

Strasbourg, 10 September 2015
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T-PVS/Notes (2015) 3

CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE
AND NATURAL HABITATS

Standing Committee

35th meeting
Strasbourg, 1-4 December 2015

APPLICATION OF THE CONVENTION

- Summary of case files and complaints -

SEPTEMBER 2015

*Secretariat memorandum
prepared by
the Directorate of Democratic Governance*

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CONVENTION: FILES

1.1 Specific sites - Files open

➤ 2004/1: Ukraine: Project for a waterway in the Bystroe estuary (Danube delta)

(IdA)

This case concerns the excavation of a shipping canal in Bystroe estuary of the Danube delta in Ukraine, which is likely to affect adversely both the Ukrainian Danube Biosphere Reserve – the most important of Ukraine’s wetlands – and the whole Danube delta dynamics.

The first phase of the project was conducted in 2004.

The same year the Standing Committee adopted Recommendation No.111 (2004) on the proposed navigable waterway through the Bystroe estuary (Danube Delta), inviting Ukraine to suspend works, except for the completion of phase I, and not to proceed with phase II of the project until certain conditions were met.

In 2008, Ukraine informed the Secretariat of the repeal of the Final Decision regarding Phase II of the Project, confirmed that the amended and updated EIA documentation would be sent to the Secretariat, and that measures would be undertaken to ensure public consultation and participation on this Project. Furthermore, the Secretariat was informed that a document entitled “Draft Time-Schedule” had been signed with the Romanian authorities for further mutual implementation of the steps to be taken by both countries.

In March 2009, the Ukrainian authorities reported to the Secretariat confirming the repeal of the Final Decision regarding Phase II of the Project, in line with Recommendation 111 (2004) of Bern Convention. The report also confirmed that “the works on the Phase II never started and are not going to start until the appropriate procedures are being implemented”.

At the 2009 meeting of the Standing Committee, the delegate of Ukraine outlined the measures taken by his government, including the initiative to collaborate with the International Commission on the Protection of the Danube River regarding research and monitoring of the transboundary part of the Danube Delta. The Standing Committee welcomed the positive co-operation underway between Ukraine and Romania, but it agreed to keep the case file open and asked Ukraine to continue to report to in 2010.

In March 2010, the European Union informed the Council of Europe that Ukraine adopted a final decision on the project at the end of January 2010. Ukraine decided to start works related to the full-scale implementation of the Danube-Black Sea Navigation Route, thus initiating the implementation of Phase II of the Bystroe Channel project.

The Secretariat asked Ukrainian authorities to inform on the issue; however, the national report was only sent on 1st December 2010, a day before the Standing Committee meeting.

Following a long discussion and after calling for an improved and regular exchange of information with the Secretariat, the Standing Committee decided to keep the case file open and agreed to set-up a Select Group of Experts to facilitate dialogue on the issue. The Group should have met after relevant Parties and the Chair of the Standing Committee agree on the terms of reference. These were sent to both Parties in January 2011; however, the Ukrainian Party was not in a position to agree on them.

In September 2011 the Bureau expressed again strong dissatisfaction towards the lack of communication from Ukrainian authorities and decided to keep the case-file opened, as well as to request to Ukraine a detailed report on the state of implementation of the Danube-Black Sea Navigation Route, as well as on the compliance with the Standing Committee Recommendation (2004) 111.

At the 31st Standing Committee meeting, the delegate of Ukraine presented the government report, stressing that - according to the data collected through the monitoring process - no negative impacts for the Bern Convention species and habitats, as well as for the Romanian delta ecosystems could be

identified in relation with the Bystroe Channel project. He further recalled that Ukraine proposed to elaborate a common Plan for the management of the basin of the Danube Delta within the framework of the International Commission for the Protection of Danube River. He informed about the content of the EIA which was elaborated by a pool of independent experts and concluded by stating that Phase II of the Bystroe Channel project had not started.

The delegate of Romania contested the quality of the EIA and, although he welcomed the monitoring project, he further stressed that this was not sufficient to erase the concerns related to the digging of a channel in the Danube delta. He concluded by recalling that both the Aarhus and Espoo Convention issued warnings to Ukraine for possible non-compliance.

The Committee decided to keep the case-file open asking the three concerned Parties for updated reports on the implementation of the provisions included in Recommendation No. 111 (2004).

In February 2012 **Ukrainian authorities** sent a full report highlighting that the works related to the implementation of Phase II of the Bystroe Channel project did not start. Moreover, according to the report, Ukraine prepared an EIA which was handed to the Government of Romania and discussed by a panel of international experts before being amended – in 2008 - according to the comments made; a separate analysis of the impacts of the full implementation of the Channel in a transboundary context was also available; public hearings on the issue were organised without the cooperation of the Romanian government. Ukrainian government further affirmed having looked into all possible alternatives to the route of the waterway before deciding to consider the Bystroe one.

Regarding the ecological compensation and mitigation of possible damages to the environment, the Ukrainian government informed having identified specific measures to mitigate the potential negative transboundary environmental impact of the Bystroe project.

Finally Ukraine informed of a number of initiatives implemented since 2004, including long-term hydrobiological studies for 2004-2011 whose conclusions would allow affirming the absence of direct impact of the renewing and maintenance of waterway Danube Black Sea to the biotic communities of phytoplankton, zooplankton, zoobenthos, fish fauna, with only a few local and limited exceptions.

The report submitted in February 2012 by the **authorities of the Republic of Moldova** informed on different mechanisms for trilateral co-operation among which the implementation of the Agreement for the Establishment and Management of a Cross-Border Protected Area between the Republic of Moldova, Romania and Ukraine in the Danube Delta and the Lower Prut Nature Protected Areas. The report stressed the strong political will of the Joint Commission towards the full implementation of existing legal instruments, scientific and technical co-operation at the Delta level, a stable socio-economic context in the Delta, exchange of information, data and methodologies, and long-term harmonised monitoring.

In a report submitted in March 2012 the **authorities of Romania** informed that Ukraine had finalised the implementation of Phase I of the Bystroe project and completed some of the works foreseen in the framework of Phase II (such as the retaining dam off the mouth of the Bystroe branch of the Danube, which was continuously extended until it reached the length envisaged for Phase II of the project). Romanian authorities recognised that Ukraine had taken some positive steps in order to comply with its obligations. However, they pointed out that the works in the area had steadily continued (including maintenance dredging to reach navigational depths and work at the engineering structures in the Ukrainian side). The authorities further regretted that the bilateral cooperation was interrupted with the notification, by the authorities of Ukraine, of the “final decision” regarding the construction of the deep navigation canal, without taking into account the concern expressed by the Romanian authorities (including the persistence of gaps in the EIA). Romania maintained its view that, in its design, the project posed significant risks of an adverse impact on the environment, including on the territory of Romania.

The report further stressed that the decision V/4 adopted by the Meeting of the Parties to the Espoo Convention at its fifth session (Geneva, 20-23 June 2011) endorsed the finding of the Implementation Committee established under this Convention that, while Ukraine had fulfilled some of its obligations

under paragraph 10 of decision IV/2 with respect to both phases of the Bystroe Canal project, it had not fulfilled all of these obligations. The finding of Implementation Committee was caused by the failure of Ukraine to comply with the request of the Committee to provide a written statement confirming clearly and unambiguously that the conditions imposed in the Decision IV/2 of the Meeting of the Parties have been met.

The Bureau acknowledged good progress in communication from all the concerned Parties, who generally submitted their reports within the deadlines and focussed on key information. However, it requested to Ukrainian authorities to make available the English translation of both the EIA and the analysis of the impacts of the full implementation of the Channel in a transboundary context.

In August 2012 Ukraine sent both the EIA (as amended in 2009) and the analysis of the impact in a transboundary context. These documents concluded that the Bystroe option would represent 'the least-impact' alternative to the UNESCO Danube Biosphere reserve (DBR) in terms of long-term viability with respect to the sustainable natural resource management and suitable governance of anthropogenic activities taking place in the areas of the Bystroe Branch.

After assessing the requested documents, the Bureau - meeting in September – decided to keep the case file open and forwarded the EIAs and its annexes to the Secretariats of other relevant international Agreements for comments.

By the 32nd Standing Committee meeting only the WWF was able to provide the Secretariat with a written opinion. According to WWF analysis, the EIA seemed to comply with the formal requirements of EIA but actually failed to address concrete relevant issues, as for instance: lack of assessment of emergency situations, persistence of knowledge gaps and high level of uncertainties; some concerns were also expressed at the level of the post-project analysis of results of the monitoring and management programmes, the social and economic forecasts, the latest hydro-morphological changes in the Delta, the cumulative environmental impact in the transboundary context. Moreover, WWF considered that the list of measures to reduce the negative impact did not contain institutional arrangements.

The delegate of Ukraine presented the EIA stressing that the document went through the assessment of 17 international experts. He explained that the EIA addressed additional aspects that were not considered in previous reports, including a rationale conduct for the transboundary EIA process, information on the socio-economic situation in the areas of the Lower Danube Basin, scientific projections to determine the potential impact of Phase II on the restoration of the environment in the affected zones, an updated assessment of transboundary aspects of some project activities and their habitat loss, considerations of alternative navigation routes and their possible environmental impact. Annex II had been particularly developed to secure answers to questions and comments expressed by the Romanian NGOs, International Non-Governmental Organizations, Romanian Public and representatives of the Romanian authorities. The delegate of Ukraine concluded by informing that the Ramsar Convention stopped monitoring this file after considering that the conservation of the concerned wetlands is satisfactory.

The delegate of Romania thanked Ukrainian authorities for the efforts in improving communication. Yet, he noted several gaps and shortcoming in the EIA. For instance, the mathematical modelling used by Ukraine, based on data which were not transmitted to the Romanian side, despite several requests in this sense. Moreover, according to the authorities of Romania, the EIA focused almost exclusively on the impact of the works on the Ukrainian side of the Delta while the transboundary impact had not been properly assessed. In conclusion, the authorities of Romania were completely-reassured by the EIA since this did not address all the environmental consequences rising up from the project and the consultations undertaken under the Espoo Convention where not duly taken into account. Romania finally requested that the impact of project is further assessed before continuing with the implementation of Phase two.

Following a ballot, the Committee decided to keep the case file open and instructed the Secretariat to reiterate its requests for feedback to the other concerned stakeholders.

In January 2013 the Secretariat addressed a reminder to the EU, UNESCO, the Espoo Convention, the WCMC and the Ramsar Convention for their views on the EIA.

The Ramsar Convention confirmed that the file opened under Article 3.2 of the Convention (human-induced negative changes) had been closed, together with the file related to the Dniestr River Delta, after the submission of information and reports by Ukraine at the occasion of the 11th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Ramsar Convention. The decision was based both on the information submitted and on the consideration that the Ramsar Administrative Authority in Kyiv took the responsibility to declare publicly that no negative change will occur through the planned works..

Regarding the request of comments on the EIA, the Ramsar Secretariat suggested that a meaningful and thorough analysis of this document would need a specifically committed study for which apposite funds should be allocated.

The report submitted in March 2013 by the European Commission summarised the information provided in previous reporting while waiting for the possible adoption by the Parliament of Ukraine of the draft law on Environmental Impact Assessment in Transboundary Context.

The Bureau held a long discussion on the possible follow-up to this complaint, including options such as: sending the file to the Standing Committee as it stand; setting up a working group tasked to analyse the EIA, or even closing the file in order to ensure coherence with the position taken by the Ramsar Convention. However, taking into account the outstanding biological diversity of the concerned area, and willing to find a satisfactory solution for all, the Bureau instructed the Secretariat to contact the three concerned States with the request of convening as soon as possible a meeting of the Joint Commission in order to inform the Standing Committee on the state of transboundary cooperation.

In the report submitted in July 2013, Ukrainian authorities informed having sent official letters to the correspondent authorities of Romania and the Republic of Moldova, inviting them to convene a meeting of the Joint Commission, according to what the Bureau requested.

The report submitted end of August by the authorities of the Republic of Moldova informed that a meeting between the Deputy Minister of Environment (Republic of Moldova), representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration (Republic of Moldova) and representatives of the Embassy of Ukraine in the Republic of Moldova took place in June 2013.

The meeting was organised at the request of the Ukrainian Embassy in Chisinau who presented the measures taken by Ukraine to comply with the recommendations made by the Standing Committee to the Bern Convention. The report further recalled that the last meeting of the Commission was convened on 11 March 2011. According to the Agreement, by the end of 2011 Romania had to hold a meeting, but this did not take place as Ukraine was unable to attend. The rotation order for the Chair should be Romania, Ukraine, and the Republic of Moldova, but the report affirmed that none of the Parties took the initiative of officially convening a meeting since 2011.

In a letter sent in August 2013, the Permanent Representative of Romania before the Council of Europe informed that Romania was taking all necessary steps for convening a meeting of the Joint Commission. Moreover, the letter informed that in March 2013 Ukraine provided the Danube Commission Secretariat with the details of the full implementation of the “Danube – Black Sea” canal, in apparent contradiction with what stated at the previous Standing Committee Meeting. The deadline for the completion of the work had been established at 30 months. The letter further recalled that the Decision of Ukrainian authorities to finalise the Bystroe Channel project had not been cancelled or suspended and thus there was no national impediment to its implementation. The Permanent Representative concluded by noting that the attention given to this complaint by a number of International treaties initiated a transboundary consultation process which was still in progress.

In addition, in August 2013 the Secretariat received the reply of the ESPOO Convention, recalling that the matter had been subject to findings and recommendations by the Implementation Committee since Romania expressed its concern, back in 2004. Two decisions by the MoP were also taken on the issue,

declaring effective the caution to the Government of Ukraine (in 2011) and requesting the authorities of this country to inform on steps taken to bring into full compliance the Danube-Black Sea Deep Water Navigation Canal in the Ukrainian sector of the Danube Delta, as well as on the implementation of the strategy of the Government of Ukraine to implement the ESPOO Convention.

The Secretariat of the ESPOO Convention also recalled that, in November 2012, the Implementation Committee decided to start drafting recommendations to assist Ukraine in complying with its obligations under the Convention at its twenty-eighth session (10–12 September 2013). The recommendations would be drafted on the basis of the information submitted by Ukraine in December 2012, as well as on the additional information that Ukraine was requested to send by 27 August 2013.

At its meeting in September the Bureau welcomed the reports submitted by the Parties, but noted that there was still no proposal or agreement on a possible date for a meeting of the Joint Commission, and regretted the lengthy and somehow dispersed dialogue on this issue. It recalled that the Joint Commission was set up to provide a framework for a true and constructive cooperation and requested the Parties to show real commitment in this sense.

The Bureau decided to keep the file open and requested again that three concerned states – Ukraine, Romania and the Republic of Moldova – convene as soon as possible a meeting of the Joint Commission and inform the Standing Committee at least on the date of the meeting as well as on the state of trans-boundary cooperation.

At the 33rd Standing Committee meeting, the Delegate of Ukraine informed that a meeting of the Joint Commission was organised on 28th November, hosted by Romania. He said that the meeting was indeed a good opportunity for discussing national and international monitoring results, as well as the development of projects and joint activities to be implemented in the short term. The meeting served to plan future co-operation of the three concerned Parties based on an agreed list of priority activities. The Commission highlighted the importance of the common bilateral and trilateral large scale joint projects, including projects within the framework of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region and future Cross border Co-operation Programmes funded by the European Union.

The Delegate further confirmed that the authorities suspended activities in the area after the Phase 1 of the project and did not start the new phase. The Delegate stressed that Ukraine was taking appropriate measures to enhance the conservation status of the Danube Biosphere Reserve and to expand its territory and concluded by asking to note the efforts shown by his country to honour the provisions of the Standing Committee.

The Delegate of Romania agreed that the second meeting of the Joint Commission was positive in the sense that some progress was made by the three Parties to jointly find a way forward in respect of the issue of the canal. He stressed that on that occasion Romania asked Ukraine to provide information on the works carried out so far and on the authorities' intention to proceed with the full scale implementation of the project. However, Romania reiterated its request to receive a clear answer on a decision of the Ukrainian competent authorities to implement or renounce to implement the Phase 2 of the project.

Furthermore, the Delegate of Romania recalled the results of the studies and monitoring activity carried out by his authorities on the works implemented until now in the Ukrainian side of the Canal, showing that the Bystroe Project had already a significant impact on the Romanian territory, particularly for what concerns the hydrological conditions of the area. Therefore he reiterated Romania's strong opposition to the implementation of Phase II of the project, and underlined the need for the impact of the works on the Romanian territory to be properly and comprehensively assessed by the Ukrainian side.

The Committee welcomed the dialogue and co-operation re-established by the three concerned Parties and noted with satisfaction that a third meeting of the Commission should be organised and held in Ukraine in May 2014. Considering that it could be useful to examine the report of the meeting of the Joint

Commission, and noting that the matter would also be assessed by the Committee of the ESPOO Convention at its 29th meeting the Committee decided to keep the case file open and gave mandate to the Bureau for ensuring the follow-up to this complaint until the next Standing Committee meeting.

The Secretariat received the report of the 2nd meeting of the Joint Commission already in January 2014. The latter confirmed the adoption of a list of priority activities based on a proposal by Romania. These included the coordination of the initiatives of the parties concerning the natural protected area of the Danube Delta and the Lower Prut, the development of joint management and monitoring programmes, the identification of possible EU grants, the possible creation of a trilateral biosphere reserve, among others. The meeting was also the occasion for an exchange of knowledge and information on the status of the respective nationally protected areas subject to the Agreement, as well as on the advancement of the common projects developed within the framework of the trilateral cooperation. However, from the report it was clear that Ukraine and Romania could not find agreement on the findings of the respective impact assessments.

In March 2014, the ESPOO Convention provided the Secretariat with an updated report, informing about the latest developments following the 29th session of the ESPOO Committee meeting. In fact, although Ukraine had submitted its report within the deadlines fixed under the ESPOO Convention, the Committee at its December session found that the information provided was not sufficient to allow for the conclusions on the matter. The issue was reported at the February session, the last before the MoP (June 2014) where the Committee was obliged to reach some conclusions. Although the Committee welcomed the timely submission by Ukraine of the requested information, it regretted that Ukraine had still failed to provide complete and specific information on the progress concerning the implementation of the ESPOO Convention, the adoption of the necessary legislation, and the specific actions to bring the project for the Bystroe Canal Project in full compliance with the Convention. Moreover, the Committee considered that the decisions by Ukraine to continue dredging activities might indicate a further breach of the obligations under the ESPOO Convention. The conclusion of the Committee was that it had no basis to recommend to the MOP to revise its recommendations set out in decision V/4 concerning compliance by Ukraine, including that the caution issued at MOP-4 remain effective. The decision was then fully endorsed by the Parties at MOP-4.

In April 2014 the Bureau deeply discussed this case-file and regretted to admit the difficulties faced by the governing bodies of the Convention in dealing with this complaint.

Among the major obstacles identified against a satisfactory solution of the case, the Bureau noted again the lack of clarity regarding the situation on the ground, the different views of the two main concerned Parties regarding the possible negative impact of the work on the ecosystem, and the diverging positions regarding the status of implementation of the Phase II of the project. In addition, the Bureau recognised again the need to urgently work towards reducing at minimum levels any negative impact and ensure that adequate compensatory measures for the works already finalised are implemented and monitored by a supervisory body.

In the light of the above, the Bureau decided to keep the case-file open and instructed the Secretariat to prepare a short note about how the Convention has in the past dealt with similar case-files, and possible scenarios for handling the present one at its next Committee meeting.

The Secretariat prepared an Information Note on the Bystroe Case-file, including a short reminder of the procedure set-up for dealing with case-files in general, as well as factual information regarding complaint n° 1986/8 on *Caretta caretta* in Laganas Bay, Greece. Moreover, the note provided an overview of the options that the Standing Committee could have regarding the present complaint, including the advantages and disadvantages of each option, as well as a summary of the main decisions of the Standing Committee since the case was open, back in 2004.

Among the possible scenarios the Secretariat identified the following three:

- a) Keeping the case file open;

b) Closing the file with a declaration of failure to comply with the decisions and recommendations of the Standing Committee. The Committee might also wish to emphasise on the right foreseen under Article 18 and on the relevance of cooperation for the effective exploitation of the case-file system.

c) Closing the file as mentioned above, with a recommendation for the implementation of compensatory and mitigation measures to reduce the impact of the works already realised. The task of identifying the relevant compensatory and mitigation measures could be entrusted to the Joint Commission as a way to ensure that all concerned Parties take the responsibility in the resolution of the problem, and the ownership of the recommended actions. The Joint Commission could be called to report to the Standing Committee on an annual basis.

