

# BALANCING HUNTING CULTURE AND NATURE CONSERVATION IN SYRIA AND LEBANON

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MAINSTREAMING  
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SSCW

## BALANCING HUNTING CULTURE AND NATURE CONSERVATION IN SYRIA AND LEBANON

*Hunting, as well as being part of national traditions with deep cultural roots, provides many families with food and income. Hunting is a valued hobby in the region, and linked to manhood. It has contributed to the tourism economy in Syria and Lebanon. However, unregulated numbers of national and foreign shooters have contributed to severe declines of many globally threatened and vulnerable species*

### ILLEGAL ACTIVITY DRIVING BIRD POPULATION DECLINES

Widespread and largely indiscriminate hunting threatens many species of soaring birds as they migrate between Europe, Western and Central Asia and Africa. The threat is greatest on the Red Sea/Rift Valley flyway<sup>1</sup>, as the area is a bottleneck for these birds whilst on passage. Conservation organisations in Syria and Lebanon have worked to improve legislation and hunting practice, in order to reduce irresponsible hunting.

It is estimated that tens of thousands of migratory birds are shot annually in Lebanon, and more than 100,000 in Syria (prior to the outbreak of hostilities). Far more are hunted across the rest of the Middle Eastern and Mediterranean region. This has led to the likely extinction from the wild of the Northern Bald Ibis (*Geronticus eremita*) in the region. Hunting has also been of considerable concern for other migratory birds, in particular soaring species, many of which are slow to reproduce, which makes their populations more vulnerable to the impacts of hunting.

### ADDRESSING THE ISSUE THROUGH COLLABORATION

Tackling hunting is one element of the Migratory Soaring Birds (MSB) Project. This Project, led by BirdLife International (financed by the Global Environment Facility and supported by the United Nations Development Programme), aims to mainstream the MSB into five sectors (agriculture, tourism, energy, waste management and hunting), to address a range of threats to birds along the Red Sea/Rift Valley Flyway.

<sup>1</sup> Soaring birds are land birds, such as cranes and vultures, which sustain flight for long periods without flapping their wings. These birds rely on warm air currents over land to glide, and this creates bottlenecks and narrow flight corridors in certain areas. A flyway is the geographical area covered by a migrating bird, including breeding and non-breeding grounds, and the routes taken between them.

In Lebanon, the MSB Project is hosted by the Ministry of Environment, with technical support from the Society for the Protection of Nature in Lebanon (SPNL, BirdLife Partner in this country). In Syria, there is a similar arrangement, also supported by the national BirdLife Partner, the Syrian Society for Conservation of Wildlife (SSCW).

The Project promotes the principles of responsible hunting, including adhering to legislation, to reduce impacts on bird populations to a minimum. Participation of hunters in the discussions has been fundamental to progress so far.

In both Syria and Lebanon, national governments, ministries and Higher Councils for Hunting (HCH) play critical roles in regulating hunting activity. The Councils include representatives from ministries, hunting organizations and conservation NGOs, and are thus forums that allow open discussion between all interested parties.

### LEGISLATING FOR RESPONSIBLE HUNTING

Hunting of all wildlife was banned completely in Syria in 1994 and in Lebanon in 1995, after declines in bird numbers. This ban was initially well observed, but then enforcement weakened to the point where the ban became unworkable. To halt the illegal killing, updates of old hunting laws were needed.

In Lebanon, a new law was finally passed in 2004, allowing the shooting of some common species and laying down penalties for hunting of all other non-game species. Although this new law was issued, to be enforced it needed detailed 'application decrees', thus illegal activities remained as a major driver of biodiversity loss. Therefore, the SPNL worked with the HCH to raise concerns about the need for the legislation to be enforced, and for further integration of biodiversity concerns.

Finally, in 2014, all application decrees for the hunting law were issued, defining hunting season, permitted species and licensing and enforcement procedures. The legal process is complete and awaits official announcement. The SPNL has promoted the concept of Responsible Hunting Areas, where hunting is permitted under the control of the local municipal authority, in order to support law enforcement.



