



**INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS ON THE ZOOGEOGRAPHY AND
ECOLOGY OF GREECE AND ADJACENT REGIONS**

ABSTRACTS



Dogs contributing to wildlife conservation: First anti-poison dog units in the Balkans

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Owing to their remarkable olfactory system, dogs are used to locate a range of scents. Specially trained dogs may significantly reduce the amount of time spent searching for a given target. Thus, scent-detection working dogs are successfully being employed in the conservation efforts of many endangered species worldwide. Poison baits are considered a critical threat to vultures in Europe, including globally endangered Egyptian vulture, and have resulted in rapid population declines and contraction of distribution ranges across the continent. In 2014, two anti-poison dog units were created in Greece³ aiming to carry out patrols in the countryside targeting, among others, the timely detection of poison baits and animals to prevent further poisonings. Priority was given to patrols in areas where new incidents had been notified by authorities and citizens, but were also conducted in areas regularly used by Egyptian vultures where poison events had been recorded in the recent past. Poison incidents were confirmed in 31 of 129 patrols, resulting in 49 dead animals and 36 poison baits. The most commonly poisoned species was the dog followed by the fox. The main drivers for the use of poison baits were: predator extermination, stray dog population control and human conflicts. Toxicological analysis revealed three pesticide's active substances: Endosulfan, Carbofuran (both banned in Greece) and Methomyl. The anti-poison dog units proved to be an innovative and effective preventive action that also proves the extent of illegal use of poison baits. Many scavengers, including Egyptian vultures, were potentially saved from a certain death.

This action is carried out in the frame of the LIFE+ project for the conservation of the Egyptian vulture in Bulgaria and Greece under the title "Return of the *Neophron*" which was launched in October 2011. It is a joint initiative of the BSPB – BirdLife Bulgaria, HOS – BirdLife Greece, WWF Greece and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. The project is carried out in key Natura 2000 sites in Bulgaria and Greece until the end of 2016. Its overall objective is to prevent the extinction of the Egyptian vulture in both countries, by identifying and acting on the causes of breeding failure and low survival rates.

Keywords: Working dogs, poison baits, Egyptian vulture.