After a careful discussion, the Bureau decided to advise the Standing Committee to keep the case-file open for one more year, in order to be able to gather objective and specific information on the situation, also in view of the preparation of a possible new draft Recommendation, based on the views, data and opinion of the Joint Commission. At the last Standing Committee meeting the discussions focussed on how to solve this complaint. The Committee agreed that for a solution to be found, Parties must be able to receive and assess tangible results of the cooperation between the Parties, including their own proposals of possible ways out.

Therefore the Committee decided to keep the case-file open for one more year, and to request to the Trilateral Commission to organise a meeting in the first half of 2015. The Trilateral Commission should address the issues at stake in the Bystroe estuary case file, and forward a report to the Bureau for assessment at its meeting in September 2015. The Bureau will then take a position on the case-file and prepare a proposal.

The Secretariat forwarded the decision of the Standing Committee to the three concerned Parties, with the request of updating the Bureau on the state of preparation of the next meeting of the Trilateral Commission.

In reply to this, Ukraine informed that the Ukrainian Ministry of Environment invited the correspondent authorities of both Romania and the Republic of Moldova to hold the third meeting of the Joint Commission on 27-28 May 2015. The items to be discussed would be the implementation of Recommendation No. 111 (2004), as well as the conservation status of key species present in the Danube Delta and listed in the annexes of the Bern Convention. The meeting should also serve for an exchange of information in light of the preparation of a series of recommended actions intended to improve the situation in the area.

At its meeting in March 2015 the Bureau congratulated the parties for their cooperation and asked Ukrainian authorities to forward the report of the meeting of the Trilateral Commission, together with a list of agreed recommended actions.

In a letter received on 1st September, Ukrainian authorities informed about their approval of a draft Protocol resulting from the meeting of the Trilateral Commission. The Protocol contains the Commission's proposals on priority activities for the next period, as agreed by the concerned parties.

The document has been addressed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine for signature to the Ministries of Environment of the Republic of Moldova and Romania.

Among the main decisions, the parties agreed to:

1. Set-up a specific working group to develop and implement detailed monitoring programmes for fish, with special focus on the sturgeon. An additional effort will be done for harmonising national legislations with EU standards, as well as for addressing poaching and bycatch;
2. Implement joint monitoring programmes to assess the conservation status of strictly protected species under the Bern Convention, identify the causes of impacts on these, and monitor the environmental state of the Danube Delta (the latter with the support of the EU, where possible). In this respect, the joint Commission decided to set-up a Working Group that will prepare an

implementation plan based on a draft Scientific Monitoring Programme prepared and proposed by Romania. The latter also offered resources to carry out the monitoring;

3. Convene next meeting of the joint Commission in Odessa, Ukraine, in October 2015.

The parties further discussed issues related to possible EU grants for trilateral projects; steps towards the creation of a trilateral biosphere reserve and its future common coordination; the possibility of creating a permanent Secretariat for the Joint Commission, to enable efficient joint management of the relevant protected areas.

On the present case-file, Ukraine presented the results of the monitoring carried out over the period 2004-2014, reiterating that this included – among others - the assessment of the impact of the deep-water navigable channel on the environment, as well as the assessment of cumulative impacts of shipping upon the condition of land and water ecosystems. Controls of water quality and hydrological conditions, monitoring of fish fauna, and long-term observations of dynamics of the delta seaside and river bed processes with the use of space images were also carried out. According to Ukraine, this long-term work carried out in the Ukrainian part of the channel confirmed that its impact is limited and localised, and that the channel would not lead to considerable changes in the main parameters of the environment and biodiversity in the Danube Delta. Also, Ukraine excludes any transboundary impact of dredging and soil dumping at the sea dumping site on the Romanian territory. Finally, Ukraine informed that the monitoring was carried out by Ukrainian nationals.

Besides, Romania presented the results of monitoring of birds in the south of the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve, noting a substantial reduction of certain bird colonies due to disturbance of the reclaimed lands at the exit from the Danube Delta. Also, Romania drew the attention to a possible impact of dredging works upon the state of fry and adults of the migrating sturgeon species which, in its views, had not been properly assessed.

In conclusions, Ukraine presented a report on the implementation of Recommendation 111 (2004) and asked the joint Commission to forward it to the Standing Committee for the closure of the complaint. The parties agreed that the document presented by Ukraine represented only Ukraine's views on the matter.

In its report, Ukraine confirmed that works related to Phase II of the project are not yet implemented. An EIA procedure is going on, in compliance with Espoo requirements. Ukrainian authorities informed that the authorities of Romania decided to consider Phase II as a new project and abandon the claims on the first phase which has already been completed. On the issue of the public consultations for phase II, Ukraine regretted the lack of cooperation from Romania to organise public hearings in this country. It further informed about meetings carried out with international bodies under the item related to the need of involving international experts in the monitoring programmes. However, this information needs to be clarified as it seems in contradiction with what stated at the meeting of the joint Commission. The rest of the report provides information already submitted in the past, related to activities implemented in the period 2004-2014. Moreover, the authorities addressed the detailed summary of the conclusions of the report on the “Comprehensive Environmental Monitoring during the Construction and Operation of the Danube – Black Sea Deep Navigation Route in 2014”, which includes some general recommendations to reduce environmental damage resulting from the navigation works.

➤ **2004/2: Bulgaria: Wind farms in Balchik and Kaliakra – Via Pontica**

(IdA)

This case concerns the building of windfarms in Bulgaria, at Balchik and Kaliakra, on the Black Sea coast. The NGO challenged the chosen sites located on the Via Pontica which is one of the main migratory routes in Europe especially for soaring birds.

An on-the-spot visit was carried out in September 2005, on the basis of which the Committee adopted Recommendation No. 117 (2005), asking the Bulgarian government to reconsider its decision to approve the proposed wind farm in Balchik in view of its potential negative impact on wildlife and taking account of Bulgaria's obligations under the Convention.

In 2006, the Bulgarian government informed the Secretariat that it did not intend to review the decision approving the wind farm project. The Secretariat received information from NGOs on a similar case involving plans to build 129 windmills 20 KMs away from Balchik, between the town of Kavarna and the Kaliakra Cape.

A new on-the-spot appraisal was carried out on 20-22 June 2007. On the basis of the expert's conclusions the 27th meeting of the Standing Committee adopted Recommendation No. 130 (2007) "on the windfarms planned near Balchik and Kaliakra, and other wind farm developments on the Via Pontica route (Bulgaria)".

In June 2008, the European Commission opened an infringement procedure against Bulgaria because of insufficient designation of 6 sites as SPAs under the Bird Directive, one of which is the Kaliakra IBA.

In 2009, the delegate of Bulgaria informed the Committee that a "Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA)" of Bulgaria's Energy Strategy and National Plan for Renewable Energy Sources had been initiated in spring, with meetings at expert level. Bulgaria's Ministry of Environment and Water expressed its readiness and intention to co-operate with civil society and business representatives to achieve the necessary results and fulfil the country's obligations for the protection of its nature and biodiversity.

At the Standing Committee meeting in 2010 the delegate of Bulgaria presented the government report informing, among others, of measures taken concerning the preventive protection of NATURA 2000 sites. Furthermore, she confirmed that no new authorisations for development in SPA Kaliakra and IBA Kaliakra have been issued in 2010.

Following information provided by the delegate of the European Union as well as by the representatives of BirdLife and the AEWA, the Committee decided to keep the case file open and continue to follow it up in close co-operation with the European Commission.

At the 2011 Standing Committee meeting the Secretariat presented the report forwarded by the Bulgarian Government, focussing on the new energy strategy up to 2020, as well as on progress on the drafting of a national action plan for renewable energies, which was still pending after that the public consultation highlighted serious omissions.

In addition, the Ministry issued formal instructions for the General Inspectorate of the Environment and Water, asking to reduce the number of authorisations issued pending the launching of the national plan; there was also a slowing down of projects already authorised owing to financial and technical problems (1 project involving 32 turbines had been stopped).

The representative of BirdLife/Bulgaria expressed her great concern about the lack of progress made and underlined the gap between the government's promises and the situation on the ground; she also protested at the energy sector's very powerful lobby.

The Committee decided to keep the case file open, asking the authorities of Bulgaria to present a report for its next meeting, as well as to take into consideration the provisions of Recommendation No. 130 (2007).

In 2012, the Secretariat didn't receive a reply to the reporting request addressed to the authorities in view of the first Bureau meeting.

Moreover, the Secretariat received an invitation from the AEWA Secretariat to join a possible Implementation Review Process (IRP) mission to the country, to assess the possible impact of a new windfarm project near Durankulak lake which "has the potential to endanger the coherence of the area as a

wintering ground for the Red-breasted Goose as the windfarm is foreseen to be built in the main feeding area of the geese". This project was approved by the Regional Inspectorate of Environment and Water in Varna in spite of the objections raised and argumentations provided by nature conservation NGOs, the local hunting organisation and local residents. This was not an isolated development as a number of windfarms had already been established in the vicinity of Lakes Durankulak and Shabla in areas previously providing feeding habitat to wintering geese, now avoided by the birds.

The complainant also submitted updated reports in March and September 2012, providing the NGO's analysis of the implementation of Recommendation No. 130 (2007) by the government of Bulgaria and concluding that the authorities were still failing to fully implement it.

The NGO further recalled the procedures opened under the European Commission and noted the need for urgent international intervention to stop a situation which already caused irreparable damage and which would be in contravention of Articles 2, 3, 4 and 6 of the Convention.

In conclusion, the NGOs requested that the Bureau (i.) urges the authorities of Bulgaria to transmit a progress report on the implementation of the Recommendation, as well as a clear action plan of activities and measures envisaged for implementing the recommendation; (ii.) that Bulgarian authorities stop issuing authorisations and licences regarding wind farm developments in the area; (iii.) that the European Commission speeds-up the infringement procedures.

In a report submitted in August 2012 the European Commission informed that a reasoned opinion was sent to Bulgaria on the infringement procedure concerning wind farms and other developments in "Kaliakra complex" SCI, "Kaliakra" SPA, "Belite Skali" SPA. Through the reasoned opinion the Commission asked Bulgaria to comply with applicable EU laws in a period of two months, after which the Commission could decide to refer the case to the EU Court of Justice.

The Bureau decided to keep the case-file open and instructed the Secretariat to inform the AEWA about the readiness of the Bern Convention to join a field visit should this be organised.

At the 32nd Standing Committee meeting, the delegate of Bulgaria presented the government report highlighting that, of the 2526 wind energy projects received since 2007, only 117 had been constructed further to obtaining the necessary authorisations. None of these was located in a Natura 2000 area. He further reported on the measures undertaken to implement the relevant Standing Committee Recommendations stressing that, since 2007, no new development had been authorised without fulfilling the EIA/AA procedure. Moreover, the legal framework had been reviewed through the adoption of new Environmental Protection Law and Biological Diversity Law which introduce a 5-year limit of validity for EIA and AA decisions.

He concluded by highlighting that, at the request of the Ministry of Environment and Water, the National Plan of the Renewable Energy Sources was also reviewed and a ban introduced to overcome, reduce and, if possible, completely eliminate all potential adverse effects that the construction of windfarms may have on the Natura 2000 sites.

The representative of BirdLife Bulgaria summarised the content of the reports submitted by her NGO in 2012, stressing that the EIAs realised for Balchik and Kaliakra areas do not examine alternative solutions or locations or the possible negative and cumulative impacts.

The representative of the AEWA reiterated that the windfarm developments along the Via Pontica continued to be a real concern and regretted to note that the AEWA Standing Committee didn't receive a reply to the offer to send an advisory mission on the ground. He concluded his intervention by making a number of proposals which received the support of the Parties.

The Committee acknowledged the steps undertaken by the Government of Bulgaria with regards to development and adoption of a National Action Plan on Renewable Energy Sources 2011-2020 and other reported measures but noted, at the same time, that concrete progress were delayed and windfarming was

still insufficiently regulated. It therefore decided to keep the case-file open and asked the Government of Bulgaria to submit, before the 33rd Standing Committee meeting, a structured, detailed and comprehensive report on the implementation of all provisions of Recommendation No. 130 (2007).

In January 2013 the Secretariat addressed a reporting request to Bulgarian authorities in view of the first Bureau meeting. Following the request of the Party, the Secretariat agreed to extend the deadline stressing that an oral summary of the content of the report would be given to the Bureau members.

In the meantime, the Secretariat was informed by the AEWA that, in December 2012, the Ministry of Environment and Water replied to the AEWA that it didn't consider appropriate to accept an IRP mission due to a pending court case regarding the appeal of the investor against the decision of the Minister to annul the EIA decision of the Director of the RIEW-Varna. However, on 17th January 2013, the Supreme Administrative Court (SAC) of Bulgaria annulled the decision of the Minister of Environment and Water thus allowing for the project to be implemented and the windfarm constructed. As a consequence, the AEWA reiterated its offer of advice on this complicated issues which was again rejected until the court case was pending. The Minister took nonetheless the responsibility to keep the AEWA informed of any development on the court case and the environmental procedures.

At its meeting in April 2013 the Bureau decided to keep the case-file open and instructed the Group of Experts on the conservation of birds to put the assessment of this complaint on its agenda, in order to prepare an opinion for next Bureau meeting.

Both the Party and the complainant sent updated reports to the attention of the Group of Experts which discussed the issue in their absence, as an exchange of views. The seriousness of the situation was generally recognised and the Group expressed concern about the high number of developments in the same flyway and, more particularly, about those that impact upon globally threatened species. The Group also recognised the wider geographical dimension taken by the file, stressing on the cumulative effect of wind farms.

At its meeting in September, the Bureau deeply discussed the complaint, clearly noting the tangible efforts of the authorities, and regretting the difficulty in conciliating bird conservation needs with the development of the green energy sector. The Bureau further discussed the coordination with the AEWA and other partners, including the EU, as a way for providing assistance to Bulgarian authorities on this matter. The Bureau members made several proposals, ending in a draft opinion for the attention of the Standing Committee.

At the 33rd Standing Committee meeting the Parties discussed the present case-file in the absence of Bulgarian authorities. However, the actions undertaken by the authorities to address the matter were presented by the Secretariat on the basis of a written report submitted by the Delegate of Bulgaria. The representative of the NGO had the opportunity to acknowledge some of the progress made by the authorities for implementing Recommendation No. 130 (2007), while stressing that some important issues were still to be addressed. For instance, the situation of the Smin windfarm was still unclear because of the pending Court ruling.

Besides, the representative of the UNEP/AEWA reported that the Ministry of Environment of Bulgaria had informed that a new EIA procedure would start for the Smin windfarm and that the authorities might appreciate advice from the UNEP/AEWA, including through an IRP mission to the country.

The Committee decided to keep the case file open and gave mandate to the Bureau for its future collaboration with the UNEP/AEWA Secretariat. Bulgarian authorities didn't reply to the reporting requests sent by the Secretariat for the two Bureau meetings in 2014.

Nonetheless, the UNEP/AEWA informed about a meeting held in February 2014 with representatives of the Bulgarian Ministry of Environment and Water, during which the authorities undertook a series of commitments regarding mainly the windfarm project in Durankulak Lake. Updated information was

submitted also by the European Commission, whom informed having referred Bulgaria to the European Court of Justice over its presumed failure to protect unique habitats and important species in the Kaliakra region due to windfarm developments.

Finally, in August 2014, the Secretariat received an updated report from the complainant, informing about the lack of any progress in the implementation of most of the actions recommended by the Standing Committee through Recommendation 130 (2007). Moreover, concerning the windfarm project in Duraknolak Lake, suspended by the Ministry, the NGO informed about the last decision of the National Court, delivered in July 2014, ruling against the Ministry of Environment and Water. As a result, the windfarm project was again a reality which could dramatically impact the Red-breasted Goose. In addition, none of the turbines considered dangerous by the Standing Committee had been removed. The report further proceeded to analyse compliance with each of the operational paragraphs of the Recommendation adopted by the Standing Committee and requested the international community to urgently assist Bulgaria in addressing the issue of the windfarm developments as a matter which may cause irreversible damage to Europe's natural heritage.

The Bureau referred the case as an open file to the Standing Committee. The Committee examined the arguments put forward by the authorities of Bulgaria, the complainant, and the representative of the AEWA, and asked the national authorities to be much more reactive to the reporting requests so to help the Institutions of the Convention putting forward the necessary recommendations in a more efficient way.

As a follow-up to this complaint, the Committee decided to keep the case-file open and asked Bulgarian authorities to provide the Bureau with a comprehensive report, including a detailed description of the actions taken in order to comply with the Recommendation of the Standing Committee, also in light of the most recent administrative and legal provisions in force at both national and international level.

Moreover, the Committee encouraged Bulgaria to prepare and communicate to the Standing Committee an Action Plan detailing the measures envisaged for ensuring the expedite and effective implementation of Recommendation No. 130 (2007), including a timetable to be delivered for the Bureau meeting in April 2015.

Finally, the Committee strongly invited Bulgaria to reconsider its position regarding the IRP mission proposed under the AEWA as it can contribute to a better assessment of the current challenges and needs.

In January 2014 the Secretariat addressed to Bulgarian authorities a specific reporting request, based on the decision of the Standing Committee but the report didn't reach the Secretariat on time to be assessed by the first Bureau meeting. As a consequence, the decision on this item had to be postponed. Nevertheless, the Bureau instructed the Secretariat to forward the report of the authorities to both the complainant and the AEWA Secretariat for their views. Unfortunately, the AEWA informed that there were no progress made regarding the Smin windfarm and a possible IRP visit, also due to the workload of the Secretariat which prevented further contacts.

In their reports, the authorities inform on the actions undertaken to implement Recommendation No. 130 (2007), emphasising on the benefits of the Convention's monitoring procedure which contributed to improve the country's capacity in EIA process and reports and in establishing a constructive dialogue with NGOs. Moreover, appropriate assessment, including of cumulative impacts, is now systematic for projects affecting the environment, and the structures in charge of the management of protected areas have been reinforced.

More concretely on Kaliakra's windfarms, the authorities recalled that in 2012 they started reconsidering the authorisations issued for projects not already implemented, thus eliminating 90% of the approved projects. Furthermore, all windfarm projects in Natura 2000 sites are now subject to EIA which have to be conducted following strict requirements and conditions. Moreover, although the general impact of wind turbines on birds had not been assessed by the authorities, some monitoring is going on at the initiative of wind parks operators. However, the results of these studies are controversial and need more time for a proper evaluation.

The report also mentions the improvements due to the adoption of the Energy Strategy 2020, which produced bans on new wind farms, regulated the authorisation's process, made EIA requirements stricter, and devised measures for eliminating or reducing the negative impact of these energy infrastructures. Moreover, a Manual has been prepared for enabling the effective implementation of environmental legislation for wind farms. The Manual has been prepared in cooperation with NGOs and takes account of both EU and Bern Convention guidelines on windfarms and protected areas. Also, the authorities mention some projects carried out with EU funds for reducing the mortality risk of specific species.

Besides, the report of the authorities recalls that Kaliakra SPA has been expanded in 2014, and informs that the procedure for the declaration of a new SPA in Dobrudzha region has now been completed. Moreover, new areas of steppe habitats have been included in Dobrudzha SCI in view of increasing its diversity. Also, the authorities have finalised a draft management plan for the whole territory in Kaliakra region, covering several Natura 2000 sites. The management plan includes an analysis of activities impacting some targeted species and habitats, and measures to manage the risk of collision of migratory birds and monitoring their mortality.

On 3 September the NGO addressed its own report, containing an overall analysis of the implementation by Bulgaria of relevant Standing Committee's recommendations. The conclusions are mitigated, with efforts and steps undertaken in the most recent years but lack of tangible results compared to the goals and aims of the recommended actions. In the views of the NGO this is due to the long delays in which (only) some of the recommended actions have been partially implemented. Generally, the NGO welcomes the changes in the legislation, the strategic plans, and the adoption of new regulations. At the same time, it notes a persistent low quality of EIAs and, most important, inaction regarding dismantling or relocating the problematic windfarms. This is for instance the case of the tree windfarms in Kaliakra, which are still operational despite evident impact on the biodiversity of the protected site. Moreover, the NGO questions the quality of the national reports which do not allow for a proper analysis of progress. The complainant presented an analysis of the efficiency of the measures undertaken to meet the requests of the Standing Committee and invites the Standing Committee to adopt an official opinion on the quality of the results so far achieved, together with further guidance for future efforts.

