

News

Announcements

For the  
record

Media  
contacts

Speeches

## Biodiversity in Cyprus □ 346 square kilometres Buffer Zone

May 27, 2010

2

*By Claudia Konyalian, Environment & Pandemic  
Focal Point, UNDP Action for Cooperation and  
Trust, Cyprus*

For nearly four decades in Cyprus' buffer zone - a 180 km long strip of land dividing the island between the Greek Cypriot community in the south and the Turkish Cypriot community in the north - nature has been left to its own devices. During this time, hundreds of species of plants and animals, many of which are rare and endangered, thrived in this relatively untouched landscape. In 2007, the United Nations Development Programme funded an island-wide team of biodiversity experts for an unprecedented two-year study of the buffer zone. The study revealed important new information on a part of the island's environmental heritage and advanced efforts towards reconciliation.



*Cyprus Mouflon is the largest wild land mammal living on the island. Until recently it was an endangered species. Currently, a population of 200-300 mouflons exist in the buffer zone. (Photo: UNDP)*

Motivated by a shared common interest in biology and nature conservation, leading biodiversity experts from the Greek and Turkish Cypriot

communities came together to investigate their shared natural heritage. The team of 18 experts conducted baseline ecological studies on plants, fungi, mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates.

With the help of UNDP-ACT (UNDP - Action for Cooperation and Trust in Cyprus) and the United Nations Peacekeeping force on the Cyprus (UNFICYP), which helped minimize the risks inherent to working in a demilitarized zone, the team of experts observed over 358 plant, 100 bird, 18 mammal and 3,391 invertebrate species living in the buffer zone; many of the species present including the Mouflon, Schneider's skink, Lapwing, and Cyprus Spiny Mouse are endangered or were presumed extinct, but flourish in the untouched zone. Dr. Iris Charalambidou and Dr. Salih Gücel, the project's leaders, explained that the buffer zone offers a unique environment to study biodiversity because it is undisturbed from development and major human activity, which normally fragments, degrades or destroys endemic wildlife.

More than just a scientific project, the UNDP funded study demonstrated how academics and scientists can inspire the way in reconciliation efforts. "By selecting experts who shared a common passion – nature conservation – we showed that it was possible to get people to work together," said Iris Charalambidou. As a direct outcome of this two-year project, many of the experts on the original team are continuing their collaboration on other projects. Indeed, the lead scientists involved in this project were involved in the creation of the Cyprus Environmental Stakeholder Forum (CESF), the first bi-communal, multidisciplinary environmental advocacy platform in Cyprus, which proposes island-wide solutions to island-wide issues.

Ultimately, the successful collaboration of both Greek and Turkish Cypriot biologists is a bright spot in the long effort at Cypriot reconciliation. Wrapping up in 2009, the project received extensive acclaim and was awarded the European Countries Biologists Association Best Project Award in 2009. Importantly, all this publicity has helped to raise awareness about the issue of conserving the biodiversity of the buffer zone. The team has published their findings in international scientific

journals with bi-communal lists of authors and has presented them at international conferences.