment.

OUTCOMES

Although the project is still running and the final results are yet to be analysed,

PRELIMINARY EVALUATION OF THE INFORMATION COLLECTED SHOWS APPROXIMATELY A 50% INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF WILDLIFE POISONING CASES FOR WHICH INVESTIGATION WAS INITIATED AND COMPLETED BY THE RELEVANT LAW ENFORCEMENT AUTHORITIES. SIMULTANEOUSLY, THERE HAS BEEN ROUGHLY A 40% DECREASE IN THE OVERALL NUMBER OF DOCUMENTED POISONING INCIDENTS ACROSS THE BALKAN PENINSULA SINCE THE PROJECT STARTED.

This favourable ratio gives hope that efforts undertaken are having an impact and offers hope for achieving the ultimate goal - minimizing the catastrophic effect that poisoning has on vultures and other wildlife.



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KEY INSIGHTS & LESSONS LEARNT

01. INVOLVE STAKEHOLDERS FROM THE BEGINNING

Involving relevant governmental institutions from the beginning of the project design was crucial to secure real and continued engagement. This collaboration helped identify constraints and opportunities early on and better direct the implementation of foreseen capacity building and conservation actions of the project.

04. USE BEST PRACTICES FROM OTHER CONTEXTS TO INSPIRE ACTION ADAPTED TO NATIONAL CIRCUMSTANCES

Drawing on best practices in addressing the same threats from environmental and law enforcement services in Spain, specialized capacity-building and training programmes were tailored to fit national circumstances and capacities. The national law enforcement authorities respond better to practical training programmes, based on real-life scenarios, and when fieldwork sessions outweigh academic sessions.

02. APPROACH THE STAKEHOLDERS FROM THE PLACE OF A COMMON GROUND AND WORKING TOWARDS THE SAME GOAL

Identifying and focusing on a shared goal—preventing wildlife poisoning—rather than assigning blame, was key to effective collaboration with project stakeholders. This approach enabled effective partnerships with government institutions in implementing capacity-building activities. Providing practical, jointly identified solutions suited to current conditions helped maintain the engagement and motivation of governmental stakeholders.

05. TRAIN THE TRAINERS

Throughout the project, carefully tailored trainings, especially those using a "train-the-trainer" approach, proved to be highly effective. These programs were well-received by the authorities, who were highly motivated to share their expertise with colleagues, amplifying the impact of the training. Equipping the relevant authorities with knowledge and skills to provide training to their colleagues themselves laid down the foundation for the continuation of this work long after the project ends.

03. ENHANCE COLLABORATION

Open communication and collaboration are key. All results must be achieved through a collaborative effort so that all stakeholders share the sense of achievement and responsibility. Establishing a working group between key institutions is an effective way to ensure the sustainability of efforts beyond the project's duration. This institutionalization of the effort makes it possible for the work to continue independently, ensuring long-term positive impacts.

FURTHER INFORMATION

- Vulture Conservation Foundation (VCF)
- BalkanDetox LIFE

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ABOUT THE CASE STUDIES

The **Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO)** and the **IUCN SSC Human-Wildlife Conflict & Coexistence Specialist Group (HWCCSG)** have jointly developed a set of case studies with the aim of covering the process projects have taken to manage various aspects of a human-wildlife conflict & coexistence situation. This case study is one of many that will be used to illustrate key components of the **IUCN SSC Guidelines on Human-Wildlife Conflict & Coexistence**. The published case studies can be found in the **Human-Wildlife Conflict & Coexistence Library**.

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