In Syria, in 2012, the SSCW advocated for the government to set up a plan, to revise the Syrian Hunting Law under the auspices of HCH. The SSCW helped draft the first revision to this law in more than 45 years, and to finalise its regulatory articles. This process is now complete and awaiting official issue. The SSCW and governmental bodies also sought alternative means of income for hunters, including training to become wardens and ecotourism bird guides.

## BIRDS AND CULTURE – REVIVING TRADITIONS WITHOUT GENERATING THREATS

Information and a series of tools have been instrumental in the decisions to be made. Misconceptions that migratory soaring birds are not resident in Syria and Lebanon, or that they do not form part of national biodiversity and their conservation is thus a lower priority than resident species, were among the challenges met by the MSB project team and other national stakeholders. Extensive communication work has been essential in raising awareness of the impacts of hunting, and the global importance of protecting these birds.

A Regional Declaration on Responsible Hunting was signed in 2013 by hunters from Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, Yemen and Ethiopia, committing to work towards the revival of the region’s traditional heritage in responsible hunting, to improve their role in hunting control, and promote responsible hunting principles.

All signatories to the Declaration also accepted a ‘Code of Best Practices for Hunters and Hunting Groups for Responsible Hunting and the Full Protection on Migratory Soaring Birds’, which contains principles and practical guidance on responsible and legal hunting. Many of the hunters who signed the Declaration expressed their aspiration to create national responsible hunting groups and clubs, with this Code as their core value. A similar Declaration was developed for manufacturers and traders of hunting equipment.

Other important material the MSB Project developed, in collaboration with national BirdLife Partners, includes a Soaring Bird Sensitivity Map that shows critical areas for birds along the flyway. In addition, the SPNL developed a manual for bird identification, Field Guide to the Soaring Birds in Lebanon, and a Soaring Birds Atlas in Lebanon, amongst others. In their respective countries, the SPNL and SSCW produced hunter manuals as well as a guide for the hunting permit exam. In Lebanon, several training workshops were carried out to build the capacity of the hunting law enforcers (ISF – Internal Security Forces, forests guards and nature reserves guards), including bird identification and, for the hunting clubs, on the approach that should be adopted to run the hunting permit exams.



MSB Project, SPNL & SSCW

## IMPLEMENTATION: CAUGHT IN THE CONFLICT

Inevitably, the monitoring and implementation of recent decisions targeting responsible hunting are affected by the current political instability and conflict. Gathering further data on bird populations and levels of hunting that would inform on outcome of decisions is, however, at an early stage and currently difficult.

The legal reforms in Lebanon are yet to be enforced on the ground, while the final step to bring the Syrian legal changes into force is held up by the instability. In Syria, the approaches adopted with local communities near the Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas of Tadmor (Palmyra) and Lake Jabboul were expected to bring benefits on a national scale, but both regions have changed hands in the ongoing conflict.

## CHANGING MINDS, PROTECTING BIRDS

The legislative reforms provide a critical framework for moving the hunting sector towards sustainable practices, but success depends on implementation. This needs investment in effective enforcement, and in finding ways to change the minds of some individual hunters, either by educating them to enjoy birds without hunting them



irresponsibly, or providing alternatives to those who depend financially on hunting activities.

Despite these challenges, revisions to hunting laws and the completed communication actions provide a foundation to integrate conservation into hunting.

*More information at:*

- [www.migratorysoaringbirds.undp.birdlife.org/en/project](http://www.migratorysoaringbirds.undp.birdlife.org/en/project)
- [www.spnl.org/sustainable-hunting/](http://www.spnl.org/sustainable-hunting/)
- [www.sscw-syria.org](http://www.sscw-syria.org)

*Factsheets:*

- Integrating protection of migratory soaring birds into Egypt's renewable energy sector.
- International investment in renewable energy: safeguarding migrating birds along the Red Sea/Rift Valley flyway.

*For more information contact:*

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