



Quirópteros Valencia - Bats conservation plan in the Valencian community

LIFE00 NAT/E/007337



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Project description:

Background

The vast mountains of the Valencia region are mainly formed of limestone rocks, which can provide excellent habitats for bats. Caves and forests in the region shelter numerous bat populations - so far, 22 species of this mammal have been observed in this area of Spain.

Some of the species, which have substantial populations in this region, are among the most threatened in Europe. A case in point is the long-fingered bat (*Myotis capaccinii*), which has roughly half its west European population in this area. Another severely threatened species is Mehely's horseshoe bat (*Rhinolophus mehelyi*), which is in an advanced state of decline and therefore needs urgent action to save it.

The threats to these bats are mainly connected to the disturbances they suffer in the refuges where they spend the winter or breed. Disturbance typically comes from human activity such as rambling in the area or caving. These refuges are also under threat of destruction, as happens to forest-dwelling bats when large trees are felled or through forest fires.

Other threats are less direct, but can be just as serious, including contamination of the habitats near to the refuges from pollutants such as biocides.

Objectives

This project aimed to ensure the long-term conservation of the populations of cave and forest-dwelling bats in the Community of Valencia. It particularly sought to focus on two vulnerable species: the long-fingered bat (*Myotis capaccinii*) and Mehely's horseshoe bat (*Rhinolophus mehelyi*).

To this end a package of measures were planned in 12 proposed Sites of Community Interest (pSCIs), notably to protect the largest cave refuges and to create the conditions necessary for increasing the currently small breeding population of forest bats.

Another aim was to set up a legal framework making it possible to guarantee the survival of the most threatened species and to increase awareness among the general public of the ecological importance of these mammals and the need to protect them.

Specific objectives were to:

- ensure the conservation of 30 refuges: 29 natural caves and 1 abandoned tunnel
- improve the scarce breeding populations of forest-dwelling bats
- ensure the conservation of the most endangered bat species in the region and to award statutory protection to species and habitats
- improve knowledge for future management planning, to monitor bat populations and to increase information on the requirements of the most endangered species in the region
- increase awareness on the ecological importance of bat populations and their conservation needs

Results

This LIFE project provided new and valuable information on the targeted bat species, allowing for specific species conservation measures to be undertaken. It also initiated crucial dialogue with relevant bodies including local authorities and ramblers associations around the need for bat conservation that should deliver long-term benefits to bat populations.

Forest-dwelling bat species were monitored consistently in five pSCIs for two years. This confirmed the status, phenology and distribution of the populations of five species. Cave-dwelling species were also intensively monitored in all the project's refuges for three years.

The research provided updated census data for both the long-fingered and Mehely's horseshoe bat in the project area, which revealed that population figures were even lower than previously estimated: 2 700 and 70 individuals respectively. Totally new data for some forest species was obtained.

The data gathered during the preparation and early implementation of the project led to the enlargement of the pSCI network: 18 new pSCIs for bats were designated, with the project area enlarged to cover 29 pSCIs. These include 30 key refuges for the conservation of the 22 Annex II bat populations present in Valencia. Five new refuges, two of them hosting important colonies of long-fingered bat, were identified.

The research also identified feeding preferences and patterns - including outstanding insights into their fishing - and habitat-use patterns down to the microhabitat level. This helped identify the most likely causes of the sharp decrease of the two populations: the intensification of citric orchards for Mehely's horseshoe bat and inadequate management of riparian habitats for the long-fingered bat.

The project enclosed and signposted 15 important refuges at most risk to human disturbance. These were then maintained on an ongoing basis to ensure their continuing adequacy as a habitat for bats. Bat boxes were introduced in five forest pSCIs to complement natural bat habitat. The occupation rate two years after installation was 26%, a promising result despite the lack of actual breeding in them during the project timeframe.

To assist long-term increases in bat populations, statutory protection was provided to two refuges as 'Wildlife Reserves', and another as a 'Local Natural Site', necessitating the incorporation of the caves into land-use planning. Additional procedures were launched to designate a further two wildlife reserves and one more local site. The beneficiary also started work towards agreement with local authorities, landowners and land users on specific Recovery Plans for the two key species - a draft Decree was already approved.

The project team published ten papers, held expert seminars and presented at international conferences. The monitoring, research and management approaches have become a reference model and have already generated similar regional strategies in Extremadura and Andalusia.

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Environmental issues addressed:

Themes

Species - Mammals

Keywords

endangered species, mountainous area, monitoring, protected area

Target species

Barbastella barbastellus Miniopterus schreibersii Myotis bechsteinii Myotis blythii Myotis capaccinii Myotis emarginatus Myotis myotis Rhinolophus euryale Rhinolophus ferrumequinum Rhinolophus hipposideros Rhinolophus mehelyi

Target Habitat types

- 8310 - Caves not open to the public
- 9180 - "Tilio-Acerion forests of slopes, screes and ravines"
- 9230 - Galicio-Portuguese oak woods with *Quercus robur* and *Quercus pyrenaica*
- 9240 - *Quercus faginea* and *Quercus canariensis* Iberian woods
- 9310 - Aegean *Quercus brachyphylla* woods
- 9330 - *Quercus suber* forests
- 9340 - *Quercus ilex* and *Quercus rotundifolia* forests
- 9530 - (Sub-) Mediterranean pine forests with endemic black pines
- 9540 - Mediterranean pine forests with endemic Mesogean pines
- 9560 - Endemic forests with *Juniperus* spp.

Natura 2000 sites

SCI ES5211007	Montgó
SCI ES5213018	Penya-segats de la Marina
SCI ES5223002	L'Alt Maestrat
SCI ES5223004	Penyagolosa
SCI ES5232002	Serra Calderona
SCI ES5233008	Sabinar de Alpuente
SCI ES5233011	Sierras de Martés y el Ave
SCI ES5233013	Serra de Corbera
SCI ES5233015	Serres del Montdúver i Marxuquera

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Beneficiaries:

Coordinator	Consellería de Medio Ambiente - Dir. Gral de Planificación y Gestión del Medio
Type of organisation	Regional authority
Description	The Valencian conselleria de Medio Ambiente is the regional administrative department in charge of the protection and conservation of environmental resources. Its General Direction for Environment Management and Planification is in charge of biodiversity protection and natural spaces management, including the Natura 2000 network.
Partners	None

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Administrative data:

Project reference	LIFE00 NAT/E/007337
Duration	01-JAN-2001 to 31-DEC -2004
Total budget	896,305.00 €
EU contribution	448,153.00 €
Project location	Comunidad Valenciana(España)

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Read more:

Project web site	Project's website (ES, EN, FR)
Video link	"Aliados en la oscuridad" (23')

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