In addition, on 3 September the Advocate General released his opinion on the case pending against Bulgaria before the European Court of Justice.

As a reminder, the European Commission claims:

1. The insufficient designation of Kaliakra SPA, which makes the site inadequate to ensure the conservation of the species listed in Annex I of the Birds Directive and the migratory species not listed in the Directive but regularly coming to the area (violation of article 4 §1 and 2 of the Birds Directive);
2. Violation of Article 4§4 of the Directive, for approving 6 important wind farm projects outside Kaliakra SPA but in an area which should have been designated as SPA;
3. Violation of article 6§2 of the Habitats Directive, for authorising wind and sport projects within Kompleks Kaliakra SCI and Belite Skali SPA;
4. Violation of Article 2§1 in conjunction with Article 4§2 and 3 of the EIA Directive, for failing to properly assess the cumulative impacts of the projects authorised outside the SPA but in an area which should have been designated as such.

The Advocate General recognises the insufficient designation of Kaliakra SPA and the failure to adequately protect the relevant species and habitats. He further recognises a violation of the Birds Directive for failure to take adequate measures to prevent that the projects authorised outside the designated area degrade the habitats and species that should have been protected. The same conclusions apply to the violation of the Habitats Directive for failure to avoid that the projects authorised within the SCI and SPA damage the habitats and species for which the sites had been designated. Finally, the

Advocate General partially agrees on the claim about the violation of the EIA Directive and considers that Bulgaria failed to properly evaluate the cumulative impacts of some of the private and public projects in a sensitive area.

➤ **1995/6: Cyprus: Akamas Peninsula**

(IdA)

This case concerns plans for the tourist development in the Peninsula of Akamas (Cyprus), with detrimental effect on an ecologically valuable area with many rare plant and animal species protected under the Bern Convention.

The case was first discussed at the 16th meeting of the Standing Committee in 1996. Two on-the-spot appraisals were carried out in 1997 and 2002 and a recommendation adopted in 1997 [Recommendation No. 63 (1997)] on the conservation of the Akamas peninsula in Cyprus and, in particular, of the nesting beaches of *Caretta caretta* and *Chelonia mydas*.

In 2008, the Standing Committee asked Cyprus to send the management plan for the area as soon as it would be ready, and wished that the area of Limni would also get adequate protection. The Committee asked Cyprus to fully implement Recommendation No. 63 (1997); to create a National Park and ensure the maintenance of the ecological integrity of the area; as well as to apply the ecosystem approach to the Akamas peninsula, including Limni.

At the 29th meeting of the Standing Committee, the delegate of Cyprus informed that there had been no great changes since the previous year.

In 2010 the Committee took note of the report presented by the Secretariat in the absence of delegate of Cyprus. It further took note of the observations and reports from the NGOs and decided to keep the file open while asking Cyprus to present a report for its next meeting; to send to the Secretariat as soon as possible the translation into English of the management plan for Limni area; to fully implement its Recommendation No. 63 (1997).

In August 2011 Cyprus authorities sent the translation of the Executive Summary of the Draft Management Plan for the Limni Area, specifying that this only referred to the Natura 2000 “Polis Gialia” site (thus not including the proposed “*Chersonisos Akama*” site) and informing that the Government of Cyprus designated a wider area that would be managed via development regulations and restrictions, to ensure the highest possible protection of the peninsula.

The report from the NGO (Terra Cypria) informed that a formal notice letter and a reasoned opinion were sent by the EU to the Republic of Cyprus regarding the insufficient SPA proposal for the area. It is expected that the issue will be led to the European Court of Justice.

In the absence of a delegate from Cyprus at the 31st Standing Committee meeting, the Secretariat presented the case-file and called the attention of the Committee on the report on the management plan for the Natura 2000 “Polis Gialia” Natura 2000 site.

The representative of Terra Cypria argued that the size and extent of the Natura site was still being considered at the EU level. The proposal by the Cyprus government to regulate part of the area not as a Natura site, but through Town Planning regulations relating to land use (rather than conservation), was an indirect admission that the area is inadequate. She further considered that in the case of Limni, while a management plan exists, this was not implemented yet and, in any case, the area designated comprises such a narrow strip of land that it cannot protect turtles from human interventions taking place just beyond. Moreover, according to Terra Cypria, the plan proposed does not seem to include policy for foraging turtles. In both cases, developments are taking place all the time. The local authorities are allowing unsuitable activities and the threats to wildlife are continuing. Therefore, she urged that the file against Cyprus remains open.

These views were supported by the representative of MEDASSET, who pointed the attention of the Committee to deaths on the sea in different areas of Cyprus. The representative of Birdlife noted the importance of the Akamas Peninsula for some threatened birds, for which not enough Natura 2000 sites were designated.

The delegate of the European Union informed the Committee that the European Commission was analysing the information sent by Cyprus authorities in reply to a letter of formal notice for insufficient designation of the area. A decision on the follow-up to infringement procedure was expected by January 2012.

The Committee decided to keep the case file open requesting from Cyprus the full implementation of its Recommendation No. 63 (1997) as well as more information on the protection of sites in the whole of the Akamas Peninsula and Limni. The Committee asked the Secretariat to follow-up the file in close co-operation with the European Commission.

The Secretariat sent out official letters requesting updated detailed information to both the Government of Cyprus and the NGO on 19 January 2012.

In a succinct report sent in March 2012 the Government of Cyprus apologised for not having participated in the last Standing Committee meeting and expressed disagreement towards the NGO's claim of inadequate designation of both the Akamas and the "Polis Gialia" areas. More particularly regarding the latter, the authorities wanted to reassure the Committee that the developments surrounding the area were being controlled by the competent authorities and the procedures for granting building permits were observed. Furthermore, the Government stressed that maximum efforts were put in place to ensure the protection of birds, particularly by designating large SPAs.

Finally, the authorities informed that a full scientific package of information was under preparation in the framework of the complaint opened under the Commission and that this information would be forwarded at the same time to the Secretariat of the Bern Convention (around end of June).

The European Union also informed that, in the framework of a complaint on the issue of insufficient designation and protection of the Akamas area under the Natura 2000 network, a reply was received from Cypriot authorities following which the Commission issued a Letter of Formal Notice under Article 258 of the Treaty for insufficient designation of the area. The Commission analysed the reply and requested a number of further clarifications, after which they would decide on next steps.

The Bureau decided to keep the case file open and instructed the Secretariat to contact both the European Commission and Cyprus authorities by mid-July 2012 for information on further developments concerning the infringement procedure.

No substantial new information was submitted by the European Union, which in August 2012 was still expecting the reply of the authorities to its request of clarifications. No information was submitted by Cyprus authorities either.

Stressing the lack of new information the Bureau instructed the Secretariat to approach again Cyprus authorities and ensure that the scientific package of information related to the Akamas peninsula is forwarded to the Standing Committee. The complainant and the European Union are also invited to submit any relevant information available.

At the 32nd Standing Committee meeting the delegate of Cyprus informed that the Cyprus Department of Environment proceeded to the revision of the Akamas Peninsula mapping using high resolution satellite and aerial images. Additionally, site visits and sampling were also made. Once the information would be properly analysed, appropriate protection measures would be taken. The delegate of Cyprus concluded by reaffirming that, concerning the "Polis-Gialia" area, the authorities were in disagreement with the claim that the designated area was inadequate. However, he informed that Cyprus was in the process of reviewing the monitoring and inspection protocols in place so to ensure adequate surveillance of the area.

The delegate of Norway stressed that the fact that the file had been open for sixteen years was a sign that the actions undertaken by the authorities were not enough effective to solve the conservation problems encountered. There was a regrettable lack of progress, an opinion which was shared by the representatives of the NGOs.

The Committee decided to keep the case file open and encouraged Cyprus to fully implement its Recommendation N°63 (1997). The Committee further instructed the Secretariat to continue co-ordination with the European Union on this complaint.

In March 2013 the European Commission informed that it had received new scientific data both from the Cypriot authorities and NGOs. The information showed controversies in its conclusions. Hence, the Commission services informed being in the process of assessing the results in the attempt of finding the best solution to resolve the case.

The Secretariat requested Cyprus authorities to report after the first Bureau meeting.

In a letter received in July 2013, Cyprus authorities communicated that the Department of Environment was finalising the mapping of the Akamas Peninsula area and that the results would be forwarded to the Secretariat once they would be published. Moreover, they affirmed being in the process of conducting a Management Plan for the Akamas Peninsula area, which was expected to be completed by the end of 2013.

Also in July, the complainant requested the Bureau to continue keeping the case under scrutiny first of all because the Akamas issue was being examined by the European Commission as a matter of “insufficient designation”, meaning that the production of a management plan for the area designated would presumably be insufficient for solving the problem alone. Secondly, the complainant informed that a local developer proposed the construction of two golf courses surrounded by villas and hotels in the adjoining Limni area, which could presumably directly affect the turtles nesting there. The complainant further informed that the Government’s failure to take a firm stance about the distance of installations from the foreshore had been the subject of a second and different formal complaint to the Commission.

In its update, the European Commission informed having received extensive additional scientific information both from the Cyprus authorities and the NGOs which was under assessment to determine whether the SCI has been (on the basis of scientific evidence) sufficiently designated or not.

At its September meeting the Bureau assessed the case for the first time in 2013. The Bureau welcomed the information provided by the authorities on some progress towards the mapping and management plan of the Akamas Peninsula, but considered it necessary to follow the developments related to the complaint regarding the presumed insufficient designation of the SCI. The matter was forwarded to the Standing Committee.

Unfortunately, Cyprus could not attend last Standing Committee meeting and did not address updated information. However, the complainant presented the NGO point of view insisting on the investigation by the European Commission concerning the presumed insufficient designation of the Natura 2000 areas as a strong evidence of the possible inadequate protection of both Akamas Peninsula and Limni. Moreover, the complainant asked the Committee to make a number of recommendations to the attention of Cyprus authorities, including to promptly revising and extending the current boundaries for the areas, regulating development in the adjacent area, adopting a management plan of Akamas with all necessary measures for monitoring and control of habitats, reacting with adequate measures against illegal constructions and unsuitable activities on the surrounding beaches, and adopting an early warning system in order to closely monitor these areas, and the rest of the Natura 2000 sites, and prevent human destruction from taking place.

The Committee decided to keep the case file open and encouraged Cyprus to fully implement its Recommendation No. 63 (1997) and to report namely on the concrete measures implemented to avoid further deterioration of the concerned habitats. Furthermore, and taking into account the urgent need of

protecting these unique sites from further destruction, the Committee invited Cyprus government to undertake any necessary step aimed at providing an early warning system against illegal damage and to inform the Committee on their implementation.

The decision of the Committee was forwarded by the Secretariat to the authorities in January 2014. By the end of March, Cyprus authorities addressed an updated report affirming that the areas proposed as SCI for Akamas and Limni are considered adequate and that further development of the area was subject to the necessary impact assessment as foreseen by both international and national legislation.

The authorities further informed that the Management Plan for the “Polis-Yialia” Natura 2000 site was being implemented but the management plan for the Akamas Natura 2000 site (expected to be completed by the end of 2013) was still under preparation.

Additionally, the authorities informed that a wider residential and rural area around the Akamas Natura site would be subject to special regulations and restrictions so to ensure the highest possible protection of the peninsula.

Besides, the report provided short but specific information on the implementation of operational paragraphs 7, 9 and 10 of the Standing Committee Recommendation No. 63 (1997), which are specific to Lara-Toxeftra Reserve area and to seagrass communities in Akamas.

Finally, the government report also addressed the recommendation by the Standing Committee to adopt an early warning system against illegal damage and considered that the regular monitoring mechanism already in place is both appropriate and effective. However, the authorities declared to be ready to evaluate any specific recommendations regarding the issue.

In an e-mail sent on 28th March, Terra Cypria informed being in disagreement with several points and committed to address to a detailed note to present its arguments. The Bureau decided to keep the case file open and to re-assess it at its September meeting, in order to be able to take into account the position of the NGO. It further instructed the Secretariat to contact the European Union for updated information.

The report received by the NGO mid-April 2014 analysed and contradicted the information submitted by the authorities, by affirming that:

- ✓ A huge part of the Akamas Peninsula has been excluded from the Natura 2000 network leaving very important habitats and species unprotected. The fact that the European Commission opened a case for presumed insufficient designation of the area was considered to be the evidence that the arguments submitted by the NGO are strong and science-based. Moreover, the NGO claimed the largely insufficient designation of the Limni area which enabled for the delivery of licences authorising the development of a golf course and a multi-villa project, adjacent to the Natura 2000 area, with a probable impact on the nesting beaches of the *Caretta caretta*.
- ✓ The Proposed Plan for Polis-Gialia does not contain serious implementation actions and therefore does not meet the requirements set by national law for the adequacy of management plans.
- ✓ The development regulations and restrictions announced by the Government around the Akamas Natura 2000 site were considered by the NGO to be part of the regular Town Planning framework and therefore not inspired by biodiversity conservation's considerations. In the NGO's views, since the designation of the Natura 2000 site is supposed to be too exiguous, leaving out areas with very important habitats, a simple Town Planning framework implemented without the involvement of a conservation agency will be insufficient to ensure the proper conservation of the area.
- ✓ Regarding the information submitted by the authorities on the implementation of the Standing Committee's recommendations specific to Lara-Toxeftra Reserve, the NGO questioned the regularity and quality of the monitoring carried out by the Fisheries Department, as well as the data sent to minimise the presumed disturbance of the Thanos hotel complex.

- ✓ Finally, the NGO considered that, taking into consideration the recent experience of situations where the interventions of the authorities against biodiversity disturbance and damage failed to be carried out before damage was done, the Republic of Cyprus should seriously consider to set up an early warning system and to put in place a team of wardens with full legal powers.

The request of the NGO to the Bureau was to keep the file open.

On its side, the European Union informed being in the process of analysing the classification of special protection areas (SPAs) of the Akamas area on the basis of the recent update of the list of Important Bird Areas in Cyprus published by Birdlife. Moreover, the Commission was assessing the alleged failure to designate the Akamas area under the Habitats Directive as a Site of Community Importance (SCI), having requested and received further technical clarifications as regards the mapping of habitat types in question as well as information on the preparation of the management plan for the broader Akamas area.

As regards the tourist development in Limni (Polis-Gyalia Natura 2000 site) the Commission investigated through an EU Pilot the measures taken to ensure compliance of the planned development with Articles 6 and 12 of the Habitats Directive. The issue was under assessment in September 2014.

Finally, in the last report submitted by Cyprus authorities at the request of the Secretariat, the latter regretted not having received any evidence from the NGO showing the insufficient designation of the Akamas Peninsula and therefore not being in a position to either remedy or counteract any possible inaccuracies. Moreover, the authorities were confident that the designated area would be considered as adequate, and provided all relevant scientific information to the European Commission in this respect. They also informed that the Akamas Management Plan was at its final stages of completion, pending the public consultation procedure which was expected to take place in January 2015.

The authorities further confirmed that an EU Pilot was ongoing on Polis-Gialia situation and that the procedure was thus confidential. In addition, the authorities defended the quality and effectiveness of the Management Plan which is intended to ensure the highest possible protection of the peninsula. They further informed that the procedure for the site's declaration to SAC would be completed by the end of 2014 as foreseen and that the relevant Ministerial decree on the restrictions and permitted actions within the site would be ready within the first three months of 2015.

The report of the authorities contradicted also the allegations concerning the lack of patrolling in Lara-Toxeftra Reserve for which a specific Turtle Monitoring Programme had been assigned every year to experts through a tendering procedure. The obligations and responsibilities of the experts are considered to be in compliance with the regulations.

Regarding the adoption of an early warning system, the authorities considered that the regular monitoring of the sites was still the most efficient measure, together with the prosecution of illegal acts. However, the Republic of Cyprus informed being in the process of studying possible amendments to the Nature Law so to allow for extrajudicial measures following damages to sites, habitats and species. In the light of the most recent information the Bureau decided to forward the case to the Standing Committee.

Based on the information provided in writing by the authorities of Cyprus, as well as on the report orally presented by the complainant the Committee decided to keep the file open and asked Cyprus authorities to keep the Bureau informed on any relevant development.

In June 2015 Cyprus authorities sent a one page letter informing that:

- ✓ The procedure for the declaration of Polis-Gialia as SAC had been again delayed, and that the Ministerial decree fixing the rules for the actions to be permitted in the site was expected to be ready by the end of 2015 now;
- ✓ The public consultations for the Akamas management plan took place as foreseen in January 2015 but the written opinions received are still being processed;

- ✓ The management of the rural area established outside the Akamas Natura site as a way to ensure higher protection to the peninsula is proceeding well, with the establishment of cycling routes, camping, and environmental awareness centres.

The complainant replied to this report emphasising on the delays, on the continuous pressures for building in the protected area, and on the need to keep the file open also in light of the on-going EU infringement procedure.

Finally, the European Union informed that on 30 April 2015 it had issued a Reasoned Opinion against Cyprus as it considered that the breaches of the Habitats Directive concerning the tourist development in Limni area persisted. As regards the other aspects of the case, the Commission received only limited information and is now waiting for the requested clarifications.

➤ **2007/1: Italy: Eradication and trade of the American grey squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*)**

(IdA)

In 1999, the Standing Committee adopted its Recommendation No. 78 (1999) on the conservation of the red squirrel (*Sciurus vulgaris*) in Italy. A second set of Recommendation [No. 114 (2005)], on the control of the grey squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*) and other alien squirrels in Europe, was adopted in 2005 asking Italy to start without delay an eradication programme.

In 2007, the Standing Committee asked the Bureau to examine the possibility of opening a file for a possible breach of the Convention by Italy on this case. An on-the-spot appraisal was carried out in May 2008. The main conclusions of the expert's visit were that the presence of the American grey squirrel in Italy was a serious threat for the survival of the protected native red squirrel, and that this expansive trend had the full potential to turn the invasion into a continental problem, where France and Switzerland would become the next countries to be affected.

In 2008, the Standing Committee agreed to open a case file and decided that a new Recommendation was not necessary. Instead it asked the Secretariat to communicate a list of actions to the Italian government.

In September 2009, the Italian government reported on progress to finalise the signature of a Memorandum of Understanding between the regions concerned, and the preparation of a LIFE+ project on: "Eradication and control of grey squirrel: actions for preservation of biodiversity in forest ecosystems", with the involvement of the three regions (Lombardia, Piemonte and Liguria) and the Ministry of Environment. Regarding the decree to ban the trade and keeping of the American grey squirrel, which should cover the whole national territory, the final text was agreed in late July 2009, and should have been shortly examined by the legal offices of the three Ministries involved (Agriculture & Forestry; International Trade; and Public Health).

At the 29th meeting of the Standing Committee, the delegate of Italy announced that the Ministry of Environment was fully committed to implementing Recommendation No. 123 and therefore had concluded a MoU in August 2009 with the three regions involved and two research institutions. A number of activities had been planned, including control of the species, monitoring of grey and red squirrels and awareness campaigns. The Ministry was preparing a decree to prohibit the trading and keeping of the grey squirrel.

The Committee took note of the information presented and welcomed progress in the conclusion of a MoU among all the actors involved in the control of the species, as well as of plans to pass a legislation banning trade on the species. However, it considered that since there had not been yet neither any action on the ground nor legislation approved, the case file should be kept open, asking Italy to fully implement Recommendation No. 123 (2007).

At the 2010 Standing Committee meeting, the delegate of Italy informed on the state of progress of the Memorandum of cooperation to be signed by the competent Provinces before entering into force; on the negotiation around the draft decree for banning the trading and keeping of the grey squirrel; and on the Life+ Project, finally launched in September 2010.

Noting that the decree concerning the banning of the trade and keeping of the American grey squirrel was not approved yet, the Committee decided to keep the file open.

