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NOTE

from : General Secretariat
to : Delegations
Subject : Problem of necrophagous birds in Spain because of shortage of natural food: a serious threat to biodiversity

Delegations will find annexed a note from the Spanish delegation on the above subject, which will be dealt with under "Other Business" at the meeting of the Council (Environment) on 30 October 2007.

Problem of necrophagous birds in Spain because of shortage of food: a serious threat to biodiversity

Regulation (EC) No 1774/2002 *laying down health rules concerning animal by-products not intended for human consumption* reflects the firm response of the European Union to the problem created by the notorious *mad cow disease*. The primary aim of the Regulation was to protect human health, but its implementation has proved to have certain unwanted negative environmental effects arising from the fact that no carcasses from extensively farmed livestock could be left in the fields or deposited in the waste dumps traditionally used in the rural environment. The effect that this measure has had on necrophagous bird of prey species and certain carnivorous mammals has been very significant, in that it has deprived them of one of their main food sources.

To facilitate the resolution of this problem, the European Commission adopted Decisions 322/2003 and 830/2005, which lay down derogation conditions to allow feeding of the endangered necrophagous bird of prey populations in Portugal, Spain, France, Italy and Greece. These Decisions are implemented in Spain through Royal Decree No 664/2007 of 25 May 2007, which fixes the health and safety conditions required of necrophagous bird feeders. However, the application of the measures authorised in the Decisions cited above and expressed in the Royal Decree can only very partially replace the enormous quantity of food lost through the compulsory removal from fields of livestock carcasses

Necrophagous populations in Spain

Spain has the largest populations of necrophagous birds of prey in Europe and, in the case of certain globally endangered species, the largest in the world. Spain's populations of these species are, according to the latest available figures, as follows:

- griffon vulture: about 23 000 nesting pairs, making up 94 % of the European total. Some estimates place the total population of this species in Spain at over 100 000 individuals;
- lack vulture: 1 810 breeding pairs in 2006. Spain has around 98 % of the total European population of this species, which is endangered worldwide;
- Egyptian vulture: some 1 450 pairs in the peninsula and Balearic Isles in 2000, plus 29 of the Canary Isles subspecies, whose situation is critical. They make up more than 80 % of the EU population;
- bearded vulture: 92 pairs in the Pyrenees in 2006. Spain's population is much larger than that of the rest of the European Union all together;
- Spanish imperial eagle: of the 216 breeding pairs in the world in 2006, 215 nest in Spain, one in Portugal;
- golden eagle: there is an estimated minimum of 1500 breeding pairs in Spain, the largest population in Europe;
- red kite: the estimated population of this species, which is endangered globally and constantly shrinking, was between 2 000 and 2 200 nesting pairs in 2004. Furthermore, a large proportion of the world's total population, estimated at over 30 000 individuals, winters in Spain;
- black kite: the estimated population in 2005 was over 10 000 nesting pairs and more than 40 000 individuals in total.

Carnivorous mammals that normally feed on livestock carcasses include the brown bear, of which there are around 130 individuals in the Cantabrian Mountains and around 20 in the Pyrenees, and the wolf, the population of which is estimated at 2 000 to 2 500.

The bird species most affected by the shortage of livestock carcasses in the field are all included in Directive 79/409/EEC on the conservation of wild birds. The carnivorous mammal species most affected by the compulsory removal of carcasses, such as the brown bear and the wolf, are likewise protected by Directive 92/43/EEC on habitats. Both Directives oblige EU countries to establish active conservation measures for the species listed in their Annexes.

The geographical distribution of these species covers almost the whole of Spain's territory, including the Balearic and Canary Islands. In applying the Birds Directive, Spain has created 560 Special Protection Areas (SPAs) for birds, with a combined surface area of around nine million seven hundred thousand hectares, much of which includes necrophagous bird species. In addition, National Conservation Strategies have been produced and approved for the most endangered species, which are the Spanish imperial eagle and the bearded vulture, as have Autonomous Community recovery plans covering the red kite, the black vulture and the Egyptian vulture.

