

A new strategy against the poisoning of large carnivores and scavenger raptors



LAYMAN'S REPORT



LIFE ANTIDOTO

Summary

Many wild animals die in terrible pain in Europe every year, because they eat a poisoned bait or carcass. There is a long list of animals killed by poison, and in many cases they belong to rare or endangered species at an European, national or regional level. Their survival can be threatened by the use of poison.

This is a silent massacre involving, among others, Wolf, Bear, Iberian lynx, Griffon vulture, Bearded vulture, Egyptian vulture, Red kite and Black kite.

Some of these belong to target species, as it is for the Wolf, which prey on livestock and hutable animals. On the contrary, scavenger raptors are the collateral victims of this non-selective method.

In order to face a hard battle against poisoned baits, the LIFE ANTIDOTO Project has implemented an innovative strategy. It aims at discouraging the use of poison, through three main guidelines: the use of Anti-poison Dog Units, the training of police officers and vets and an awareness-raising process involving stakeholders and general public.



The Anti-Poison Dog Units of LIFE ANTIDOTO

LIFE ANTIDOTO activated two Dog Units in the Gran Sasso e Monti della Laga National Park and another NCA in Aragon, thanks to Andalusia (Junta de Andalucia and AMAYA) which provided ten trained dogs and trained the new conductors in Italy and in Aragon.





The use of poison

Poisoned baits are used in order to protect livestock or huntable species from Wolves and Foxes. This is the "historical" explanation for the use of poison; in some European regions, this harmful practice is one of the main causes of extinction of some species, such as Wolf, Bear and many scavenger raptors; it also poses a risk to their conservation in other areas. More recently, poisoned baits are also used to kill the competitors' truffle hunting dogs, especially in some Italian regions where truffle hunting is a major business.

Poisoning is a large-scale, illegal, deceitful method which enjoys a high degree of impunity and has a huge knock-on effect on wildlife.

In fact, a poisoned bait can also affect the non-target species. The carcass of a poisoned animal can become a deadly bait for other animals, triggering an endless chain of deaths.

The Anti-Poison Dog Units carry on preventive inspections on a regular basis and urgent missions, when a supposedly poisoned bait or carcass is found.

Dogs are able to detect poisoned baits and carcasses and they can also check buildings and vehicles.

The recovered material is examined by the veterinarians working for the Park and for Aragon Region; if necessary, it is transferred to the laboratories in order to confirm poisoning and identify the toxic chemicals.





The Anti-Poison Dog Units of the Gran Sasso-Laga Park

The first NCA of the Gran Sasso-Laga Park is composed of Maya and Karma, two agile Belgian Malinois, and of Datcha, a joyful border collie: they operate under the guidance of their conductor, Alberto Angelini.

The second NCA is composed of Dingo, an attentive Belgian Malinois and Jonai, a phlegmatic black labrador; they are led by Alessandra Mango, Superintendent of the Territorial Coordination for Environment of the Italian State Forestry Corps (CTA / CFS).

Between August 2010 and March 2014, the Dog Units carried out 135 periodic inspections in the Park and 76 urgent inspections, many of them in different protected areas in Italy. In 14 of the 76 urgent inspections they identified some baits and carcasses and they removed 35 poisoned baits, a group of other baits and 12 poisoned carcasses.



Anti-Poison Dog Units (NCA)

It is nearly impossible to find a poisoned bait in a natural environment, even through targeted inspections in a delimited area. Only the Anti-Poison Dog Units are able to check large areas thanks to dog's olfactory ability; the Units are formed of dogs trained to search for poisoned baits and carcasses under the guidance of an experienced conductor; they can also decontaminate a given territory and identify all the elements which were affected by poison.

The Anti-Poison Dog Units play a fundamental role in preventing animal deaths and supporting police investigations.

Andalusia was the first European Region to adopt an Anti-Poison Dog Unit, in 2007; this tool immediately proved its own efficiency.

The Anti-Poison Dog Unit of Aragon

The Aragonese NCA is composed of Dune, Yus and Sultan, three energetic labrador retriever, Merlin, a very expert golden retriever, and Yelka, a young German shepherd. Between August 2011 and December 2013, the Dog Unit carried out 95 preventive inspections and 60 urgent inspections, 7 of which outside of Aragon (Navarre, La Rioja and Castilla y León). In 59 cases, the NCA found circumstantial evidence; in two cases poisoning has been confirmed by clinical analysis.