In 2011 the situation remained almost unchanged. The Italian delegate presented the Government report, informing on the implementation of the LIFE+ Project, particularly focussing on the elaboration of a communication action plan to target the wider and general public, highlighting the multiple challenges of obtaining a wide consensus of the civil society. No real progress could be reported on the decree on the banning of the trade and keeping of the species.

The Committee expressed deep concern for the longstanding situation which was seen as a serious threat for the long-term survival of the native red squirrel, while damaging the woodland. The Committee was particularly worried to note that inaction could result in the spread of the invasive alien species to other Contracting Parties.

The Committee agreed to keep the case-file open and instructed the Bureau to closely follow up this issue.

Italian authorities sent updated reports in February and August 2012, informing both on the state of implementation of the LIFE+ Project “EC-SQUARE”, and on some difficulties regarding eradication in Piedmont Region, where the procedure aimed at delivering the necessary authorisations for the capture of the American grey squirrel were temporarily suspended due to an appeal presented by animal welfare NGOs to the Regional Administrative Court of law.

Moreover, in their last report Italian authorities informed that the Ministry of Environment had finally obtained positive advices on the draft decree on banning the trade of the species from the Directorates of the State Forestry Corps of the Ministry of Agricultural, Food and Forestry Policies and the Ministry of Economic Development. The visa of other related Ministries was still pending but the authorities were confident that a positive reply will be given to their request.

At the 33rd Standing Committee meeting, the delegate of Italy reported on a series of good progress, particularly concerning Liguria and Lombardy regions and informed that the ban decree was signed by the Minister of the Environment and forwarded to the other Ministers involved in animal trade and management for their definitive countersignature.

Some of the Parties thanked Italian authorities for their efforts in a difficult mediatic and social context, noting however that the species was still not completely under control and that the adoption of a decree on banning the trade of the species was pending since at least four years.

The Committee therefore decided to keep the file open.

In 2013, Italian authorities informed on the implications of the adoption and entry into force of the ban decree “Dispositions for the control of detention and trade of alien squirrels of the species *Callosciurus erythraeus*, *Sciurus carolinensis* and *Sciurus niger*”. The government report explained that, further to the adoption of the decree, the trade, breeding and detention of these species had been forbidden in all the national territory, with a few exemptions only for zoos, circuses, research institutes, wildlife conservation bodies and scientific institutions.

The decree also addresses the situation of those already detaining specimens of the mentioned species, fixing the rules and procedural steps for their declaration to CITES unit of National Forest Corp as well as sanctions for those who abandon the species into the wild.

At the last Standing Committee meeting the delegate of Italy presented the government's report, and the project manager of the LIFE project on the eradication of the species presented the latest information related to the eradication efforts.

Despite some encouraging information concerning the return of the red squirrel in the areas where the eradication succeeded, animal welfare's organisations were still posing big challenges to the full implementation of the project and the eradication campaign was confronting appeals to the Administrative Courts, political pressure, petitions and public demonstrations. Moreover, the project revealed that there are areas in Italy, notably those where the American grey squirrel expanded, where the red squirrel disappeared.

The Committee expressed satisfaction for the efforts of Italian authorities and very much welcomed the adoption of the decree for banning the trade, breeding and detention of the American grey squirrel. However, considering that the LIFE project EC-SQUARE was still ongoing, the Committee decided to keep the case file open.

The case was not assessed at the first Bureau meeting in 2014 so to give the country the possibility to continue the implementation of the LIFE project and evaluate its results before the first reporting.

In the report submitted in August 2014 the Italian authorities informed about the enforcement of the decree banning the trade, breeding and detention of the American squirrel: the shops stopped selling it and the CITES Territorial Services of the cities concerned by the "invasion" didn't register any infraction.

Concerning the LIFE project, the authorities regretted the continuous delays experienced in the implementation, due once more to the criticism of the majority population, particularly in Lombardy region. This also materialised in the lack of permission to accede to some private areas, despite the presence of the invasive species. As a consequence, the expected results of the project were already revised in 2013, with the identification of less ambitious goals. However, the efforts and commitment toward the eradication remained unchanged.

The report underlined that a particularly dangerous population had been identified just a few kilometres from the Swiss border, where the alien squirrels already colonised a large area. In order to address this problem, the competent authorities prepared a specific Action Plan, which has been (and still is) unfortunately blocked for some months at the administrative level. The Action Plan is not adopted yet and the authorities noted a high risk of not being able to stop the expansion of the population.

Regarding Piedmont region, the authorities were controlling the grey squirrel in restricted areas (of a total area of about 2,000 km²) and were considering several steps forward.

In Liguria, where the project privileged the surgical sterilisation of the animals instead of their suppression, the strong local opposition was making difficult for the authorities even to find veterinary structure willing to proceed to the sterilizations. 130 squirrels were sterilised in Genova Nervi area but the species was considered to be progressing again.

The same information was presented at the Standing Committee during its 34th meeting. Regarding the control and eradication on the ground, Italy informed about stronger efforts devoted to raising the awareness of the local communities on the threats posed by IAS. A specific communication action plan had been prepared by a professional company and more resources were allocated to its implementation.

Moreover, a wide-scale information campaign had been launched within the LIFE EC SQUARE project and a dedicated task force had been set up for communication purposes. The report of the authorities concluded with a description of the main results already produced on this aspect.

The Committee decided to keep the file open in light of the progress regarding the on-going LIFE project.

The report sent by the authorities in August 2015 presents an updated evaluation of results. The Decree on the banning of the species is regularly implemented: shops completely stopped selling grey squirrels and CITES territorial services didn't find any cases of violation of the decree. Moreover, in terms of concrete results, the authorities achieved the almost complete eradication of the grey squirrels in Genova Nervi and the surrounding areas, with only few animals being still trapped. According to the estimates, 3,000 hectares of forest areas are now adequate for recolonization by the red-squirrels.

The report vaguely informs about the start of activities aimed at the eradication of alien squirrels in 4 macro areas (out of eight) in Lombardy region, and in one a few kilometres from Switzerland. These activities should avoid the colonization of North Italy and Switzerland by alien squirrels and will be sustained after the end of the LIFE project. The same approach applies to Piedmont region, which hosts the largest grey squirrel population in Italy. The authorities are confident that the knowledge acquired through the LIFE project on both innovative eradication techniques, sociological aspects, and legal procedure will be sustained and used for the post-LIFE eradication phase.

➤ **2010/5: Greece: threats to marine turtles in Thines Kiparissias**

(EFG/IdA)

On 22nd August 2010 the Secretariat received a complaint from MEDASSET (The Mediterranean Association to Save the Sea Turtles) regarding development plans in a NATURA 2000 site (THINES KYPARISSIAS - GR2550005) which would affect *Caretta caretta*, a threatened species protected under the Bern Convention. The NGO reported about uncontrolled development on the site (summer houses building, construction of coastal roads, occupation of the beach by, among others, bars, umbrellas and deck chairs) and expressed concerns over the intensive pressure on the nesting activity of turtles, which can lead to reducing the unique population of *Caretta caretta*.

The complainant referred to the obligations for the Contracting Parties mentioned in articles 4 and 6 of the Bern Convention, and highlighted that *Caretta caretta* is also protected by other international agreements, among which CMS, CITES and the Barcelona Convention for the protection of the Mediterranean Sea against pollution, and the EU Habitats Directive.

In March 2011 the Greek authorities forwarded to the Secretariat the response sent on 22nd December 2010 to a letter of the European Commission in relation to the protection of priority species in the Natura GR 2550005 site.

The response informed that a law concerning Conservation & Biodiversity had been approved by the Greek Parliament to ensure a more effective protection regime for the priority species in all Natura 2000 sites. The law should have entered into force by the end of March 2011. In addition to that, the Ministry of Environment was in the process of drafting a Joint Ministerial Decision, based on a specific environmental study of 2002, which should regulate all activities within the GR 2550005 Natura 2000 site by providing a specific legal protection regime. The Joint Ministerial Decision should allow facing conservation problems in an integrated way for the whole Thines Kyparissias Natura 2000 site.

Among the measures taken, national authorities forwarded to Local Authorities the specific environmental study mentioned above, along with a Presidential Draft Decree which included a Management Plan for the Area, with the request of taking these into account to enforce the necessary Environmental Protection measures. The response additionally informed that a recently adopted Ministerial Decision required the official approval of the Ministry of the Environment for any license of exploitation of the sandy seashore sites issued by the Local Authorities. However, the responsibility concerning the compliance with obligations related to the exploitation itself lies down to the Local Authorities and the State Property Service.

In a report sent in September 2011 the NGO informed that, although the law on Conservation and Biodiversity entered into force in March 2011, enforcement of specific protective measures was still poor, and a number of illegal activities continued to exert a considerable amount of pressure on the nesting

activity of marine turtles. In addition, according to the NGO, the Joint Ministerial Decision announced by Greek authorities was drafted yet; furthermore, none of the demolition protocols issued by the State Property Service of the Prefecture of Messinia for the illegal constructions in the area was executed.

The NGO report denounced the degradation and erosion of the sand dunes and coastal forests, due to roads and buildings illegally developed; the lack of restoration measures to compensate the destruction part of the sand dunes; the absence of specific protection measures and lack of provision of appropriate information to local residents. The NGO considered that it would be appropriate to draft an updated Special Environmental Study (the current one was prepared in 2002), which would take into account the new developments and assist competent Local Authorities to identify specific conservation measures for the area in question.

The Bureau took note of the information provided by the NGO, which questioned the effectiveness of the measures undertaken by Greek authorities, as described in the report submitted the government in March 2011. However, because of the lack of reply by Greek authorities, as well as of new information from the European Commission, the Bureau was not in a position to properly assess the situation. It decided to consider this complaint as a complaint in stand-by at its first meeting in 2012.

In a report sent end of March 2012, Greek authorities forwarded again the “Response to the letter of the European Commission in relation to the protection of priority species in the Natura GR 2550005 site” (sent on 22nd December 2010) and further informed that the procedure for the special protection of the above area and the issuance of a Joint Ministerial Decision (J.M.D.) applicable for a period of 2 years would be jointly prepared by the competent Legislative authority of the Ministry. The updating of the Special Environmental Impact Assessment (S.E.I.A.) prepared specifically for this referenced area had been included in the overall planning for the time period 2012 - 2015.

Finally, the authorities confirmed that the Administration of Messinia Prefecture had been instructed on the need to protect the site in order to ensure that the requirements set under the EC Directive 92/43 were met.

The report sent by the complainant informed that enforcement of the specific protective measures for Thines Kyparissias, included in the law concerning the Conservation and Biodiversity (entered into force at the end of March 2011) was lacking. At the same time, the provision of information to local residents by the Prefecture of Messinia regarding appropriate use of the nesting beach was also missing, while a number of activities and illegal constructions on the site continued to exert a considerable amount of pressure on the nesting activity of marine turtles. The NGO also stressed that the situation remained unchanged since last reporting, as the JMD had not yet been drafted by the National authorities and in the meantime local authorities had not prepared any specific protection measure for the area.

Finally, the NGO recalled that none of the demolition protocols issued by the State Property Service of the Prefecture of Messinia for the constructions illegally built in the area had been executed; extensions of already existing beach bars were recorded by the Land Property Service in 2011 for which new demolition protocols were issued but not executed. The same concern remained for the three beach bars that operated illegally in 2011 within the core zone of the protected area (Kalo Nero) which the NGO feared that they could restart their illegal activity soon.

The Bureau decided to consider the complaint as a possible file and to forward it to the Standing Committee to decide whether or not to open a case-file. The Bureau further instructed the Secretariat to organise an on-the-spot appraisal for putting mediation in place and gathering additional information for the attention of the Standing Committee.

In June 2012 the Secretariat addressed an official letter to Greek authorities informing about the decision of the Bureau and requesting their agreement for an on-the-spot visit which would serve to gather additional information for the Standing Committee’s attention. In September 2012 Greek authorities informed the Secretariat that its request of agreement for an on-the-spot visit was being duly considered and that a reply would be communicated soon.

At the 32nd Standing Committee meeting the Secretariat regretted to inform that no new information had been received since.

In the absence of delegates from Greece, the Chair gave the floor to the representative of MEDASSET, whom summarised the content of the reports submitted in 2012. MEDASSET used a power-point presentation illustrating with photos some few examples of degradation collected in 2011-2012, including the construction of four roads within the core NATURA 2000 area, and other disturbing human activities as, for instance, the opening of beach bars (generating light pollution and noise), fisheries with fishing vessels operating too close to the shoreline in the Southern Kyparissia Bay, the use of heavy machinery for levelling, clearing, etc.

Moreover, MEDASSET reported that the Municipality of Trifylia continued the construction of a road network within the Natura 2000 area without either an Environmental Impact Assessment or authorisation from the Ministry of Environment. The Ministry was alerted to these works, which nevertheless continued unabated in 2012. MEDASSET concluded by requesting that a case-file be open.

The delegate of the European Union referred to the report sent to the Secretariat, informing that a field visit was carried out by the Commission services in July 2012. In the light of the findings, as well as the reply of the Greek authorities to the Letter of Formal Notice, the Commission issued in September 2012 a Reasoned Opinion under Article 258 of the Lisbon Treaty for insufficient protection of the area. In case of referral to the Court of Justice of the EU, the Commission would not exclude to ask the Court for interim measures.

Regretting the absence of delegates from Greece, the Committee further stressed the lack of relevant and substantial communications from the authorities. It decided to keep the complaint as a possible file, emphasising on the need to be informed by the authorities on the state of the situation in the area. The Committee instructed the Secretariat to request to the authorities, the NGOs and the EU, updated and complete reports on this important issue.

In January 2013 the Secretariat sent Greek authorities the decision of the Standing Committee together with a specific request inviting the Party to report on the state of conservation and management of the area, enforcement of relevant legislation, assessment of possible negative impact of the tourism developments, and mitigation measures envisaged.

In reply to this request, on 15th March, the Secretariat received a short e-mail summarising the content of a letter sent by Greek authorities to the European Commission about the official schedule foreseen by the Greek Government to prevent further degradation of the natural habitats and the improvement of the situation.

However, in March 2013 the complainant sent an updated report about the information submitted by the Ministry of Environment Energy & Climate Change to the EC. A detailed Action Plan for the protection of the area in question was being elaborated with the aim to halt any development works in the area until the issuance of a Ministerial Decision, which would constitute the basis for the protection of the area until a Presidential Decree would be in place.

The Ministerial Decision should be drafted based on the Special Environmental Study (SES) carried out by ARCHELON in 2002. A Steering Committee consisting of members representing Local and National Authorities, NGOs and experts was established in order to supervise the implementation of the afore mentioned Action Plan.

MEDASSET further informed about some other unpleasant developments, occurred despite the assurances of the Ministry, including the building –in November 2012 - of three houses in the sand dunes of the core nesting area near Vounaki hill, for which a permit was issued outside the city planning area.

Moreover, on 20 February 2013, a part of the back of the beach in the core nesting area was plowed, resulting one more time in the destruction of dune vegetation.

In conclusion, MEDASSET requested to the Standing Committee to screen again the complaint, and urged the Secretariat to follow up through the Greek Government the progress made over the Action Plan and in particular over the cessation of all infrastructure and/or development activities, which pose an immense threat for Thines Kyparissias.

The Bureau reiterated its request to Greek authorities for timely communication and sound information, and noted that enforcement was still a major issue. It decided to screen again the complaint at its next meeting and instructed the Secretariat to urge Greek authorities to send an official progress report informing: on the state of conservation and management of the area; on enforcement of relevant legislation and administrative decisions (including more particularly the execution of the demolition protocols); on the adoption of the measures whose implementation is envisaged as of June 2013; and on the progress made over the Action Plan, particularly regarding the cessation of disturbing activities and infrastructures.

The Secretariat regretted to inform that its letter to the authorities of May 2013 and the reminders sent until end of July remained unanswered.

In August 2013 the complainant sent an update focussing on the developments since February 2013:

1. On Kalo Nero Beach (O Sector): the Illegal wooden platforms remained despite the demolition protocols that were issued from the Land Management Agency of Kalamata. Sunbeds and umbrellas placed late May without the necessary permissions still occupied almost the whole beach and were not removed at night-time. Other disturbances reported by the complainant were intense light pollution and excessive vehicular traffic on the coast road of Kalo Nero. The Municipality of Trifylia did not equip the area with informative signs and prevented ARCHELON to erect the seasonal information station. The complainant denounced a worsening situation and an increase in the number of tourists on the beach at night.
2. Beach Sector between Neda River and Kalo Nero beach (A, B, C Sectors): The Plowing of the dunes recorded in February 2013 was repeated in April 2013 (with the blessings of the Mayor of Trifylia). The construction of the houses was progressing, while planning permission was issued for the construction of another 2 buildings in the area. However, the issuance of building permits had been suspended for a part of the NATURA 2000 site since late May 2013 (Bill (FEK): 180/24-5-2013).

Intense light pollution at night and lack of informative sign-posting were a threat also to this area.

According to ARCHELON's investigations, adult turtles that attempted to nest returned to the sea without successfully doing so. In addition, a high number of nests were purposefully vandalised almost on a daily basis since the start of the nesting season. Moreover, ARCHELON's personnel had been victim of physical and verbal offences and the scientific equipment was stolen.

No Action Plan had been elaborated for the area in question at that time, while the Steering Committee responsible for supervising the implementation of the Action Plan and for drafting a Ministerial Decision (MD) met only twice.

Regretting the lack of concrete information on the conservation and management of the area, as well as the enforcement of relevant legislation, the Bureau suggested, at its September meeting, that the case file should be discussed as a file open at the 33rd Standing Committee meeting.

Greek authorities didn't attend the 33rd Committee meeting but addressed a report in October 2013 informing that the Ministerial Decision of Suspension/Prohibition of all construction and agricultural activities in the broader coastal area was issued in May; a Ministerial Decision issued in July had put in place a basic set of management measures concerning the reproduction of the sea turtle; in June the authorities commissioned to a Professor of the University of Athens a detailed study of the area in order to provide all the necessary environmental data that should form the basis of a Joint Ministerial Decision.

Moreover, the authorities announced that in January 2014 there would be a Decision offering a specific legal protection regime for the site (GR 2550005) during the next 2 (+1) years. This should have included an integrated management plan and measures for the cessation of all disturbing activities and infrastructures with an emphasis to sand dune restoration, where possible.

After examining the presentation of the complainant, which provided examples of habitat degradation due to the recent development of roads, large and small-scale housing development plans, installation of green-housing, and the presence of heavy machinery and vehicles on the nesting beaches the Committee expressed worries for the continued developments in the Natura 2000 site and the possible threats that these may cause to the habitats and species of the area. Considering the matter as urgent, the Committee decided to keep the case file open and instructed the Secretariat to seek the agreement of Greece on an on-the-spot appraisal to be carried out in the first semester of next year.

The Secretariat obtained the agreement of the authorities on an on-the-spot appraisal in May 2014. Dr Paolo Casale, Research fellow at the University of Rome “La Sapienza”, scientific coordinator of the sea turtle project of WWF Italy and Member of the IUCN SSC Marine Turtle Specialist Group was entrusted with the task of leading the on-the-spot visit, assess the situation, and prepare a set of possible recommendations to the Standing Committee’s attention.

The on-the-spot appraisal took place on 14-16 July 2014. The expert, accompanied by a member of the Secretariat as well as representatives of the authorities and of the NGOs, visited the authorities in Athens and conducted both night-time and daylight visits to the core nesting area in Thynes Kyparissias.

According to the expert, among the potential problems, the most urgent one was the building of ca. 50 houses along the coast in the dune area, as this development would directly and indirectly induce a high increase of disturbance to nesting females and hatchlings at the nesting beach. Moreover, the expert identified a series of problems which confirmed some of the fears expressed by the complainants and namely: light pollution from tourism infrastructures, private houses and public lights; the presence of six roads perpendicular to the seashore and over the dunes; camping on the beach; attacks from feral dogs.

However, the expert also acknowledged an improvement of the situation in comparison to what reported by the NGO in the past years, particularly thanks to actions undertaken by the municipality of Trifylia and the Ministry of Environment in respect to the delivery of construction licenses (halted by decree), the removal of canteens on the beach, the closing of the roads perpendicular to the seashore, and the management of beach furniture.

