

Forty-seven participants attended in person or virtually from eight of the nine countries with native wild otters (Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, and Trinidad and Tobago); only Honduras was not represented. In the last session of the workshop the participants joined together to form the Nutrias de Centromérica Network, and they have already made significant progress. All members are now searching for data to establish the status of otters in their countries. In Belize, otter spraint has been recorded and camera traps installed (donated by Idea Wild), and World Otter Day will be celebrated with primary schoolchildren in two communities. The International Otter Survival Fund Costa Rica has been formed and is working on education/awareness and research.

In Mexico, monitoring of otter populations and habitat quality, and environmental education programmes, continue. The NGO Okapia, with support from various organizations, experts and university students, is surveying five rivers in Morelos State and measuring water quality to assess threats to otters; tracks have been found at two sites, one for the first time. Priorities for the Nutrias de Centromérica Network will be research and school and community education, and the enthusiasm of the members will undoubtedly lead to practical and effective otter conservation programmes in Central America.

GRACE YOXON  (grace@otter.org)

International Otter Survival Fund, Broadford, Isle of Skye, UK

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Under pressure: the Critically Endangered common hamster in Hungary reached an all-time demographic low in 2024

In 2020 the common hamster *Cricetus cricetus* was recategorized from Least Concern to Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List. This rodent species originally lived on the Eurasian Steppe but has adapted to the large-scale transformation of its original habitat to agricultural land. The increasing intensification of agricultural practices has, however, brought new challenges.

In 2020, contrary to the global trend, hamster populations appeared to be stable in central Europe. Within this area, the Pannonian region, with Hungary in its centre, hosts the largest population, and this population has displayed decade-long fluctuations. In 2020 there was a peak in population size, followed by a rapid decline, and the hamster population in Hungary has now reached an all-time low.

It is unclear whether the population will recover, as the hamster faces a paradoxical conservation status in Hungary. Although protected, farmers have the right to



Female common hamster *Cricetus cricetus* at her burrow. Photo: V. Nyíri.

exterminate populations at the first signs of any unfolding population increase, without the need for permission. Although this practice is intended to safeguard farmers' legitimate interests, emerging evidence suggest it may jeopardize hamster populations regionally.

Adding to the complexity of the situation, during the last population increase in Hungary the hamster started to utilize village gardens. Contrary to expectations, these semi-urban populations have thrived even as rural populations have declined. Although this suggests a potential novel way for the species to survive, it raises new challenges and underscores the need for innovative conservation.

We launched a detailed population genomics study in 2023, within the Biodiversity Genomics Europe project, to investigate the intricate genetics of the Pannonian hamster population. As part of this, field surveys uncovered a significant decline in numbers. However, there was a noticeable contrast either side of the Danube River, with a decline in

the east and an upward trajectory in the west. The first results from RADseq-based conservation genomic research in February 2024 identified that the Danube, the largest river in the Pannonian Basin, has shaped the current regional genetic structure. Of even greater concern was the discovery of alarmingly low levels of genetic diversity, potentially lower than those observed in the rarest mammals.

These findings shed light on the discord between existing legislation and the population trends of the hamster in Hungary. Although data on crop losses as a result of hamster population increases are scarce, the absence of significant reports from farmers suggests losses may not be as substantial as perceived. The future of the Pannonian hamster depends on collaboration between conservationists and farmers to balance conservation with agricultural interests.

LAJOS SZATMÁRI¹ , GÁBOR SRAMKÓ^{2,3} , VIRÁG NYÍR²  and TAMÁS CSERKÉSZ¹  (cserkesz.tamas@nhmus.hu)

¹Hungarian Natural History Museum, Budapest, Hungary.

²Evolutionary Genomics Research Group, Department of Botany, University of Debrecen, Debrecen, Hungary.

³HUN-REN-UD Conservation Biology Research Group, Debrecen, Hungary

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Benefits of restoring a daya in arid Algeria: the reappearance of *Teucrium campanulatum* after 168 years

The bell-shaped germander *Teucrium campanulatum* L. (family Lamiaceae) is a perennial herbaceous plant occurring in the western Mediterranean (Algeria, Balears, France, Italy, Libya, Morocco, Sicilia, Spain and Tunisia). Like all members of the genus *Teucrium*, this species is known for its medicinal properties and ornamental potential. Although *T. campanulatum* has not yet been assessed for the IUCN Red List, it is considered rare in Algeria, France, Italy and Spain. In Morocco, it is categorized as Endangered (Fennane, 2018, Tela-Botanica, Fascicule 7, Fagaceae–Lythraceae).

In March 2024, during a floristic exploration of the degraded steppe rangelands north of the Aïn Sefra region in Naâma, Algeria, near the village of Mékalis, I observed plants with a particular appearance, forming more or less compact tufts. They were growing in a small, fenced but abandoned daya (a shallow depression where water from adjacent land accumulates temporarily) at 1,250 m altitude. I identified the plant as *T. campanulatum*. This was the first record of the species in Naâma for 168 years. This new location is c. 80 km south of Taoussera Foukani near Aïn Benkheilil, where Cosson (1856, *Bulletin de la Société Botanique de France*, 3, 559–565) first recorded it in



Teucrium campanulatum in Mékalis, Naâma: (a) habit and (b) inflorescence. Photo: Belkacem Gordo.

Algeria. The reappearance of this species underlines the importance of protecting steppe environments, including daya, which are becoming degraded, leading to a reduction in plant cover and the disappearance of food plants important for grazing animals and pastoralism.

My preliminary assessment suggests *T. campanulatum* should be categorized nationally in Algeria as Critically Endangered based on IUCN Red List criteria B1ab(v) (i.e. the extent of occurrence is < 100 km², the population is severely fragmented or occurs in only a single location and there is a continuing decline in area and number of mature individuals). Further field studies are required to facilitate a comprehensive national Red List assessment of this species.

BELKACEM GORDO  (gordo.belkacem@cuniv-naama.dz)

Laboratory of Sustainable Management of Natural Resources in Arid and Semi-Arid Zones, University Centre of Naâma, Naâma, Algeria

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First record of the spotted pond turtle *Geoclemys hamiltonii* in Shuklaphanta National Park, Nepal

Eleven species of turtles of the family Geomydidae are known from Nepal (Rai et al., 2022, *Arco-Nepal Newsletter*, 3–23), including the spotted pond turtle *Geoclemys*