All these species are substantially dependent on carrion from livestock, be it from animals that die in the fields, with a territorial distribution similar to that of wild ungulates, or from waste dumps and feeders where carcasses of farm animals were thrown out. This source is important for young and unskilled animals and for feeding chicks in the nest.

Effects of the lack of food

Drops have been noted in the numbers of breeding pairs and in the numbers of chicks flying the nest in certain colonies of griffon vultures which have been under continuous observation for more than ten years. Such is the case of the river Riaza colony, where the population drop is correlated with the reduction in available food. In addition, for the first time in recent decades, certain breeding centres have disappeared from some areas in eastern Spain in the last two years.

Certain behavioural changes have drawn much attention and been widely reported in the European press, such as unusually extensive searches for food, leading to the appearance of several dozen griffon vultures in regions as far from their breeding grounds as Belgium, Germany and the north of France.

Incursions by underfed necrophagous birds into wildlife stock recovery centres have increased spectacularly in all the Autonomous Communities where records are kept. The number of individuals of carrion-eating species was in some Communities three times greater in 2006 than in earlier years. For instance, more than 900 individuals entered the recovery centre of La Alfranca in Aragon, compared to around 300 in 2004 and 2005. In the centres belonging to the Junta of Castilla La Mancha, twice as many members of these species entered in 2006 as in 2004 and 2005. Similar trends have been noted in other Autonomous Communities.

The appearance and spread of non-standard behaviour such as attacks by griffon vultures on livestock during parturition, or on sick or newborn livestock, are particularly significant. Such anomalies have been widely reported in the media, echoing increasing anxiety among farmers in the areas concerned, which may soon lead to a rise in conflicts. Damages claims had been registered in nine Autonomous Communities by June 2007, with a total of 687 compensation claims submitted. The number of attacks reported has increased spectacularly in recent years, rising from 60 in 2004 to 120 in 2005 and over 200 in 2006. More than 170 had already been recorded by June of 2007.

Feeding of carrion-eaters

Given the size of the populations concerned, we may infer that the derogation measures laid down in the Decisions mentioned above and applied in Spain by Royal Decree No 664/227 are not sufficient on their own to resolve a problem which affects such large populations of birds and mammals and such an extensive area. Add to this the problem of the artificial nature of the feeders and their effect on the behaviour of the birds; birds of prey have very large minimum habitat areas, which frequently involve movements of 100 km or more in a straight line. In these circumstances, it is not desirable for these birds, some of which are endangered, to be concentrated in large numbers in very particular areas, where they are undoubtedly more vulnerable to uncontrolled hunting by unscrupulous hunters or, worse still, users of poisoned baits. It is preferable to retain an uneven and unpredictable spread of carrion, so that necrophagous birds have to keep up their food search and detection skills. Networks of feeders designed for highly endangered species like the bearded vulture are another matter; they need these additional food provisions (mainly bones) to maintain viable population levels.

The options offered by the derogations from Regulation 1774/2002 are necessary but not sufficient to ensure the survival in favourable conditions of necrophagous species in Spain, some of which are endangered worldwide. A network of artificial feeders, however dense it might become, could never replace the supply of carcasses of extensively farmed livestock. Furthermore, the network of dumps cannot relieve the problem posed for carnivorous mammals like the brown bear and the wolf, since their construction is designed specifically to prevent access by land animals.

A detailed investigation is therefore required into the options that the Regulation or any future revision thereof could offer, in the light of new information on livestock diseases and the evolution of TSEs, and in particular BSE, in the European Union, together with the improved awareness of the impact of compulsory removal of livestock carcasses on the conservation status of numerous species of endangered birds and mammals, in order to achieve favourable natural conditions at least in the areas established as critical for the various species, and maintaining the safeguards necessary to protect human and livestock health.

In short, solutions must be sought such that human health protection measures do not bring in their wake avoidable negative effects on the populations of species which are protected by national and Community legislation and for the protection of which significant resources are being used. Protection of health and of the environment must work in harmony and not in mutual conflict. That approach is feasible and we must be capable of adopting it. The Commission can play an important role in seeking synergies between the two objectives.