In conclusion, the expert prepared a set of recommended actions which, if implemented, should lead to an improvement of the situation. The main recommendation was to give the most important areas for marine nesting a protection status equivalent to the one of National Park, and to permanently prohibit the construction of any villas, buildings, roads or infrastructure in order to keep those areas in a natural state. Other measures concerned the restoration of the original dune and forest habitat, the proper management of the area, the management of the problem of photo-pollution and the control of feral dogs. The report and recommended actions were made available in document T-PVS/Files (2014) 49, and forwarded to Greek authorities for comments.

At the last Standing Committee meeting the European Union informed that, following the assessment of the Reasoned Opinion received from the Greek authorities in 2013, the Commission decided in March 2014 to refer the case to the Court for breach of EU legislation (Directive 92/43). The application was being prepared.

Both the delegate of Greece and the representative of Medasset presented their respective comments to the expert’s report, as well as to the draft Recommendation. The latter was slightly amended and further adopted. The Committee kept the complaint as an open file and decided to review the monitoring of the implementation of the relevant Recommendation at its next meeting.

In August 2015 the Secretariat received updated reports from both the national authorities and the complainant. Moreover, a short assessment of the situation on-the-spot was also included in the independent legal report on the implementation of the Bern Convention in Greece [document T-PVS/Inf(2015)22].

Concerning the report of the authorities, it informs about the efficient implementation of a whole set of measures to ensure the proper conservation of the protected site, in close cooperation with the NGO Archelon. Among these measures, the newest ones relate to:

- ✓ Provisions to suspend the issuing of new building permissions and the prohibition of other works;
- ✓ Restrictions for licensing of installations for bathers on the beaches for this summer;
- ✓ New procedures for the appropriate assessment of development plans and projects.

Moreover, the authorities informed that they are working at a body of regulations that should allow for a unified legal protection framework for all concerned SAC. However, some procedural/formal obstacles prevented to achieve faster progress with the adoption of the relevant Presidential Decree. (It should be noted that the expert in charge of the legal report on the implementation of the Convention in Greece says that one of the reasons why the draft Presidential Decree on the operation of the Kyparissia protected area was rejected by the Council of State was that it declared the park to be a regional park rather than a national park, thereby allowing additional activities to take place in the park. A new draft Presidential Decree is expected in the autumn of 2015).

In addition, the authorities list the rules included in the Ministerial Decision issued for fixing the restrictions on the beach area for summer 2015. They further inform that the issuing of building permits and execution of works is suspended in the egg-laying zone and the surrounding terrestrial area since 2013, by mean of consecutive Decisions that are renewed every year since.

MEDASSET also addressed an updated report analysing each of the recommendations made by the Standing Committee, and concluding that there was no improvement in the protection and management of the sea turtle beaches in Kyparissia over the past year. On the draft Presidential Decree, MEDASSET confirm that it was rejected because of procedural/formal problems, but clarifies that the Council of State took the opportunity for further commenting on the substance, finding that the designation of the Natura 2000 site as a regional park would not grant to the area a sufficient degree of protection. The Court also recommended that sand gravel extraction throughout the park be forbidden.

Moreover, the recommended restoration work has not taken place, and the temporary blocking of the roads leading to the beach have been removed. No actions have been taken to reinstate the previous dune ecosystem in houses built within the vicinity of nesting areas, nor have any actions been taken to reduce photo-pollution, with unlicensed taverns still operating on or close to the beach at night. Furthermore, cultivation of water melons and market vegetables continues on the dune area, beach equipment is not removed at night, fishing with nets near the beach is not forbidden and is a widespread practice. It further seems that there are no controls or measures to avoid the access of people and cars to the beach at night, and that the issue of feral dogs, which is under the responsibility of the local council, didn't receive an adequate response.

1.2 Possible files

➤ 2011/4: Turkey: threats to the Mediterranean monk seal (*Monachus monachus*)

(IdA)

End of June 2011 the Secretariat received a complaint from the Middle East Technical University Institute of Marine Sciences regarding the development plans comprising the construction of a road as well as of a new marine terminal near Yesilovacık village (Silifke district, Mersin Province) which would eventually have a detrimental impact on the Mediterranean monk seal (*Monachus monachus*), a species listed in Appendix II of the Bern Convention (strictly protected fauna species).

The complainant expressed concern with regards to the location of the marine terminal, foreseen at just 500 meters away from a breeding cave acting as a bridge between the core monk seal colony of the area and the pioneers moving further east.

Moreover, the complainant considered that the breeding cave, formed by soft geological material, could eventually collapse once the planned road would be opened to lorry traffic, and that pollution, turbidity and noise would force the inhabitants to abandon the cave without having in the vicinity other caves with similar morphology. The complainant informed that an Environmental Impact Assessment was made by the Ministry of Environment and Forestry for the marine terminal although this had not apparently taken into account the critical importance of the chosen area for the Mediterranean monk seal.

The complainant highlighted that the Mediterranean monk seal is also protected by other international agreements, among which CMS, CITES and the Barcelona Convention.

The Bureau stressed that the monk seal is one of the world's most endangered mammal and considered the complaint with the utmost seriousness.. It therefore requested more specific information to both Turkish authorities and the complainant.

In reply, the complainant sent an accurate report providing a summary of the main studies carried-out on this issue since the '90s. Regarding more concretely the breeding cave which is the object of this complaint, Balıklı cave, the plaintiff first stressed that Mediterranean monk seal was forced to abandon beach habitat due to human disturbance, hunting and habitat fragmentation, choosing, as a consequence, cave habitat for resting and reproduction; he further presented the results of long-term studies revealing that the total number of suitable caves in Mersin area is 37 out of which only 7 caves are located in the coast between Tasucu and Aydincik, and only one of them, Balıklı has the morphology suitable for whelping (and hence is used by pregnant mothers).

Taking into account the scarcity of suitable habitats, Mersin (Cilician) coast and the targeted breeding caves and the foraging areas were designated by the competent authorities as "No-take-zone" (sea) and "1st Degree Natural Asset" (land) already in 2007. The further studies carried out right after the enforcement of conservation measures showed that the response of the seals in Mersin was very positive with increased success in breeding as from 2002.

Concerning the morphology of the Balikli cave the complainant explained that the West side of Mersin coast (Cilician basin), where the cave is located, is characterised by ruggedness with steep mountain sand shoreline cliffs plunging into the Mediterranean. The geography on the coast is dominated by karst topography, but also by sand and sedimentary rocks. Balikli is built by soft material mainly deposition of soil at the outskirts of the coastal ridge and therefore has a very fragile structure and a delicate ceiling. However, it is protected from prevailing winds (no risk for the pup to be wounded or die during very harsh winter storms as it is the case for other caves), and a shallow pool is located inside the cave, surrounded from right to left by a small platform, a beach, and some flat-topped rock blocks. For these reasons the complainant considered that the conservation of Balikli cave is directly linked to the survival of the monk seal population in Mersin.

The Secretariat recalled the "Criteria for selecting underground habitats of biological value" appended to Recommendation No. 36 (1992) on the conservation of underground habitats, which suggests considering as underground habitats of ecological value or value for the heritage, those habitats where – among others- vulnerable, endemic or rare species are present; those habitats whose vulnerability may result either from danger of destruction of the habitat itself (quarrying, filling in, development) or from the destruction of its fauna by chemical or organic pollution, over-visiting or thoughtless hunting; those habitats which can either serve as a reference or be used for long-term follow up of populations and biotic communities.

In the light of the information received, the Bureau decided to forward the complaint to the Standing Committee as a possible file.

At the meeting of the Standing Committee in November 2012, the delegate of Turkey presented the government report, stressing that the development project was approved after undergoing all EIA procedures. Moreover, an independent evaluation of the EIA was carried out by three Professors from the Ankara University. The authorities further organised a meeting with the complainant to discuss the possible ways forward but, in the meantime, the issue had been brought before the Turkish National Court. The authorities ensured that the Turkish Ministry of Forestry and Water Affairs would be monitoring all developments related to this complaint and inform the Secretariat as soon as the Turkish Justice would emit its judgement.

The Secretariat sent a request for updated information to the Party in May 2013. In the meantime, it received a report from the complainant informing on the results of the monitoring carried out in the past two years using photo-traps. The investigation showed that Balıklı cave had been actively used by two females, two males and 1 monk seal pup that was born in the cave. Although the complainant recognised that the number of seals using the cave could be higher than the number of seals observed (only a few chambers of the cave could be monitored due to technical constraints), it seemed likely that seal activities lowered down if compared to the period before the construction.

Following the letter of the Secretariat, Turkish authorities kindly informed that the competent Ministry sent a pool of experts to the area for preparing an official report on the state of the situation.

At the meeting of the Standing Committee in December 2013, the delegate of Turkey confirmed that a final judgment on the law case before the Turkish National Court was expected soon. He informed that the report following the on-the-spot investigation confirmed that the monk seal started to use the cave again as soon as the construction in the nearby were stopped by the authorities.

The Committee decided to keep the complaint as a possible file and invited the Turkish authorities to keep the Bureau informed of any new development, including on the Court's decision.

Soon before the first Bureau meeting in 2014, the complainant spontaneously sent an updated report warning the Secretariat in particular on the fact that the construction of the marine structure didn't stop, contrary to what stated by the national authorities in December 2013.

The complainant provided dated pictures to illustrate the progress in time in the construction works. It further confirmed that even the pool of experts sent to the area by the Ministry for preparing an official report on the state of the situation witnessed the continuation of the works although the decision of the national court was still pending. The complainant informed that the marine works were almost finished. He also reported about a worrying decrease in seal activity in the cave during 2013, as shown by camera recordings in the period July 2013 and December 2013. The most disturbing information provided by the complainant concerned the death of a pup born in December 2012 in the cave, found dead on the beach near the construction site by local inhabitants. According to the complainant, the autopsy performed by authorised veterinarians at the Institute of Marine Sciences on 29 February 2014, revealed clear indications of the severe malnutrition of the new born pup.

Questioned by e-mail by the Secretariat, Turkish authorities sent a short note stating that, although the necropsy seemed to ascribe the reasons of the death to malnutrition, the scientists in charge of it requested to conduct more in-depth investigations to clarify the issue. In fact, illegal fishing could also be a reason because of two holes present on the right side of the abdomen of the pup. The authorities further informed that, in April 2014, the issue was still pending before the National Court and concluded by confirming that the construction activities were suspended in the area, but only between 1st September 2013 and 1st January 2014.

The Bureau expressed disappointment for the lack of information from the authorities on the continuation of the development works, and the apparent contradictions of previous national reports with the evidence submitted by the complainant. It therefore urged Turkish authorities to send a detailed report on the government's plans for recovering the habitat of Balıklı cave, stimulating the return of the species next season, and avoiding repeating such a sad situation in future.

However, no new information reached the Secretariat by the second Bureau meeting. The Bureau decided to keep the case as a possible file, and invited the Turkish authorities to attend the Standing Committee meeting and to submit an updated report in writing addressing the questions raised by the Bureau since April 2014.

Turkish authorities orally reported to the last Standing Committee meeting. They informed that, as required by the ecosystem evaluation report, the company in charge of the construction of the marine terminal committed to comply with some of the recommendations included in the EIA report. For instance, it committed to suspend construction activities during the monk seal breeding season, which is between September and January. This commitment was fulfilled. Moreover, the company worked in close cooperation with academic staff to monitor the monk seal activity. As a result, two monitoring reports covering a three month monitoring period in the whelping season were produced. The monitoring also confirmed that the cause of the death of the young seal was related to fishing activities around the region.

The delegate also stressed that the national action plan for the protection of Mediterranean monk seal in Turkey, identifies 17 important breeding sites, 5 of which are located in Mersin province. A local action plan to be implemented over a five year period had been prepared in 2012 and revised in 2014 to ensure proper conservation of the Monk Seal in the area. It includes monitoring measures, a conservation programme, education and inspection programmes. The delegate also recalled that the case was still under consideration of a Turkish National Court and ensured the Parties of the highest consideration of the Ministry for this matter.

The Committee thanked the authorities for the encouraging information provided by the delegate of Turkey regarding the finalisation of an Action Plan for the monk seal in Mersin area; still, the Committee strongly regretted that, as shown by the complainant, marine infrastructures have been built in the vicinity of a fundamental reproduction and breeding zone, despite these having an obvious impact on the species.

Therefore the Committee decided to keep this complaint as a possible file, requesting a timely and complete report on the implementation of the Action Plan, on any other measures undertaken for the conservation of the Mediterranean Monk Seal, as well as the conclusions of the pending Court case if available.

Finally, the Committee mandated the Bureau, in close cooperation with the Barcelona Convention, to analyse the situation of the monk seal in the East Mediterranean in light of the information received, and to prepare proposals and recommendations for the next Standing Committee.

In the report sent in March 2015 Turkish authorities confirmed that Turkey holds a fourth of the World Monk seal population, half of which inhabits the Mersin Province.

The report provided a very succinct presentation of the structure of the Action plan, identifying three major threats, namely: habitat loss due to tourism and road infrastructures (including in Mersin), deliberate or unintentional killing, human disturbance. The Action Plans counts with four main fields of activities including research, conservation measures, monitoring, and education.

Despite some information on activities implemented in 2014, the Secretariat considered that the measures undertaken for the implementation of the Action Plan were however insufficient to ensure adequate protection of the species in general, and in Mersin province in particular. For instance, the activities foreseen for 2015 mainly concerned research, awareness and education but little or no information was provided in the report on recovery or conservation measures.

Therefore the Bureau decided to re-consider this complaint at its next meeting as a possible file, and asked Turkish authorities to send a copy of the Action Plan (including in Turkish if the English version was not available), to be shared with the Barcelona Convention. The latter would then be requested to highlight the main gaps and suggest a set of measures that the national authorities could include in their current Action Plan for stronger and more focussed results.

Finally, the Bureau stressed that this complaint opens two issues: one is the conservation of the species at the national level; the other is the need to urgently mitigate the impact of the marine terminal on the population which was using Balikli cave in Mersin province. The Bureau requested Turkish authorities to report on this last point on time for its next meeting

The Secretariat requested all relevant information to Turkish authorities with a deadline of 3 July. Unfortunately, despite several reminders, the letter of the Secretariat remained unanswered. A copy of the letter was also sent to the Barcelona Convention for information but, due to the lack of additional documents, it was not possible to undertake a joint follow-up on this file.

➤ **[2012/3 - Possible spread of the American mink (*Neovison vison*) in Poland]**

This complaint is on the agenda of next Standing Committee meeting.

1.3 Complaints on stand-by

➤ **2006/1: France: Protection of the European green toad (*Buro viridis*) in Alsace**

(10)

A complaint was lodged in 2006 by the Association BUFO (*Association pour l'étude et la protection des amphibiens et reptiles d'Alsace*) focusing on threats to the green toad's few remaining habitats in Alsace. It specifically targeted shortcomings in the impact studies carried out for a major bypass and urban development projects, and a project for the construction of a leisure complex.

In 2008, the French government reported that a restoration plan for the common spadefoot (*Pelobates fuscus*) and the green toad (*Bufo viridis*) was under development, at the initiative of the regional authorities (DIREN Lorraine). The plan would be ready at the end of 2009, with specific actions starting in 2010.

In 2009, noting the very limited progress achieved, the Committee decided to treat this pending complaint as a "possible case file" at its next meeting.

At the 2010 Standing Committee meeting, the French delegate announced that the National Action Plan was to be validated in the spring by the Ministry of Ecology. Activities had already started. Attempts to find out more about the species and consult a very wide range of stakeholders had held up the finalisation of the plan.

The representative of the regional environment, planning and housing directorate (DREAL) said that the regional implementation of the plan would be a priority in 2011 and that all planning files were carefully monitored.

The representative of ASFS said that the population was at threat of extinction.

The Committee decided to keep the file as a possible case file as the procedure for drawing up the National Action Plan was not completed.

In 2011, the representative of the regional environment, planning and housing directorate (DREAL) informed that the delay in finalising the national action plan was due to a failure on the part of the consultancy tasked with drawing up the plan; the plan's completion, however, was not in danger. At regional level, DREAL Alsace was working with the associations and partners concerned, in particular the Bufo association, which had been mandated to draw up a regional action plan.

The representatives of the relevant NGOs, *Sauvegarde Faune Sauvage*, CERPEA and the European Environment Bureau, expressed deep concern about the delay in finalising the national action plan, the ever-growing pressures of urban development and the proliferation of schemes, slicing up land. The representative of CERPEA asked that a file be opened.

The Committee decided to keep the file as a possible file and urged the French authorities to finalise the procedure for drawing up the National Action Plan in view of its final adoption.

In a report submitted in March 2012, the French authorities indicated that the contract with the consultancy tasked with drafting the action plan had been terminated on 23 December 2011. An agreement had subsequently been signed with the National Museum of Natural History (MNHN). A new version of the plan would be sent to the members of the relevant committee during summer 2012 for approval at its meeting due in September 2012.

In Alsace, the regional action plan for the Green toad had been submitted on 30 January 2012 to the Alsatian steering group of the regional action plans for amphibians. Priority measures for 2012 had also been agreed, including, in particular, monitoring of population trend indicators, continued study of the inclusion of the species in the “green and blue infrastructure” policy, inclusion in regulatory zoning and integration of the species in spatial planning strategies.

In the case of Lorraine, where the green toad had also been identified as a priority species requiring the establishment of protected areas, three sites had been identified and were currently being studied: the Merle gravel quarries in Freyming-Merlebach and St Avold, Rosselmont in Forbach and Petite Rosselle, and a 35-ha site in the municipality of Morsbach. Three other projects which could have an impact on the Green Toad or its habitats had been examined in 2011 or were in the process of being examined. The outcome had been either the abandonment of the project or avoidance, reduction or compensation measures: a planned urban development zone (ZAC) in Warndt community of municipalities; a photovoltaic project in Freyming-Merlebach; and the planned extension of a gravel quarry in Sentzich.

Around ten nature reserves of ecological interest for fauna and flora (ZNIEFF) had already been designated for the Green toad in 2006. A Lorraine working group would be updating these reserves and proposing new ZNIEFFs. A map entitled “Green Toad ecological corridors” had also been drawn up. Lastly, a technical guide would be produced on integrating the Green toad in development projects.

The Bureau welcomed the information provided by the French authorities and noted the encouraging developments at regional level, including the strengthened co-operation with the Association BUFO. The Bureau decided to keep this complaint as a possible file and instructed the Secretariat to contact French authorities for an updated report to be assessed at next Bureau meeting.

French authorities were requested to send a report by 24th August 2012 but were unable to reply by the given deadline.

At the Standing Committee meeting in 2013, the French authorities informed that a meeting of the national committee of experts on the Green toad was scheduled to take place in January 2013, in the framework of the finalisation of the new National Action Plan (PNA) commissioned to the National Museum of Natural History in Paris (MNHN).

The representatives of the NGOs welcomed the involvement of the MNHN in the preparation of the Action Plan, but deplored the lengthiness of the drafting process and the lack of available information on progress on the webpage of the Ministry. They stressed that, in the meantime, the three populations of Green toad in the region were decreasing.

The Committee took note of the information presented and acknowledged progress at local level as well as the collaboration with the MNHM. The complaint was kept as a possible file.

In a report submitted in March 2013, French authorities informed that the completion of the revised Action plan was foreseen for April, followed by its official submission to the National Council for Nature Protection in May. Moreover, the last available draft version of the action plan had been published on a dedicated webpage.

The Bureau noted with satisfaction the efforts of French authorities to improve the transparency of the process and it further welcomed the foreseen adoption of the Action Plan in the late spring of 2013. It decided to keep the case-file as a possible file and asked the French authorities to further inform on the formal adoption of the national action plan and the milestones set for its operational implementation

In a report submitted in August 2013, French authorities communicated that the finalisation of the National Action Plan was unfortunately again delayed, although “the file is being processed”. The Ministry of ecology received an amended draft Action Plan from the Museum of Natural History, which integrated comments made by the national group of experts. The amended draft had to be submitted to the national Steering Committee in September 2013, after the final validation of the experts. The next milestones should include: consultation with all services concerned at national level, submission to the National Council for Nature Protection, and finally the organisation of public consultations. The adoption of the final version was therefore foreseen for the end of 2013. The implementation would start upon the distribution of the plan at national level.

