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THE ROLE OF THE FACULTY OF BIOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF SOFIA IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SPECIES REINTRODUCTION ACTIVITIES IN BULGARIA

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Species reintroduction represents an important part of the nature conservation activities worldwide. In Bulgaria many institutions and non-government organizations are involved in different projects, aiming to recover biodiversity by reintroducing species, which are extinct or dramatically decreased in their natural habitats.

The Faculty of biology of University of Sofia is the largest national institution for education of biology specialists in bachelor, master and PhD degrees. The great number of qualified lecturers and motivated students represents a solid basis for supporting the reintroduction processes.

The role of the Faculty could be determined on many levels.

The scientific potential is used for assisting the reintroduction programmes from the initial feasibility studies to the following execution and long-term monitoring activities. The Department of zoology and anthropology was intensively involved in the process of reintroduction of Griffon vulture (*Gyps fulvus*) in Kresna gorge. The project team from Fund for wild flora and fauna (FWFF) and zoologists from the Department did vast researches of the process and the results were presented and published in conferences and publications (Grozdanov & Stoynov, 2010; 2011). In addition, students from the master programs of zoology were also involved in the reintroduction researches by working on theses, linked with the species. Reintroduction projects were also implemented with the participation of other departments. The Department of general and applied hydrobiology was

part of reintroduction project for the Bullhead (*Cottus gobio*), where lecturers and students were involved. There are also projects concerning reintroduction of plant species, implemented with the participation of experts from Departments of Botany and Ecology and environmental protection. These include actions for the rare or endangered plants *Aldrovanda vesiculosa* and *Primula deorum*. As a part of master of science thesis developed in the Faculty, monitoring of the reintroduced or reinforced species *Hottonia palustris*, *Hippuris vulgaris*, *Leucojum aestivum*, *Viola pumila*, *Fritillaria meleagroides* was implemented in the area of Aldomirovtsi marsh (as part of a project of the nature conservation organization Balkani).

On the other hand, the Faculty students from bachelor programs are often taking part in the projects, providing a significant amount of volunteer work. This process includes many benefits not only for the reintroductions, but for education process in the University, which is generally enriched with thematic theoretical and field work. The Students club for education and development (club Skorec), which is based in the Faculty, organised several nature conservation brigades in the area of Kresna gorge. The students were able to observe the projects work directly and took part in important activities like vultures supplementary feeding, preparation of bird aviary for the nesting season, etc. Thus, after such campaigns, the Sofia university students received additional qualification and motivation.

The Faculty of biology was the first institution, which hosted scientific forum, dedicated to the reintroduction of species in Bulgaria. During the First national conference “Reintroduction of conservation-reliant species”, most of the ongoing projects and activities were presented and discussed in academic environment, which gave, among the other benefits, a solid basis for a series of new thematic forums, including international ones.

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