

Razor wire between European countries endangers wildlife: statement by IUCN WCPA Transboundary Conservation Specialist Group

In the last few months, more than 500,000 refugees and migrants from Syria and other Middle Eastern countries passed through Croatia in search of security and a better life in Germany and other European countries. In an attempt to control the further influx of migrants, Hungary started erecting razor-barbed wire fence along its boundary with Croatia in October 2015. This was followed by Slovenia which erected a razor wire fence along an 140 km portion of its boundary with Croatia. This occurrence not only puts Croatia in an unusually awkward situation being the only European Union (EU) country separated from neighbouring EU member countries by a wire fence and generating discomfort among local population, but also creating problems with free transboundary movement of wild animals and disabling the ecological connectivity.

Ecological connectivity is highly important for species that migrate on a daily or seasonal basis in search for food, shelter or individuals of the opposite sex for breeding. Historically, the boundary of Croatia and Slovenia, which is about 500 km long, had no physical barriers that would disable the movement of species or local people. Moreover, portions of areas adjacent to the political boundary are part of the EU Natura 2000 ecological network where connectivity, essential for transboundary movement of species, has so far been assured. The situation has changed 'overnight', creating doubts about the future of wildlife, some of which is already on the brink of extinction. For years, Croatian and Slovenian scientists have cooperated on various projects and action plans to protect and sustain certain species such as Eurasian lynx (*Lynx lynx*), brown bear (*Ursus arctos*) and wolf (*Canis lupus*). All of these species regularly migrate through the two countries' territories as wildlife and nature know no political boundaries. With the new fence in place and further plans by Slovenia to erect still more along the border, transboundary conservation of these species is at risk.

Conservation of large carnivores is particularly promoted by the European Commission (EC). Moreover, brown bear, wolf and Eurasian lynx are all listed in Annex II of the EU Habitats Directive (Directive 92/43/EEC) as animals of community interest whose conservation requires the designation of Special Areas of Conservation, and in Annex IV as animals of community interest in need of strict protection. At the European scale, the habitats of these two countries, along with other countries of the Dinaride region, are rare refuges for these large carnivores and for the richness of biological diversity in general. The fence not only harms large mammals on their regular route from Croatia to Slovenia and vice-versa, but also puts pressure on already threatened species such as the lynx. According to the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, the Dinaric population of lynx is Endangered. With only about 50 individuals in Croatia, the national Red List indicated lynx as Critically Endangered. Slovenia, according to the latest EC report from 2012, hosts only about 20 lynx individuals and the population might be decreasing.

Transboundary Conservation Specialist Group of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA) raises serious concern about erection of the razor wire fence which has already proven to harm the wildlife by exposing it to suffering, and believes that such a fence creates unfavorable conditions for ecological connectivity and the migration of wildlife, including threatened species. The Specialist Group strongly suggests the removal of the fence and supports the efforts of the Croatian Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs in calling the Slovenian Government to remove the wire. The Specialist Group also supports the public efforts of local communities in a number of near-boundary locations in Croatia and Slovenia to influence the decision for wire removal.

WCPA Transboundary Conservation Specialist Group notes with regret that the current situation with physical obstacles to free movement of wildlife at the boundaries of Croatia with its adjacent EU countries is not an isolated case in Europe and in the world. In Europe, due to the refugee crisis, Hungary has built a massive fence system on its boundary with Serbia, putting at risk the survival of the blind molerat (*Nannospalax (leucodon) montanosyrmensis*). Some other examples include the extension of the fence between Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Bulgaria and Turkey, and Greece and Turkey. Such physical barriers will generate sustained direct and indirect impacts to ecosystems and migration corridors, often of ecological importance at the European scale.