LETTERS

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Baits, Budget Cuts: A Deadly Mix

THE ILLEGAL USE OF POISON BAITS IS THE MOST IMPORTANT NON-natural factor in the the extinction of several European vertebrate megafauna over the previous two centuries. Yet the practice continues unabated today. Poison baits represent a serious threat to public health and a serious conservation problem for sustaining biodiversity at both European and global scales (*1*).

Bearded vulture with GPS transmitter.

Spain is home to important populations of several threatened vertebrate species. More than 8000 cases of illegal poisoning were reported in the period between 1990 and 2010, with victims including 53 bearded vultures (*Gypaetus barbatus*), 366 Egyptian vultures (*Neophron percnopterus*), 759 cinereous vultures (*Aegypius monachus*), 117 Spanish imperial eagles (*Aquila adalberti*), 2877 Eurasian griffon vultures (*Gyps fulvus*), 1981 red kites (*Milvus milvus*), 961 black kites (*Milvus migrans*), and 9 brown bears (*Ursus arctos*) (*2*–*5*). Several of these species are classified as endangered within the European Union (there remain only 170 pairs of bearded vultures, 323 Spanish imperial eagles, 1889 cinereous vultures, and 1900 Egyptian vultures). Moreover, Spain is home to more than 95% of all European avian scavengers and the world's entire Spanish imperial eagle population. Given this context, the damage to the conservation of European biodiversity caused by poisoning is considerable.

In light of the current economic crisis, the Spanish government has cut funding for research and development, and its Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Environment has reduced investment by 31% with respect to 2011. As a result, research and conservation programs that can minimize the impact of illegal poisoning are at risk. Without the funds to monitor threatened species with satellite transmitters, to analyze animal carcasses found through this and other monitoring methods, and to continue with environmental education programs and research trap selectivity methods, illegal poisoning looms even larger. All the human and economic efforts of the past two decades could turn out to be futile and biodiversity be put at risk if research and conservation programs are paralyzed.

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Saving Vietnam's Wildlife Through Social Media

ALTHOUGH VIETNAM IS A GLOBALLY RECOGnized biodiversity hotspot with 59 new species discovered in 2010 alone (*1*), the state of wildlife conservation therein is a matter of serious international concern. Vietnam is a major consumer and exporter of wildlife, as well as a source and conduit for the illegal trade from Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar to China (*2*). Over a 10-year period, Vietnamese authorities have confiscated over 180,000 wild animals destined for trade. It is estimated that this represented only 5 to 10% of the actual amount illegally traded (*3*), about half of which is consumed in the domestic market (*2*). In fact, consuming wildlife has become the norm among Vietnamese. Half of Hanoi residents have used wild animal products (*4*), and almost a third of all Vietnamese have used bear bile to treat illness (*5*).

In a recent report, the World Wildlife Fund ranked Vietnam last of 23 countries in implementing its commitments to prevent the illegal trade of elephant, rhino, and tiger products through the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) (*6*). A large share of the responsibility for the dire state of conservation can be attributed to Vietnamese society, which both drives wildlife consumption and behaves passively toward conservation-related scandals. This passivity is illustrated by the seeming acceptance of the public toward incidents such as the purchase of rhino horn by a diplomat from the Vietnamese Embassy in South Africa (*7*) and the official—yet illegal—auctioning of confiscated tiger bone glue with approval from the Provincial People's Committee (*8*).

Social media offer a major tactical opportunity to hold public officials and citizens accountable, by galvanizing public opinion, applying public pressure, and therefore incentivizing improved conservation behavior. For example, in July, photos of a pregnant endangered douc (*Pygathrix cinerea*) being tortured and slaughtered in the presence of Vietnamese soldiers were posted on Facebook. The story grabbed the attention of readers and generated substantial public outcry (*9*). Such mass criticism over mistreatment of endangered

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