Training of police forces and vets

When police officers or vets find baits or carcasses, the adoption of specific protocols is a big step towards investigating and decontaminating a territory. In order to train up police forces and vets, in Italy, three training courses were held, involving officers from the Italian State Forestry Corps and other police forces (Provincial Police, environment officers from protected areas etc), as well as veterinarians. In Andalusia, two courses were organized and held, involving environment officers from Andalusia, officers of the Italian State Forestry Corps and Environment officers of Gobierno de Aragón. In Aragon, a course was organized for the staff members of SEPRONA (Servicio de Protección de la Naturaleza de la Guardia Civil).



In addition, the vet working for the Gran Sasso-Laga Park has taken an internship in Aragon, at the Wildlife Rescue Centre of La Alfranca (Zaragoza).

In order to support the training process, a booklet for the Italian State Forestry Corps and an operating manual for the veterinary management of cases of suspected poisoning of domestic and wild animals were published by the Gran Sasso-Laga Park, with the cooperation of Dr. Chabier Gonzalez, vet from Aragon.



Public awareness raising

Raising public awareness is essential in order to prevent the use of poison. This method has to be perceived as a barbaric, useless and hateful practice; it is also important to bring the activity carried out by the Anti-Poison dog units and by environment officers to the widest possible notice among the public.

In the Gran Sasso-Laga Park, meetings were held with the staff members of 8 large farms; 37 meetings were held with tour operators. Many educational activities in schools were arranged, involving 330 students. A study based on participatory communication was also developed.

In Andalusia, thanks to ANTIDOTO, 805 meetings with the interested parties (hunters, farmers, staff members of hunting companies etc..) were held, in those areas where the use of poison is very common and there are rare species of scavenger raptors.

In Aragon 37 meetings in 31 different rural areas were held, involving 622 people including SEPRONA officers and rangers.





Awareness in Italy

In Italy, before ANTIDOTO, there was only a poor knowledge of this problem. The Gran Sasso-Laga Park spared no effort to bring the problem to the widest possible notice among the competent subjects by developing many initiatives in order to boost knowledge about the illegal use of poison and and to take effective measures to deal with it.

Five events were organized, involving over 560 professionals.

The ANTIDOTO staff members spoke about the LIFE ANTIDOTO Project and other issues related to the illegal use of poison and its effects on wildlife during 9 conferences and 17 seminars, organized by different stakeholders both at a national and European level.

A specific dissemination campaign, involving about 400 entities, institutions and other actors was activated in order to communicate the Strategy against the use of poison in Italy; this publication not only provides information about the current legislation and the use of poison (acquired through a specific study carried out by the National Reference Centre for Forensic Veterinary Medicine), but also explains how to organize and manage an Anti-Poison dog Unit and suggests some measures and regulations in order to repress

the use of poison, by proposing a specific legislation. As ANTIDOTO Project became more and more popular, many organizations requested the intervention of

the Anti-Poison Dog Units of the Park; in addition, they launched some initiatives against the use of poison (courses, workshops, activation of new Anti-Poison Dog Units), also requiring the support of the staff members of ANTIDOTO.





Training and information material

In an attempt to raise the public awareness several products were released: three general brochures (one for each area of the project), a documentary DVD (Italian and Spanish versions), an educational booklet for kids and a booklet for farmers (in Italy).



The website

The website www.lifeantidoto.it had 20.850 hits; over 50 new items were published. The PDF version of the products related to the actions have been downloaded more than 12.500 times.





Collaborators in Italy

In Italy, the ANTIDOTO LIFE project received special collaboration from the Italian State Forestry Corps, which directly manages one of the Anti-Poison Dog Units and has cooperated in many educational activities; the project also received the support of the National Reference Centre for Forensic Veterinary Medicine of Lazio and Tuscany's Zooprophyllactic Institute, which provided a valuable contribution to the realization of studies, publications and training courses.

Eukanuba provided free food for the dogs operating with the two Anti-Poison Dog Units.



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