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Raptor monitoring: challenges and benefits

Raptors have fascinated mankind for millennia and, together with harvestable species, have probably been among the first animals to receive some form of nest searching and monitoring. In modern times, raptors are peculiar in terms of monitoring for three reasons. First of all, they are relatively difficult to census, because they often occur at low density and frequently select nest areas with difficult access for humans. Thus, their surveys demand intensive searches over large areas, marked effort in terms of costs and time, and different species often require different census techniques. As a consequence, generalized census methods widely adopted in ornithology, such as point counts, are poorly suited for this group, which necessitate specialized, context- and species-dependent techniques, as also highlighted by Väli and colleagues in this special issue. Second, despite the above challenges, the special charisma and fascination that these species exert on people imply that a very large number of professional biologists and dedicated enthusiasts place what Saurola and Francis define as a 'monumental effort' to census raptors, find their nests, monitor their fates and sometimes ring their chicks and parental adults. For example, I believe that all of us who work with raptors are aware of a multitude of people near their home that spend an enormous quantity and quality of time and effort to monitor the raptor species that so fascinate them. Thus, the difficulty of surveying these species is counter-balanced by a large crowd of well-driven enthusiasts who are fully capable of implementing the required specialized and intensive surveys. Third, however, as an additional complication, many of these raptor observers tend to work alone, sometimes they are as territorial as their study subjects about their data, and are often disconnected from any entity that could coordinate and integrate the work of different individuals at the regional or national scale. This weakens the value of such 'monumental effort' and hampers the detection of


urgent conservation problems, such as sudden or large-scale species declines.

Given the above, ambitious initiatives like the European Raptor Monitoring Network (EURAPMON) are a welcome endeavour for the future conservation of our European raptors. EURAPMON attempts to disseminate and standardize raptor monitoring practices and to provide the link that feeds information from local, to regional, national and international scales. This will enable the appreciation of large-scale population trends together with their regional and local variation, which would provide timely alerts and help to formulate hypotheses about the causes of potential declines, for example by pinpointing the coincidence of declines with the presence or concentration of specific threats.

But raptor monitoring is not just useful for the conservation of raptors themselves. Raptors are often at the top or near the top of food chains and there is growing appreciation in ecology that apex predators may cause or depend on, and thus encapsulate, whole ecosystem properties, from habitat degradation to biodiversity or chemical contamination. Ultimately, this will also inform on the sustainability of anthropogenic activities for ecosystem functioning and on the life support capabilities of our European ecosystems, including for our own species, as well portrayed by Movalli and colleagues in this special issue. Monitoring a large suite of sentinel raptor species at hundreds of large study sites across several countries, as ambitiously attempted by EURAPMON, could be a powerful shortcut to the integrated surveillance of European ecosystems, of the large-scale factors that may threaten them and of their quality for our own lives.

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