At its meeting in September 2013, the Bureau regretted the procedural delays in the adoption of the National Action Plan, and invited the French authorities to inform the Standing Committee about the state of play. It further noted that the complainant had not reported to the Secretariat during 2013, and instructed the Secretariat to contact the relevant NGOs for updated information on the situation of the green toad. Finally, the Bureau considered that if it should appear that the conservation status of the green toad was suffering from the lack of an adequate action plan or other relevant measures, the Committee should decide on the opportunity of opening a case file.

At its meeting in December 2013, the Standing Committee took note of the information presented by the Delegate of France and the summary of the observations of the NGO. The Committee acknowledged the progress in the implementation of measures in favour of the conservation of the species through the enforcement of the regional Action Plans in the Alsace and Lorraine regions, and noted the upcoming finalisation and adoption of the National Action Plan in the summer of 2014. The Committee welcomed the good co-operation between the regional authorities and the complainant NGO on the planning and implementation of actions in the Alsace region, and decided to keep the complaint in stand-by.

The report sent by the French authorities in August 2014 acknowledged that the consultation procedure for the National Action Plan (NAP) had been completed and its text finalised. The final adoption of the NAP by the Minister of the Environment was foreseen for September 2014. A copy of the final National Action Plan was also submitted to the Secretariat.

The report, prepared by the Regional directorate of the environment, planning and housing (DREAL) of Lorraine and Alsace, also informed about the actions already implemented in favour of the green toad in 2014, mainly through Regional Action Plans¹, respectively in Alsace, which is concerned by the complaint, but also in Lorraine and Corse, where the species is present.

Several prioritised actions for 2014 were listed for implementation in Alsace, among them: monitoring of changes in populations; study on the genetic characterisation of populations of green toad; production of a documentary film on the species; prevention against infectious disease, chytridiomycosis on the green toad; maintenance, creation and restoration of wetlands, mostly in quarries; training of technical staff of the State. The report further highlighted two flagship projects foreseen for 2014 in Alsace and in Lorraine, concerning the online availability and distribution of the “Guide of consideration of species subject to a Regional Action Plan in territorial development policies”.

In addition, the report mentioned the development projects concerned by the request for exemption regarding protected species in the Bas-Rhin, including the Green toad, and how the authorities dealt with those requests.

The report finally pointed out the inclusion of the species in territorial development policies: 1) the modernisation of the ZNIEFFs (nature reserves of ecological interest for fauna and flora) would enable to identify and bring to the attention of the various project managers the territories and habitats that are favourable to the green toad; 2) the Regional Scheme for the Ecological Coherence (SRCE) would contribute to the maintenance and preservation of reservoirs and ecological corridors associated with this

¹<http://www.alsace.developpement-durable.gouv.fr/les-plans-regionaux-d-actions-a1626.html>;
<http://www.lorraine.developpement-durable.gouv.fr/crapaud-vert-r2720.html>

species; two reservoirs of biodiversity had been identified around Strasbourg and Mulhouse; and 3) in the framework of the instruction of territorial development projects, the opportunities and needs to preserve the habitats of the Green toad would be taken into consideration.

At its meeting in September 2014, the Bureau welcomed the information received from the French authorities about the recent finalisation of the National Action Plan (NAP) for the protection of the European green toad and its expected adoption in November 2014. The Bureau further appreciated the good cooperation of the French authorities with the complainant and invited them to inform the Convention as soon as the Action Plan is officially adopted, and to report back to the Bureau in September 2015 on the results of the first implementation period.

As requested, the national authorities sent their report in July 2015 informing that the Ministry of Environment adopted the National Action Plan on 27 November 2015. They further described in details the measures put in place at both the national and regional levels, including conclusions of contracts for the implementation of the Plan at the regional levels (with the Association BUFO for the implementation of the Plan in Alsace), communication and awareness-raising activities, plans for police intervention actions controlling the respect of species protection regulations, research activities on the species population trends, etc.

The NGO Sauvegarde Faune Sauvage also submitted a short report in July 2015, informing on the actions put in place by the Association BUFO for the implementation of the regional part of the NAP in Alsace. The NGO requests that the case-file is not dismissed, as they fear the implementation of some actions foreseen in the Plan might be difficult or even compromised in some localities of the region where derogation requests to their participation in the Plan might be filed.

➤ **2014/6: Wind energy: Possible threats to an endangered natural habitat in Izmir (Turkey)**

(IdA)

This complaint was submitted in July 2014 by a citizen of Çeşme, İzmir, to denounce the exponentially increasing number of wind energy installations (WEIs) which are rapidly developing into the Çeşme Peninsula. The latter is an endangered natural habitat, nurturing a biota of expansive biodiversity. The complainant stressed that the Turkish Energy market is the fastest growing in the world, with important economic benefits. However, a non-sustainable use of renewable energy sources can make these environmentally, socially and economically unviable. The complainant denounces the negative impact of uncontrolled wind-energy developments on a number of protected habitats and species, in violation of Articles 4 and 6 of the Bern Convention.

Following a request for more specific information the complainant addressed some of the questions raised by the Secretariat.

Regarding the windfarm project in Izmir, counting with already 385 wind turbines, the complainant highlighted that the latter had not been subject to an EIA, which is compulsory for this kind of projects according to the national legislation. In fact, to avoid the EIA requirements, the project developers limited the scale of the initial project to the recommended capacity, with the intention of increasing it in future. This is demonstrated by the requests, already put forward by some companies, for additional capacity increase. For this reason, other windfarm development projects have already been brought before national Courts and there have been some rulings against these. For instance, very recently, the citizens of Karaburun won a case against the installation of additional 47 turbines in a nature reserve candidate for a biosphere status.

It is however important to note that Turkey is not subject to the obligations of the Aarhus Convention.

Concerning Çeşme town, the matter is still pending before a Court, and concerns the confiscation of private lands; the intermediate rulings requested to suspend the further continuation of constructions but the private company continues implementing the construction project. The complainant informed being in the process of preparing a complaint for cumulative impacts of the windfarm project to be submitted to a National Court.

The Turkish authorities informed the Secretariat that they were collecting the necessary information for submission to the governing institutions of the Convention.

The Bureau noted that this complaint presents two major aspects: one concerns the common controversies surrounding wind-farm siting and the relations with the communities hosting windfarm close to their homes, which are already being dealt by a national Court and on which the Convention has no competence. The second is the potentially uncontrolled wind-energy development, which also poses problems in some other Contracting Parties. In this respect, a precautionary reaction seemed useful to avoid difficult situations in future.

In light of the readiness of the authorities to provide information on this case, the Bureau decided to consider the complaint as a complaint on stand-by at its next meeting. It further instructed the Secretariat to liaise with other MEAs and NGOs with a specific knowledge on wind-energy issues.

The Secretariat contacted BirdLife International and the WWF Turkey for additional information. The WWF Turkey recognised a competence and knowledge on/of wind-energy matters in the country and offered to help in the investigation. However, its opinion will be received after the Bureau meeting. In the meantime, another private citizen contacted the Secretariat and informed of her wish to submit a separate complaint on the same matters.

➤ **2014/1: Presumed risk of national extinction of badgers in Ireland**

(IdA)

In January 2014 the Secretariat received two complaints from the Irish Wildlife Trust denouncing a possible breach of the Bern Convention with regards to i) the increased culling of badgers in Ireland, with possible detrimental impact on the population size; ii) the failure of Irish authorities to submit biennial reports due under Article 9 of the Convention in case of exceptions made to the provisions of Articles 4 to 8 of the Convention. The files so submitted were registered as a single complaint.

The Secretariat recalls that last year the Bureau of the Standing Committee to the Bern Convention devoted specific attention to the issue of complaints submitted for presumed breaches of the Convention related to species listed in Annex III. In fact, most of these complaints concern the culling of badgers and many are not well-founded on the ground.

At its last meeting the Standing Committee agreed to disseminate a guidance document on the “Admissibility of complaints related to species listed in Appendix III: the Badger as a Model”. The latter has been prepared with the aim of clarifying - without prejudice to the provisions of the Convention - both the degree of protection offered by the Treaty to Appendix III species, and the reporting obligations of Parties according to Article 9.

In the complaints in object the Wildlife Trust denounced on the one hand a risk of local disappearance of the species due to the fact that the ceiling of 30% cumulative percentage of agricultural land under capture for badgers has been exceeded and that a review of the status of the national badger population is lacking; on the other hand, the complainant considers that Ireland failed to comply with the reporting obligations set under Article 9 of the Convention.

On the latter, the Secretariat recalls that, as a general remark, if the species listed in Appendix III, it is not threatened in the territory of the Contracting Party, the population is not jeopardized by the exploitation’s policy, the exploitation is monitored by the concerned authorities, and the Party has not make use of one of the prohibited means listed in Appendix IV, the Party can authorise a certain degree of exploitation without being obliged to report to the Standing Committee through the biennial reports.

However, as a follow-up to a previous complaint submitted in 2011 on the same issue, Irish authorities recognized a certain decline of the badger population in Ireland, but informed that the latter was under control and that it would not continue further. They also informed about some research programmes concerning oral and intramuscular vaccination of badgers as tools for potentially avoiding the culls (see document T-PVS/Files (2012) 3).

In the light of the above, and in order to enable the Bureau to take a decision on the follow-up to be given to the complaint, where appropriate, the Secretariat addressed a reporting request to Irish authorities on any relevant change in the population size on the national territory since 2012, as well as on the measures undertaken to monitor it; on the conservation status of the species; and on the results of the research on the vaccination as an alternative to the culls.

Unfortunately, the report requested by 6th March didn't reach the Secretariat. The Bureau stressed once more that the badger is a widespread species subject to the less strict degree of protection granted by Appendix III. However, it also recognised the interest in getting some updated information from the national authorities, particularly on monitoring activities, and asked the Secretariat to reiterate its request for next Bureau meeting.

The Secretariat addressed several information requests to Irish authorities. It also got notification of a change in the focal point for Ireland and addressed the whole file to the new officers appointed. However, its requests remained unanswered.

➤ **2014/8: Presumed large-scale exploitation and marketing of protected marine shelled molluscs in Greece**

(EFG/IdA)

This complaint denounces the large-scale illegal exploitation and marketing of protected marine shelled molluscs in Greece, including species protected under the Bern convention, as well as under other regional or international conventions (including EU legislation).

A survey conducted between June 2009 and June 2011 on 219 seafood restaurants in 92 localities revealed that forty-two percent of the surveyed restaurants were serving at least one of the protected and hence illegally exploited species. Among these, the date mussel *Lithophaga lithophaga*, the common piddock *Pholas dactylus*, the giant tun *Tonna galea* are listed under Appendix II of the Convention.

The complainant observed that, given that these figures are based on the statements of the restaurateurs themselves, they are probably an underestimation of the true scale of the problem.

He also affirms that since the publication of the study the situation remained unchanged. The complainant further stressed that the populations of all the Annex II species mentioned in the complaint are declining in the Mediterranean and in particular in Greek coastal areas. Protection through international agreements and European or national legislation was decided on the basis of a need to reduce mortality and to allow these populations to recover. Continuing intense exploitation for illegal trading in seafood restaurants will render the achievement of this goal unfeasible.

The Secretariat addressed a detailed reporting request to Greek authorities but unfortunately it didn't receive a reply by the first Bureau meeting.

The Bureau regretted the lack of reply from Greek authorities and decided to re-consider this complaint as a complaint on stand-by at its next meeting, after reiterating its reporting request. Moreover, the Bureau requested the views of the European Commission on the matter.

In the report addressed end of July, the national authorities confirm that the species object of the complaint are protected under both national law and the Habitats Directive. In fulfilment of these obligations, the authorities claim that the relevant controlling authorities have been given the right to

impose deterring sanctions in case of infringements. Moreover, the Port Police Authorities conduct targeted inspections in localities where the consumption is still considered to be high. Therefore the authorities recognise that illegal consumption still exists, but disagree with the conclusions of the complainant regarding the extent of the problem, which seems limited to few localities.

The report further mentions a Presidential Decree which has been adopted in reply to Recommendation No. 85 (2001) of the Standing Committee to prohibit the exploitation of the protected molluscs species and stop the trade in *Lithophaga lithophaga*.

The authorities conclude by ensuring their commitment to cooperate with all the stakeholders, and take all the necessary measures and actions to stop the illegal exploitation of these species.

The European Union, on its side, informed that the Commission may raise the matter with Greek authorities but would welcome more updated information on the extent of illegal activities after 2011.

➤ **2014/9 : Possible impact of haying performed in the steppe and forest-steppe reserves of Ukraine**

(10)

In October 2014 the Secretariat received a complaint by the Kyiv Ecological and Cultural Center, alleging a presumed breach by Ukraine of Article 6 of the Convention, caused by the destruction of important habitats of bird and reptile species listed in the Convention's Appendices, due to haying practices. The complainant considers that the high number of haying permits annually issued by the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources of Ukraine is resulting in habitat destruction and great disturbance to a high number of species from Appendix II of the Convention. In addition, the complainant explains that most of the haying is conducted during the reproduction period of the species (May and June), using not adapted heavy machines.

The areas presumably affected are mainly steppe areas, - Nature Reserves and Natural Parks – such as the Askania-Nova, Luhanskiy, Kanivskiy, Dniprovsko-Oreelskiy, Medobory, Mykhailivska Tsilyna, Yelanetskiy Steppe, Chornomorskiy, etc.

Most of these areas have been nominated as candidate Emerald sites for Ukraine and are awaiting a scientific evaluation prior to their full adoption as Emerald sites. Therefore, Recommendation No. 157 (2011) of the Standing Committee applies to the areas, in particular in its provisions recommending Parties to preserve their ecological values ahead of a full adoption as Emerald sites and the planning and implementation of appropriate management measures.

In January 2015, the Secretariat addressed a letter to the national authorities, requesting their position on the complaint, and more information on the regulations in place on the issuing of haying permits as well as any other measures adopted to ensure that the haying practices do not have a negative impact on the species listed under the Convention and their habitats in the areas concerned.

On 6 March 2015, the national authorities informed being in constant contact with the complainant regarding the dangers of haying for the conservation of species of flora and fauna in areas of strict protection. The Ministry stressed that the complainant fails to provide any specific proof of deaths of plants or animals in the protected areas. Regarding the regulation of haymaking, the authorities informed that this is carried out on the basis of territorial planning and included in the management plans of the relevant protected areas. They further argued that the haying aims at preventing fires, - which can cause significant loss of steppe biodiversity -, at facilitating foraging by wild ungulates and at conserving plant communities that have historically emerged in the areas.

Eventually, the authorities concluded by informing that the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources of Ukraine, in consultation with the complainant, prepared and sent a circulation letter to the authorities of the relevant protected areas, recommending to carry out haying only with scientifically-

based approaches and after detailed surveys of steppe areas, after flowering of native plant species and breeding of animal species that are included into the Red Data Book of Ukraine and the annexes of the Bern Convention, and not to use heavy machinery.

On 11 March 2015 the Secretariat approached the complainant, requesting their position on the information provided by the authorities. No answer was received by the preparation of the present document.

The Bureau welcomed the information provided by Ukraine and decided to keep the complaint on stand-by to give to the complainant the possibility of replying to the national report. If the problems would not persist, the Bureau could decide to dismiss the complaint at its next meeting.

The Secretariat contacted again the complainant in June 2015 but it got no answer.

➤ **[2012/5: Sport and recreation facilities in Cirali key turtle nesting beach (Turkey)]**

[This complaint is on stand-by pending information on the expected court's case decision.]

➤ **[2012/7: Presumed illegal killing of birds in Malta]**

[This complaint is on the agenda of the Group of experts on the conservation of birds and will be examined at the first Bureau meeting in 2016.]

➤ **[2013/10: Impact of corn monoculture on the conservation status of protected species in Alsace, France]**

[This complaint will be examined at the first Bureau meeting in 2016.]

➤ **[2014/3: Presumed deliberate killing of birds in Serbia]**

[This complaint is on the agenda of the Group of experts on the conservation of birds and will be examined at the first Bureau meeting in 2016. In September this year, Serbia has been further requested to report on a controversial decision undertaken by the Ministry of Agriculture and Environmental Protection to stop the hunting ban on common quail and turtle dove as of 1st of August, thus coinciding with the migration's peak.]

1.4 On-the-spot appraisal

➤ **File Open – 2012/9: Turkey: Presumed degradation of nesting beaches in Fethiye and Patara SPAs**

(IdA)

At the Bureau meeting in September 2012 the Secretariat informed that MEDASSET submitted an updated report regarding the implementation by Turkey of Recommendation No. 66 (1998) on the conservation status of some nesting beaches for marine turtles.

Although in 2011 some valuable steps were made to protect the loggerhead nesting areas at the Fethiye SPA, the NGO was concerned by the fact that several of these measures were not sustained in 2012.

In the light of these new elements the Bureau decided to include the follow-up of that Recommendation on next Standing Committee meeting agenda.

At the 32nd Standing Committee meeting the delegate of Turkey informed on the measures undertaken to protect the nests in the area, including caging, tagging of animals, awareness raising and monitoring.

The representative of MEDASSET made a detailed presentation based on photo supports showing, despite some efforts from the authorities, lack of guarding and of information signs, litter and light pollution, plantation of introduced species, unregulated motorised water sports and presence of people and vehicles on nesting beaches at night. MEDASSET stressed that, in 2012, one new wooden hut with a

concrete patio was installed on the nesting beach, and a hotel was built on the beachfront, destroying the last section of the remaining wetland while Recommendation No. 66 (1998) specifically states that remaining unbuilt beach plots should be secured against development.

MEDASSET proposed that a file should be open regarding Fethiye SPA, and concluded its intervention by calling upon Turkish government to inform on the neutralisation and removal of the toxic waste as well as sea turtle conservation efforts in Kazanlı. MEDASSET further informed that a new complaint had been lodged before the Convention regarding the Patara SPA.

The delegate of Turkey acknowledged that the images presenting the situation in Fethiye were “uncomfortable” and stated that he expected matters to improve, as certain organisational issues related to the management of the beaches were to be resolved soon.

The delegate of Norway considered that there were reasons for concern, but welcomed the conscious reaction of the delegate of Turkey. He therefore suggested, with the support of the delegate of the Slovak Republic, that the file be dealt as a possible file.

In January 2013 the Secretariat forwarded the Standing Committee’s decision to the authorities of Turkey, together with a reporting request. Turkish authorities replied on 15th March asked for an extension of the deadline for submitting the information requested.

Meanwhile, the NGO submitted updated information on the situation in Patara, Fethiye and Kazanlı, urging the Secretariat to consider the complaints lodged for Fethiye SPA and Patara SPA as distinct.

In fact, MEDASSET argued that on the one hand the complaint and the subsequent update reports submitted to the Secretariat referring to Fethiye SPA highlighted the lack of implementation of conservation and management measures, as well as the construction of new hotels and other buildings on the nesting beaches; on the other hand, the problems put forward in the complaint referring to Patara SPA focussed on large scale construction projects taking place within the protected area and failure of the land use and management plan to secure adequate protection status to the SPA at both the ecological and archaeological heritage management level. MEDASSET offered to invite an expert on land use and heritage site management to further inform the Standing Committee, if requested by the Bureau.

Regarding more concretely Fethiye SPA, and noting the continued decline of nest numbers in the area possibly due to poor management and protection of the habitat, MEDASSET requested a detailed report by the Turkish authorities with an account of conservation and management measures to be applied in Fethiye SPA before and during the 2013 nesting season.

Concerning Kazanlı, MEDASSET requested that the issue be dealt with as a follow up to Case File No. 2000/1, which the Bureau dismissed in 2009 in order to consider the complaint under the general monitoring of the implementation of Recommendation No. 66 (1998). However, MEDASSET asked that Recommendation No. 95 (2002) on the conservation of marine turtles in Kazanlı be put on the agenda of the 33rd Standing Committee meeting since there had been no news or report on progress for the safe disposal of the 1.5 million tons of highly toxic solid waste located right next to Kazanlı’s most important green turtle nesting site, posing a threat to the environment and human health.

In April 2013, after assessing the file, the Bureau took note of the concern and requests expressed by MEDASSET and agreed to monitor the implementation of Recommendation No. 95 (2002) at next Standing Committee meeting. However, the Bureau still considered the conservation and management issues related to Fethiye and Patara SPA as interlinked and decided to address in conjunction.

The report of the national authorities reached the Secretariat a few days after the Bureau meeting.

