

PRESS RELEASE

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JUSTICE BODIES IN ALBANIA IGNORE CRIMES ON WILDLIFE, EVEN FOR THE CRITICAL ENDANGERED SPECIES LIKE THE BALKAN LYNX

Elbasan Prosecutor requested the dismissal of the illegally killed Balkan lynx case, in 2020, at Elbasan region

Following the local network's announcement regarding a killed, taxidermized, and exhibited Balkan lynx (*Lynx lynx balcanicus*) individual, in the interior of "Ke Reema" restaurant, at Elbasan city, PPNEA denounced this poaching case in June 2020. After nearly 2 years of slow-moving investigations, the Court of First Instance Elbasan was asked by the Elbasan Prosecutor to dismiss the case of this illegally killed Balkan lynx in the Elbasan region.

The Prosecutor claims to have completed all investigations, related to this case and asked the court to dismiss it, due to lack of concrete evidence. From the analysis of the gathered evidence, it was concluded that the stuffed lynx 2017 picture at the restaurant (Fig. 1) was considered as evidence, however, the law based on the Criminal Code of the Albanian Republic, provided in Article 202 / a, and published in the official gazette in 2019, has no retroactive force. The 2020 picture, of the new stuffed lynx at the restaurant, did not have a timestamp (Fig. 2). Therefore, the Prosecutor did not consider this piece as evidence. However, the Prosecutor's conclusion did not take into consideration other evidence, presented by PPNEA. It was confirmed, by national and international experts, that the new lynx in the restaurant was the same individual photographed by camera traps, in 2018, by the Elbasan Regional Administration of Protected Area. This evidence was clearly obtained after the law entered into force. Additionally, the document states that the investigation was carried out at the restaurant's premises and no alleged law prohibited stuffed animals were found, so there are no criminal facts for a charge to be filed.

Unfortunately, this was not an isolated case of Balkan lynx poaching in recent years. Altogether, in the entire range of the subspecies in the SW Balkans, partners of the Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme have evidence of 14 individuals poached/illegally killed since 2006. Considering the extremely small size of the population (< 50) and the fact that usually the number of known poaching cases, is only the 'tip of the iceberg', this number is shocking and confirms that poaching is a major threat, to the survival of the Balkan lynx in the wild.

Therefore, we call upon Albanian authorities to readdress this case, taking into consideration all the evidence mentioned in this declaration and denounced to the Tirana Prosecutor on 5th June 2020, which later was passed to the Elbasan Prosecutor, by Albanian legislation in compliance with the international treaties that Albania has signed. The critical status of the Balkan lynx entails that the loss of even a single individual can jeopardize the survival of the entire population. Maximum effort should be taken, for the law to adequately addresses poaching cases, to minimize the risk of such occurrences happening again in the future, thereby bringing the Balkan lynx one step closer to extinction. It is also important to emphasize, that the failure of the justice authorities in Albania to seriously consider, exposing environmental crimes, is in contradiction with international law, concretely the Bern Convention, ratified by the Albanian Government. The European Commission has specifically highlighted the killing of the Balkan lynx cases, in the 2021 report for Albania and the failure to seriously pursue such flagrant cases of wildlife crime, which

violates the fulfillment of environmental criteria for the country's association, in the European Union.

There are less than 50 Balkan lynx individuals in the world, therefore classified as Critically Endangered (CR) in the IUCN Red List. It has been listed in Annex II of the Bern Convention (Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats), which foresees stricter protection of this subspecies in range countries, and fosters transboundary cooperation for its conservation. The listing entails that range countries are obliged to make maximum efforts, to ensure the survival and improvement of the population, as well as habitat and prey for the lynx.



Fig. 1. Screenshot from the social media page of Bar Restaurant "Ke Rerema" where two taxidermized individuals of Balkan lynx have been exhibited since 31st January 2017.



Fig. 2. A freshly killed Balkan lynx, likely poached in April-May 2020, exhibited together with two older individuals at the same restaurant in Elbasan