The authorities explained that, following the restructuring of the Ministry of Environment, the General Directorate for the Protection of Natural Assets had been appointed as the body for the Special Environmental Protection Areas (SEPAs). The latter can be subject to urban developments, provided that these are foreseen in the so-called Master Plans, which fixes the conditions for land use and density of developments in the respective areas.

More specifically regarding Patara, the report informed about the legal status of the area, stressing that the zone where the villas are constructed is a 3rd Degree Archaeological Site (DAS). Moreover, the construction plans related to Patara 1st DAS had been approved by decree. In addition, the report summarised the measures taken for ensuring sea turtle conservation in the period between May and September 2012, and provided some data collected as a result of monitoring studies carried out in the same timeframe (i.e. number of nests, tracks, predation, accidents, etc.).

Concerning Fethiye SEPA, the report provided the same kind of data, and further informed on more specific conservation actions, like for example the caging of nests against human activities and predators, a measure which concerned 11.23% of the nests. Public awareness actions were also implemented at night at the “Caretta Info Desk” on Çalış beach, targeting for instance local and foreign tourists.

The Secretariat acknowledged the encouraging information on some conservation actions carried out by the authorities in 2012, but invited them to complete the report submitted with more detailed information on some of the issues raised in the Secretariat’s correspondence, for instance the measures and actions whose implementation was foreseen that year, as well as the steps towards the removal of illegal or unauthorised constructions in both Fethiye and Patara SPAs. The deadline for the complementary information was set to 6th September 2013.

On 9th September 2013 the Secretariat received the report by the complainant. Regarding Fethiye, the report listed and described into details the impact of the main threats to the nesting population, affirming that in 2013 there was no improvement to the protection and effective management of the nesting beaches, with the exception of beach furniture management in a small part of the nesting beaches and some new signage which, however, remained insufficient. The main threats continued to be the lack of effective signage, the presence of beach furniture, beach access at night, light pollution, plantation, and illegal tourism infrastructure. The report included a list of recommendations, namely regarding the need of reinforcing guarding on the beaches, of continuing the programmes of scientific monitoring and nest protection, the need of appropriately managing beach furniture, preventing the access to the beaches at night, removing the plantations and securing the remaining unbuilt beach area against developments.

Regarding Patara, the complainant reported that the building of 27 villas to be inhabited by summer 2014 had been completed. The complainant further recalled that the whole construction project concerns the building of around 400-750 villas in total and stressed the need of urgently reconsidering the scale of the project. Moreover, like in Fethiye, signage was insufficient and apparently no guarding was foreseen to enforce conservation rules on the nesting beaches, unlike previous years. The complainant reiterated its proposal to bring an expert on land use and heritage site management to further inform the Standing Committee, if requested by the Bureau.

At its meeting of September 2013, the Bureau requested the Party to provide the Standing Committee with an updated report, including more recent information related to, among others, the breeding season.

At the 33rd Standing Committee meeting the representative of the NGO presented the most updated information, reiterating the problems already spotted in previous reports. More concretely, for Patara the NGO requested the re-evaluation of the scale of the tourism development project in the 3rd Degree Archaeological Area, the implementation of an Environmental Impact Assessment, and the elaboration of an updated SPA management plan to manage visitor flows prior to the 2014 tourist season.

On Fethiye, the NGO showed pictures taken during the summer season in 2013 clearly showing the lack of effective signage and guarding, lack of management of the beach furniture, beach access at night and consequent light pollution, creation of parking spaces, wooden pavilions, temporary discos, and even a new road.

The Delegate of Turkey explained that the authorities are aware of the situation and committed to revert it. In fact, the process of re-organisation of the competencies within the bodies responsible for nature conservation had an impact on the efficiency of the response of the government, but some measures were already envisaged to ensure that the effective management of both areas is done in compliance with the recommendations of the Standing Committee.

In the light of the above, the Committee decided to open the file as a mean for encouraging relevant bodies at national level to work towards greater accountability, co-operation, and responsibility. Besides, the Committee instructed the Secretariat to promptly approach Turkish authorities with a detailed reporting request, and mandated the Chair of the Standing Committee to convey the Committee's concern to the responsible national authorities, together with the relevant proposals of assistance.

The Secretariat addressed a letter to Turkish authorities already in January 2014, conveying the worries of the Committee as well as the proposal of assistance, and requesting an updated report on the progress towards the management of the area. Due to a communication problem, the Delegate requested an extension of the deadlines fixed by the Secretariat until the 28 March.

Therefore the Secretariat received first the report from the complainant, concerning both Fethiye and Patara. Regarding Fethiye SPA, MEDASSET denounced the lack of preparatory actions by the authorities to improve the management and conservation of sea turtle nesting beaches. In addition, the complainant alerted on the promotion by the authorities of a "public interest decision" allowing for the relocation and construction of a shipyard/drydock on Akgöl nesting beach. The latter is an "old" project regularly denounced by MEDASSET since its construction could undermine conservation efforts in the area and have a severe impact on a pristine habitat. In its report, MEDASSET addressed a series of requests to Turkish authorities, including the preparation of a SPA management plan for both the land and marine areas, the urgent implementation of a comprehensive action plan ensuring proper management and adequate protection of the SPA, and the allocation of the necessary financial and human resources for the enforcement of regulations. Furthermore, the complainant requested to the government to reject the plans for the construction of the drydock in Akgöl.

To conclude on Fethiye, MEDASSET asked the Bureau to consider the possibility of an on-the-spot assessment as a way forward in case no relevant information is communicated by the national authorities on the complaint, as well as to request an official update on the status of the shipyard construction project.

Regarding Patara, MEDASSET informed that the construction of another 300 villas inside the protected area had been documented in several press articles since January 2014. According to the complainant the summer house construction project is incompatible with the Bern Convention's related recommendations. The NGO therefore requested to the national authorities to take a clear position on the matter, to re-evaluate the scale of the construction project, to revise the SPA management plan and ensure its implementation through the necessary human and financial resources before May 2014. As for Fethiye, the complainant concluded by requesting that the Bureau consider the possibility of an on-the-spot assessment in case of lack of reporting by the Turkish authorities.

The government report recognised the lack of a local management unit, as well as of physical points of entry/exits at Fethiye-Göcek SEPA. Although the control of the area was not adequately maintained, the report informed about the results of the studies carried out during the 2013 nesting season, with data on the number of emergencies, of nests caged against predation and human activities, and hatching. Regarding the latter, only 1.92 % of the nests did not produce any hatchlings and, after considering the unfertilized eggs and the death in shell, the hatching success was calculated at 91.99%. The report further contained pictures documenting some public awareness activities, namely with hotel owners, personnel and guests, as well as the installation of three info signs at the main entrance to the beach at Çalış, Yanıklar and Akgöl sections.

Concerning Patara, the authorities noted that the area where the villas were to be constructed is about 2 km away from the beach. The Implementation Plans for the construction project received all necessary authorisations and were prepared by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and endorsed by the Antalya Culture and Natural Heritage Protection Regional Council. Moreover, the scale of the initial plans had been already reduced of approximately 75%.

More concretely regarding sea turtle protection activities, the report informed about the results of the studies conducted between May and September 2013, showing a high percentage of eggs suffering from predation, mainly by foxes. However, around 90% of hatched turtles managed to reach the sea. Some awareness activities, similar to those carried out in Fethiye, were also organized in Patara.

The Bureau acknowledged the information submitted but requested to receive more detailed information from the authorities on the plans for the forthcoming tourism season, as well as on the measures to be implemented for ensuring the proper conservation of the areas in the future. It also requested the official position of the authorities with regards to the possible relocation and construction of the shipyard on Akgöl.

The Secretariat addressed a specific reporting request to the authorities at the beginning of May, followed by several reminders. However, no new information was submitted by the authorities on time for the second Bureau meeting. In the meantime, the NGO submitted an updated report, mainly to question some of the assertions of the authorities.

A first contradiction concerned the location of the summer house developments, which the NGO considered to be more near the core nesting area than what affirmed by the authorities. In addition, the NGO reported about some press articles informing that 122 houses would be built on the land belonging to the HITIT Housing Cooperative, within the protected area.

Besides, the NGO detailed some other persisting conservation problems, such as the lack of signage, inadequate beach furniture management, discard of pesticide bottles onto the beach and into the sea, use of fishing nets close to the shore during the nesting and hatching season, the construction of a new road and the establishment of a new beach bar in Çayağzı beach. To document these allegations the NGOs included photos in its report.

The report concluded with a series of requests addressed to both the Turkish authorities and the Standing Committee.

The Bureau regretted the lack of updated information from Turkey and decided to keep the case-file open and to ask to the Standing Committee to ensure its follow-up, including by considering the possibility of an on-the-spot appraisal depending on the information submitted and provided there is agreement of the Party.

At last Standing Committee meeting the Delegate of Turkey made an oral statement reiterating that, in Patara, the construction of the villas is taking place outside the nesting beaches, in compliance with national legislation. As for Fethiye, he recognized some problems related to the management and control of the area, due to high tourism pressure.

He further provided information on the measures taken to improve awareness, as well as the results of the last nest conservation activities. He concluded by reaffirming the commitment of his authorities for solving the existing problems by making nature conservation compatible with human exploitation of the areas.

The Standing Committee emphasised again on the need for a positive response to the reporting requests of the Bureau and the Secretariat. The Committee also considered the report presented by the complainant, confirming that the management of the beaches is still inadequate, and informing about new construction and about further construction projects already planned.

At the proposal of the Chair, and following the agreement of the concerned Party, the Standing Committee, with the agreement of the Party, decided to keep the case-file open and to conduct an on-the-spot appraisal to the relevant sites in view of identifying a set of recommended actions to be submitted for consideration of the Committee at its next meeting.

Dr Paolo Casale, research fellow at the University of Rome “La Sapienza”, scientific coordinator of the sea turtle project carried out by WWF Italy and Member of the IUCN SSC Marine Turtle Specialist Group accepted to carry out the visit.

The latter took place on 28-31 July, with the purpose of identifying a set of recommended actions that – if implemented – would avoid Turkey being in breach of the Convention. The visit included day and night assessments of both Specially Protected Areas, as well as four separate meetings with the authorities and with the stakeholders of both Antalya and Mugla provinces. The mission was observed by scientists of the IUCN and the WWF Turkey.

Dr Casale’s report will be delivered on 20 September.

However, it can be already noted that the problems identified by the complainant are serious for both sites, and were confirmed during the visit.

Regarding Patara, none of the actions recommended by the Standing Committee for that beach is currently fully implemented, and those actions undertaken in 2011 have not been sustained. However, the area can still be effectively conserved if the authorities commit to strictly implement the recommendations that the expert will put forward in his report.

The situation is worse in Fethiye, particularly in Çalis beach where, due to the serious degradation of the area, the whole nesting process seem to be still possible only thanks to human assistance.

Common major problems for both areas seem to be: the lack of adequate management of the beaches; the lack of education and public awareness on the needs of marine turtles and the intrinsic value of nature; and the degradation of the system of protection for all the areas classified as Specially Protected Areas (SPAs) that passed – in 2012 – from the responsibility of the Ministry of Water Affairs and Forestry to the one of the Ministry of Environment. The legislative environmental framework of the latter seems inadequate to ensure the necessary protection of outstanding areas like those which make the object of the present complaint.

➤ **File open – 2013/1: Hydro power development within the territory of the Mavrovo National Park (“The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”)**

(10)

The complaint was submitted in March 2013 by the NGO “Eco-svest - Center for environmental research and information” to denounce a possible breach of the Convention by “The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” with regards to the development of hydro-power projects within the territory of the Mavrovo National Park, an Emerald candidate site since 2011.

According to the complainant, the construction of several hydro-power plants and supporting infrastructures (roads, bridges and transmission lines) will result in the direct destruction of forests, severe disturbance of water sources and fragmentation of wildlife habitats – the home of numerous strictly protected species of plants, mammals, birds, amphibians and reptiles listed in Appendix I and II of the Bern Convention. The complainant emphasised that some of these species, namely the *Lynx lynx balcanicus*, might be critically endangered if the projects are implemented.

The Secretariat addressed a reporting request to the government, stressing that according to Recommendation No. 162 (2012) of the Standing Committee, on the conservation of large carnivore populations in Europe requesting special conservation action, “The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” should assess the environmental impact on the lynx population of dams in the Mavrovo National Park - a site identified as a candidate for the Emerald Network - and consider abandoning the

project if the dam poses a risk of endangering the lynx population. The Secretariat also reminded that, according to Recommendation No. 157 (2011) of the Standing Committee, on the status of candidate Emerald sites and guidelines on the criteria for their nomination, national authorities should “take the necessary protection and conservation measures in order to maintain the ecological characteristics of the candidate Emerald sites”, until their full inclusion in the Emerald Network.

The Government report, received in September 2013, informed that an Environmental Impact Assessment Study for the hydropower plant project Boshkov Most was prepared by GEING Skopje, “The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” based engineering company operating in the Balkan area. Additionally, a 4-seasons biodiversity monitoring had been carried out by a team of experts on invertebrate and vertebrate species. The report said that according to EIAS and monitoring study, the hydropower plant project Boshkov Most satisfied entirely the requirements of the national legislation and that a decision authorising the development of Boshkov Most’s project had been already issued. The report did not provide conclusions from the EIAS or monitoring study allowing to judge about possible impacts of the project on the species and their habitat, referred to by the complainant. The report further informed that the Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning (MEPP) instructed the ELEM to implement an Environmental Impact Assessment Study for the hydropower plant project Lukovo. An international tender was published and the company BRL from France was selected to develop the EIA Study by engaging international and national experts. When accomplished, the ELEM would send the Study to the independent expert committee established by MEPP, for review.

At its meeting in September 2013, the Bureau decided to keep the complaint on stand-by pending the authorities’ reply and asked the Secretariat to contact them with a request to provide more detailed information about the possible impacts of the hydropower project implementation in Mavrovo National Park on species and habitats.

In a report submitted in January 2014 the complainant informed that a lawsuit was pending before the Administrative court against the decision of the Ministry of environment to approve an incomplete EIA study for the hydropower plant project Boshkov Most. The complainant underlined that the irregularities on the EIA study were confirmed by a EBRD compliance review report (January 2014) which concluded that the EIA was “not sufficiently comprehensive and conclusive”.

In a short report submitted in March 2014, the national authorities informed that the EIA for the Hydropower plant Boshkov Most was concluded, and that the results of the biodiversity monitoring implemented were taken into account in the final EIA report. The EIA for the Hydropower Plant Lukovo Pole was under preparation. No mention was made by the authorities of the pending lawsuits against the EIA results and procedures, reported on by the complainant.

At its meeting in April 2014, the Bureau regretted the lack of informative reports on behalf of the national authorities. The Bureau instructed the Secretariat to contact again the authorities of “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” for more detailed and comprehensive information on what was added to the EIAs study further to the biodiversity monitoring, what was already implemented on the site and under which conditions, as well as on the pending lawsuit.

The national authorities did not submit a report for the September 2014 meeting of the Bureau, but informed via e-mail that the EIA report for HPP Lukovo Pole was expected for the end of December 2014. The authorities claimed that they didn’t receive the reporting request sent by the Secretariat. The complainant, who was copied in the letters addressed by the Secretariat to the authorities, had - on the contrary - submitted detailed information regarding both hydropower plants’ projects. Regarding the Boshkov Most HPP project, the complainant informed on two pending lawsuits, (1) one claiming that the Ministry approved the EIA report based on insufficient data (supported by a compliance report of an independent experts charged by EBRD) and (2) a second one on denied access to the expert’s reports on Mavrovo HPP projects. In addition, the complainant claimed that the civil society organisations were supposed to participate to the bio-monitoring mentioned by the national authorities, but their comments

and proposals were not included in the final EIA report. Comments on the insufficient data used for the bio-monitoring report were also made by the Vice-Chair of the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas and other IUCN committees, as well as by Birdlife and national/international experts.

At its meeting in September 2014, the Bureau regretted the lack of information from the authorities of “The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” and decided to forward the complaint as a possible file to the Standing Committee, inviting the national authorities to attend and to report in detail on the state of implementation of the projects, as well as on the pending lawsuits.

In December 2014, the Standing Committee took note of the latest updates presented by the delegate of “The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” and the detailed presentation of the complainant. The Committee noted the importance of the area as key biodiversity hotspot, its status of National Park, and the concerns expressed by a number of international organisations and delegates over the negative impact of hydropower developments on the biodiversity of the area. The Committee further noted the pending adoption of a Management Plan for the Park, the pending lawsuit on the Environmental Impact Assessment for one of the hydro power plant's projects as well as the expected finalisation of the assessment for the second one.

The Committee decided to open a case file and instructed the Secretariat to seek the agreement of the Party for the organisation of an on-the-spot appraisal to the area in 2015, with the objective of collecting more information and data for the preparation of a draft recommendation to be submitted to the next Standing Committee meeting.

On 4 March 2015, the Minister of Environment and Physical Planning sent an official letter to the Secretariat confirming his agreement on the organisation of the on-the-spot appraisal. The European Union, the IUCN and WCPA requested to participate in the appraisal as Observers. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), financing the project, has also been invited to join.

The visit took place on 24-25 June 2015. Mr Pierre Galland from Switzerland accepted to be the independent expert in charge of the mission.

The Council of Europe's delegation had meetings with the Minister of the Environment and Physical Planning, Mr Nurhan Izairy, as well as with the representatives of the company ELEM which is the project developer, the Director of the Mavrovo National Park managing authority, representatives of civil society organisations, including the complainant, representatives of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and various local stakeholders.

The delegation managed to visit the main localities of the two big hydro power projects, as well as an additional small HPP plant already implemented. The full report of the on-the-spot appraisal will be delivered end of September and submitted to the Standing Committee.

1.5 Mediation

➤ **Possible file – 2013/5: Presumed impact of a construction of Overhead Power Line (OHL) in an environmentally sensitive area in the Lithuanian-Polish borderland**

(IdA)

This complaint was lodged in May 2013, to denounce a possible breach of the Convention by Lithuania with regards to permissions issued for the construction of a 400 kV, 1000 MW Overhead Power Line (OHL) in an environmentally sensitive area in the Lithuanian-Polish borderland.

Due to further developments which will be detailed later in this text, the complainant requested – in September 2014 - to enlarge the file to Poland. However the Standing Committee rejected this request.

According to the complainant, the construction of the OHL will not only have a direct impact on a number of species and habitats protected under the Convention, but also involve the development of other infrastructures and disturbing activities (for instance a new road network, clearance of forests, cultivation

of land, increased pollution levels, technical maintenance, etc.). These infrastructures may result, among others, in destruction and fragmentation of the habitats and the migration routes, disturbance of the species by the noise and vibration caused by the operation and the necessary service works, accidental killing by vehicles, chemical pollution.

Moreover, for Lithuania, the complainant considered that the EIA procedure was not transparent and that the EIA report (approved in January 2011), is of insufficient quality. It further highlighted that reasonable alternatives to the chosen OHL route and its technology were identified by the community and experts, but not considered for the EIA because the OHL project had a short deadline due to the EU financial framework.

End of May 2013 the Secretariat sent a reporting request to Lithuanian authorities.

In their report, the authorities expressed disagreement with the arguments of the complainant and informed that the OHL was approved by law as a project of Strategic State importance (i.e. relevant for the well-being of the society). The project is also important for the strategic security of the country.

Furthermore, the authorities detailed the process according to which the EIA was carried out, stressing that this was prepared in full compliance with the national legislation. Information on the EIA was published in the newspapers, while the EIA programme was available on the website and in the municipality. A specific booklet was published and printed for broader distribution. The authorities further listed the numerous public presentations done. The comments received by different sources, including the public, were integrated in the final version of the report.

The authorities considered that the decision to approve the EIA report on the construction of the Power Line was made after comprehensively and fully considering and evaluating the conclusions and proposals of all EIA subjects, in accordance with all the procedures set out in the Law on Environmental Impact Assessment of the Proposed Economic Activity and by ensuring submission of proper information and participation of public in all stages of EIA procedure.

The authorities further recalled that the OHL construction was to be carried out in two countries (Lithuania and Poland) and that the EIA procedures were carried out in both national territories. In addition, the applicant already questioned the lawfulness of the EIA report before national courts in Lithuania (first instance and appeal). The application was dismissed in May 2013 by the Supreme Administrative Court of Lithuania.

Concerning the non-establishment of two protected areas near the Polish Natura 2000 Network area PLH200007, the authorities informed that the possibility of setting-up two landscape and geologically sensitive protected sites nearby the area of dispute was being studied, but that the process for this had not started yet and it was anyway independent from the OHL construction. They further stressed that no new roads had been constructed in the area identified by the complainant, and that only reconstruction of the existing local road was carried out.

On the presumed lack of assessment of the impact of the OHL on an important bird migratory corridor, the authorities affirmed having carried out comprehensive biodiversity studies which included measures to avoid or mitigate possible negative effects and that no negative impact on migrating birds could be found. As a consequence, the EIA report was validated by the State Service for Protected Areas under the Ministry of Environment.

Lithuanian authorities further informed that the submission of comments by the complainant, including the technological alternatives, were comprehensively assessed and rejected as unfounded, not because of the financial obligations to the EU, but rather due to the fact that the proposed alternatives were considered contrary to a number of already adopted territory planning documents and could have an unacceptable negative environmental impact on another Natura 2000 area, Kalvarija Biosphere Polygon.

Regarding the allegation of negative impact of the OHL on the European pond turtle (*Emys orbicularis*), the authorities considered that the applicant didn't prove the presence of the species in the exact area where the power line will be constructed and that this species was not confirmed by the survey of amphibians and reptiles performed by the NGO Lithuanian Fund for Nature in July/August 2013 in part of the area or by the investigations which took place for the preparation of the EIA report. To conclude on this point, and based on all the surveys research done, the authorities affirmed that there are no European pond turtle and its habitats in the planned route of the Power Line from Žemaitkiemis village, Lazdijai District Municipality to Filicijanavas village, Lazdijai District Municipality.

Moreover, the authorities also detailed the main negative impact reducing measures foreseen in the EIA report, which will be taken into account during the construction of the OHL, namely for reducing the significant negative impact to fauna of the construction works.

On the possible impact of the power line on Galadusys Lake hydrological regime, the authorities informed that the digging works will not be performed along the whole OHL route but only at the power line support building places. Again, they referred to the EIA and to the measures identified to reduce possible negative impact.

Finally, the report submitted by the authorities of Lithuania informed that there are no other development or infrastructure projects planned in the area other than the power line building works. The authorities considered having taken all necessary legislative and administrative measures, including those foreseen by the Convention, to conserve wild flora and fauna and their natural habitats.

On 9 September the complainant sent a reply, informing about the results of five half-day visits carried out in 2013, which would suggest that the European pond turtle (*Emys orbicularis*) is present in the area, so as the European fire-bellied toad (*Bombina Bombina*), great crested newt (*Triturus cristatus*), common spadefoot (*Pelobates fuscus*) and the European tree frog (*Hyla arborea*). For the European pond turtle, the complainant recalled that the species is listed as present in the Polish Natura 2000 site which forms one ecosystem with the Lithuanian area. The complainant further provided a list of birds which have been observed in the area, and mentioned some other plant habitats maintaining that the rich biodiversity of the area has not been properly assessed.

At its meeting on 17 September 2013, the Bureau decided to keep the complaint on stand-by and to consider it again at its first meeting in 2014. The Secretariat was charged to request further clarification concerning the presence of protected species, and in particular the European pond Turtle, in the area where the OHL would be built.

In the reply sent on 7 March 2013 to the Secretariat, the national authorities informed that no additional information could be provided on the presumed presence of the species as no research or surveys were carried out due to the unsuitable winter season. The non-governmental organisation Lithuanian Fund for Nature informed the authorities that surveys on the presence of nesting sites within the area concerned would be conducted during the spring season of 2014. The results of these surveys would be sent to the Secretariat as soon as available.

The authorities further recalled that during the preparation of the EIA report, the qualified experts participating did not find any European pond turtle nesting places in the area of investigations. They also reminded that the technical project for the construction of the OHL had been prepared and the building permit issued. Construction works were expected to start in spring 2014. The building contract included special clauses for a mandatory ecological supervision of the works and direct inspection of the future construction sites by an ecology expert, before the works start.

In its report of March 2014, the complainant provided some evidence (through photos) of the OHL project works that had already started and presumably damaged the area. The complainant provided further information to support the data already submitted for the 2013 Bureau meeting on the presence of the species in the area of concern.

Opinions of eminent experts of the European pond turtle from the country seemed to confirm that the area is an important habitat for the species and that individuals were found by local people at less than 1 km from the planned OHL. The presence of the rare species was further confirmed by recent biology students' thesis. Supporting letters were also provided on behalf of an expert from the University of Warsaw, testifying that the area on the Polish side comprises a lot of good habitats for the pond turtles. He further explained that the area is very poorly investigated and requires detailed research.

In a last e-mail sent to the Secretariat soon before the April Bureau meeting, the complainant expressed some doubts on the objectivity of the organisation that would conduct research in the area in spring 2014. According to the complainant, the NGO would depend financially from the Ministry of Environment, even though its past work on the species is of quality. In addition, the complainant reminded that the construction works had already started - a fact not without a consequence on the surveys planned. The complainant also reminded that the file did not concern solely the European pond turtle, but other species too.

After assessing the information received at its meeting in April 2014, the Bureau welcomed the good response from the Lithuanian authorities but regretted to learn that, despite the ongoing assessment of the complaint, the works were due to start soon. The Bureau recommended postponing the construction of the OHL, at least until the survey on the occurrence of the European Pond turtle was carried out and its results analysed. In addition, the Bureau feared that the starting of the works could interfere with the survey.

The Secretariat was requested to forward the concerns of the Bureau to the authorities, together with the request of considering the possibility of associating the complainant to the survey to be carried out by the selected NGO.

In the report submitted by Lithuanian authorities on 25 August 2014, the Ministry of Environment confirmed that a survey on the presence of the European pond turtle in the area where the OHL had to be built was carried out according to the request of the Bureau. The survey lasted two months, from 20th May to 20th July 2014, and was carried out by specialists of the Lithuanian Fund for Nature.

The survey concluded that the European pond turtle (*Emys orbicularis*) does not live and breed in the territories where the OHL was planned to be constructed. No individuals or nesting sites of the European pond turtle were found along the route, as already stated in the conclusions of the EIA Report, approved at the end of 2010.

The report sent by the authorities briefly described the methodology used for the survey, including inspection of the habitats, metal traps with bait (from 6 to 30 June) and monitoring of the areas suitable for laying eggs. According to the survey, attached to the authorities' report, no European pond turtle was found there.

The authorities also informed that, on 2 July, they encouraged the complainant to contact the Lithuanian Fund for Nature (LFN) so to be associated to the survey. The LFN also contacted the complainant, by phone on 16th July, and by letter on 8th August, through which it invited the Rudamina community to join an official meeting with the authorities to discuss the protection of Bern Convention's species and habitats along the OHL route. The authorities stated that the Rudamina community didn't accept any of the proposals of cooperation.

The government also denounced that the complainant attempted to request the help of local people to collect evidence about the presence of the turtle, by encouraging people to take the turtles from the environment, something which is forbidden by national law when it comes to protected species. Finally, the report concluded with some information on the occurrence in Lithuania of the European pond turtle, as well as on the measures generally implemented for the protection of the species mentioned in the complaint.

The complainant informed the Secretariat several times since last Bureau meeting, and addressed a report on 3 September 2014.

He first denounced some misleading information sent out through the press, which would lead to presume that the Bureau or Secretariat of the Bern Convention would participate (or at least be invited to) in the survey.

The complainant also regretted the lack of genuine cooperation from the authorities with regards to the participation of the Rudamina community in the survey. In fact, the LFN had been also entrusted by the OHL construction company for carrying out the ecological monitoring of the whole construction project. This would lead to presume a clear conflict of interests, or at least a lack of independence which would jeopardise the seriousness of the survey itself. Moreover, as recognized by the authorities, the complainant was invited to join the survey only at a very late stage (18 days before its end) and didn't receive any information on the terms of reference and agreed methodology.

Besides, the complainant considered the area object of the survey insufficient for giving a clear picture of the situation, particularly because the construction works had already started (April 2014) at the time of the survey. In addition, the complainant recalled that while the migration range of the pond turtle is about 2 km, the area affected by the OHL is about 50 km². Concluding on the survey, the complainant noted that the report submitted by the LFN had no information about the other species listed in the complaint.

Concerning the status of the works, the complainant informed that these started also in the Polish side of the OHL (in June 2014). Species like *Grus grus*, *Egretta alba*, and *Bombina bombina* are common in the area affected by the works in Poland. The complainant also recalled that – as stated in previous reporting – the official Polish database lists the pond turtle in this bordering area.

Regarding the scale of the already implemented works in Lithuania, the complainant informed that the cutting of the forest started already in April, i.e. well before the survey (and independently from it). He affirmed having found *Bombina bombina* in the area affected by the works, and provided pictures of egg shells of the pond turtle found on the OHL route.

After denouncing the situation to the Bern Convention, the complainant presented a claim also to the Aarhus Convention. The Compliance Committee considered that the complaint is, on a preliminary basis, admissible for investigation.

Finally, in his report the complainant stressed that the construction works in the Polish side received important funds by the European Commission (€ 60M). The funds were allocated to Poland in May and the works started soon after the signature of the contract. Moreover, the complainant highlighted that the European Commission is quoted among the co-founders also of the Lithuanian part of the project.

The complainant concluded by requesting that Poland is associated to the current complaint.

The Secretariat further received the reply of the European Union to a letter sent in April 2014, addressing an official reporting request on the Lithuanian part of the complaint.

The European Commission informed that the Lithuanian side of the project received EU funding under the TEN-E programme, aimed mainly at financing the feasibility studies to support faster implementation and prepare future works. This contract was ongoing at the time of the reporting, and should finish at the end of 2014. The report stated that, in line with EU legislation, “*all necessary environmental permits have to be granted by the responsible national authorities before the construction can begin*”. Before awarding EU funding to the project, the European Commission would verify whether the Action implementing the PCI is in compliance with EU environmental legislation.

Finally, the Secretariat of the Bern Convention received from the complainant some other information which, however, could not be verified before the Bureau meeting:

1. the presumed signature by Lithuania and Poland of an agreement to reciprocally renounce to an environmental impact assessment in a transboundary context;

2. the launch of the construction works in Poland, despite some pending court cases lodged by landowners putting into question the existence of all the necessary permits;
3. a presumed contract concluded for the preparation of an EIA for a gas pipeline in the vicinities of the area in question, meaning that the OHL is probably not the only development which will intervene in the area and that it could be useful to take into account also the cumulative effects of these works.

The Bureau expressed concern for the celerity with which the construction works were progressing, regardless from the fact that the complaint was still under scrutiny. Considering that a possible impact of the construction works on species like the European pond turtle (*Emys orbicularis*), the common crane (*Grus grus*), the great white egret (*Egretta alba*), the European fire-bellied toad (*Bombina bombina*) and a number of bird species is not excluded, the Bureau decided to forward the complaint to the Standing Committee for its follow-up. The Standing Committee would also be requested to decide on the opportunity of associating Poland to the current complaint. Finally, the Bureau requested the Secretariat to contact the European Union for information on the financing of the projects and the necessary ecological assessments.

At the last Standing Committee meeting the Delegates assessed the complaint after detailed presentations by the representatives of Lithuanian and Polish authorities, as well as by the complainant.

More particularly, the Committee thanked Poland for presenting a report without being asked to, and acknowledged the satisfaction of the representative of EUROBATS for the consideration given by the authorities to the specific needs of bats when planning the development project. It therefore decided not to associate Poland to the complaint.

Concerning the information presented by the authorities of Lithuania the Committee acknowledged the strategic importance of the project for the security of the country, but recalled the importance of robust, comprehensive, and scientifically sound EIAs prior to any development of infrastructures, so to ensure that these are built in sustainable conservation perspective.

The Committee also invited Parties to always look at alternative solutions which, even when more expensive, may be better able to preserve Europe's natural heritage. In the present case, for instance, the Committee would have appreciated receiving some consideration about the possibility of underground transmissions as an alternative to the OHL.

In conclusion, and considering the state of development of the project whose construction had unfortunately already started, the Committee decided to keep the complaint as a possible file and, with the agreement of the authorities, to initiate a mediation procedure. The latter would be carried out in accordance with the Rules applicable to mediation adopted by the Standing Committee at its 32nd meeting. The purpose of the mediation would be to facilitate dialogue between the authorities and the complainant or interest groups on matters under the scope of the Convention, in view of fostering dialogue, facilitating discussions, identifying and clarifying conservation issues, and propose possible solutions that would satisfy the different parties. The mediator would be identified by the Secretariat in collaboration with the Bureau, and would be called to submit a report to the Standing Committee at its next meeting.

In 2015 the complainant continued to submit spontaneous updates including on the follow-up to the case submitted under the Aarhus Convention which has been declared admissible on March 2015. Moreover, according to the complainant, the Regional nature protection department, in reply to a report submitted by the complainant, admitted a violation of the law by the OHL construction company contracted by LITGRID (the Lithuanian TSO in charge of the project) who illegally removed "713 m3 of the ground material". The complainant also forwarded the unofficial translation of a document transmitted by LitPol Link to the Lithuanian Parliament explaining why the alternative route proposed by the complainant and the local municipality could not be retained. From the unofficial translation, it seems that the alternative route - if chosen - would delay the project, thus preventing the Republic of Poland from

benefitting of EU funding. Moreover, by changing the border crossing point, making the OHL route shorter and grouping it with the railways, the Polish municipalities "would lose large incomes in the municipal budgets received as taxes paid upon implementation of the project".

In March, the complainant also informed that an EIA procedure for a new gas pipeline to be built along the constructed OHL was about to be finalised. According to the complainant, the gas pipeline project planning in the area concerned started already in 2012, although the valid Master plans originally foresaw the pipeline routes in a different location. In the views of the complainant, these further developments were the evidence of the building up of a powerful infrastructural corridor across an important ecological area, in contradiction with what previously stated by Lithuanian authorities in its communications to the Bureau.

At the Bureau meeting in March 2015 the Secretariat also informed that LitPol Link applied with the OHL project to the "Good Practice of the Year Award", an award launched by the Renewable Grid Initiative to support and promote attempts to make grid planning more transparent and participatory and to decrease possible negative impacts on the environment. The Secretary of the Bern Convention, in her capacity of member of the Jury, had access to LitPol Link's application and regretted to note that the Convention was expressly mentioned among the "stakeholders" supporting the project. This issue had been brought to the attention of the organisers of the Award, and it was made clear that the Convention is monitoring the situation in order to avoid a possible breach of the Treaty. The Bureau decided to address the matter with the competent authorities in order to avoid this kind of (repeated) misleading communications in future, also for the sake of the mediation procedure. Moreover, the Bureau requested clarifications from Lithuanian authorities on the possible building of a gas-pipeline along the OHL route.

The Secretariat didn't receive a reply to this last question by the preparation of the present document in view of the Bureau meeting.

However, the contacts with the authorities were very positive regarding the organisation of the mediation procedure. The expert appointed for the task of Mediator is Prof. Michael Usher, from the Universities of Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Stirling. Prof. Usher has a degree in forestry, he is the author of several scientific studies on ecology and conservation, did some research in design of farm woodlands, and was for more than a decade Chief Scientist at Scottish Natural Heritage. According to the Rules of Procedure, his nomination received the prior agreement of both the Bureau and Lithuanian authorities.

The mediation will take place in Vilnius on 6-9 October 2015. The programme of the visit was prepared by the Secretariat, in cooperation with the Mediator, and received the agreement of the authorities and the complainant.

1.6 Other complaints

➤ Follow-up to complaint N° 2010/4 on the Increase in the number of sea turtle deaths recorded at Episkopi area under the control of the British Sovereign Base Area Administration (SBAA)

This complaint has been dismissed in 2012 following the proposal of UK authorities (at the 32nd Standing Committee meeting) to organise a joint trilateral meeting between the SBA, MEDASSET (the complainant) and the authorities of the Republic of Cyprus.

Since then, the Bureau has repeatedly encouraged UK authorities to convene the joint meeting, without success. The Secretariat also proposed the organization of a mediation procedure as a possible way forward. In October 2013 UK authorities informed that a reply concerning the possibility of a mediation would be sent soon to the Secretariat. In the lack of reply, the issue was raised again by MEDASSET at the 34th Standing Committee meeting, and the Committee instructed the Bureau to ensure a follow-up to this complaint, in coordination with UK authorities.

The Secretariat notified the decision of the Standing Committee to the national authorities, and sent several requests concerning a possible mediation procedure, or any other suggestion for a follow-up that might help ensuring the necessary dialogue between the government and local nature conservation NGOs. However, no news was received in 2015.

1.7 Follow-up of previous recommendations

➤ **Recommendation No. 25 (1991) on the conservation of natural areas outside protected areas proper**

(10)

The follow-up of Recommendation No. 25 (1991) was initially requested by the Group of Experts on Protected Areas and Ecological Networks in 2013. This monitoring exercise should have aimed at contributing to the work of the Group on the Action Plan for the establishment of the Pan-European Ecological Network. Unfortunately, due to the low number of reports received last year, the Group was not able to prepare an analysis of the implementation of the measures put in place by the Parties. As decided by the Standing Committee in December 2014, a new reporting request was sent to Parties at the beginning of 2015. The Secretariat collected 16 Parties (grouping those received in 2014 and 2015), which are compiled in document T-PVS/Files (2015) 25.

M. Rob Jongman, renowned researcher in the field of ecological and landscape connectivity and biodiversity, was entrusted with the task of the analysis of the replies of parties. In this task, the expert used additional sources of information, such as the 4th and 5th national reports to the CBD. He further included information on other initiatives carried out by NGOs or scientific organisations which were not mentioned in the reports submitted by the national authorities.

The final assessment report [T-PVS/PA(2014)8] will be presented and discussed at the 7th meeting of the Group of Experts on Protected Areas and Ecological Networks on 16-17 September 2015. The report comprises a concluding section, which presents the general observations and findings on the actions and measures implemented by Parties for improving nature conservation outside protected areas proper.

➤ **[File closed n° 1998/3: France: Habitats for the survival of the common hamster (*Cricetus cricetus*) in Alsace]**

[This complaint has been closed in 2013, following the ruling of the European Court of Justice, and some encouraging actions undertaken by French authorities as a follow-up to the court's case. However, the Committee decided to monitor the implementation of the national and regional Action Plans in France at its meeting in 2015. The report of French authorities is expected by 8th October 2015.]

(1dA)

➤ **[Recommendation No. 95 (2002) on the conservation of marine turtles in Kazanlı beach (Turkey)]**

(1dA)

[This recommendation was adopted in 2002 and originated from a complaint lodged in 2000 and an on-the-spot appraisal carried out in 2002. The recommendation addresses a series of actions which Turkey is invited to implement in order to grant the long-term conservation of the beach's quality for green turtles' nesting. The implementation of the recommended measures is regularly monitored by the Standing Committee since 2012.]

At last Standing Committee meeting, the Parties invited Turkey to continue its efforts, in particular for urgently addressing the issues of pollution and erosion, and encouraged the competent authorities to request the additional support of other conventions with a specific competence, as for instance the Barcelona Convention, on possible solutions for addressing the issues at stake.

The Committee asked Turkey to report back to next Standing Committee meeting. The possibility of a future on-the-spot appraisal could also be discussed. The national report is expected by 8th October 2015].

- **[Recommendation No. 96 (2002) on conservation of natural habitats and wildlife, especially birds, in afforestation of lowland in Iceland]**

(IdA)

[This Recommendation was included on the agenda of the Bureau for monitoring purposes. At its last meeting, the Standing Committee congratulated Iceland for accepting to undergo an AEWA Implementation Review Process (IRP), and confirmed the readiness of the Bern Convention for joining and contributing to the IRP visit. The Committee also decided that, in case the visit would not take place in 2015, Iceland would be requested to report on the implementation of the above recommendation at its 36th meeting]. Despite strong organisational efforts by the Secretariat of the AEWA, preparation of joint (AEWA, Bern Convention, Ramsar Convention and CAFF) terms of reference, and setting up of dates, the visit has finally been postponed. Icelandic authorities have in fact just submitted proposals for amendments to the terms of reference in view of restricting the scope of the mission to AEWA and Bern Convention's provisions.]