

How the European Green Belt initiative can support the European mink conservation programme in Poland?

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STATUS OF EUROPEAN MINK IN POLAND

European mink, *Mustela lutreola*, was common species of Polish fauna in the past – in 1549 G. Agricola wrote about *Noerza* living in the basin of the Odra and Vistula rivers. The process of the species extinction in Poland started in XVIIth century and the last specimen was reported between 1950 and 1960 of XXth century. It is crucial, that hunting law (with protection period since 1st February to 31st December) was established for the European mink in 1934 and only till 1952 the species is under the state protection, as strictly protected species. Today the European mink is one of the most endangered mammalian species globally, indicated in the Polish Red Book, Bern Convention, UE Habitats Directive and IUCN Red List. Till 1994 the Poznań ZOO participate in the European Endangered Species Breeding Programme of the European Association of Zoos and Aquaria (EAZA), and keep several animals.

CAUSES OF EXTINCTION

It seems to be not possible to point single, universal cause of extinction of the European mink in Poland and today the most popular is the multiple causes of extinction theory, which include: habitat loss (wetlands drainage, river engineering, agricultural expansion), over-hunting (commercial trapping for fur), hybridization between the polecat, *Mustela putorius*, impact of the American mink, *Mustela vison* (intraspecies aggression, reproductive superiority, surplus killing), pollution, climate changes, introduced disease, genetic bottleneck, dependence on declining prey and intraguild predation.

PROGRAMME OF THE EUROPEAN MINK CONSERVATION IN POLAND?

In 2016 the European mink was listed as 'Critically Endangered' in the IUCN Red List. Its emerging situation obliges to take immediate and large-scale conservation actions. The goal of such programme in Poland should be establishing a conservation breeding programme, as well as examining and cataloging examination and cataloging of existing specimens of extinct Polish mink. Described programme has to face a number of problems, caused mainly by long 'ecological absence' of the species: 1. uncertain reasons of its extinction, 2. lack of public awareness of the species present situation and lack of interest in its protection, 3. insufficient *ex situ* conservation, 4. habitat loss and degradation, 5. growing population of feral, invasive American mink and lack of its monitoring and control, 6. doubtful and not clearly explained subspecies status (problems in choice of specimens for reintroduction), 7. running loss of genetic variability of wild European mink population caused by its fragmentation and decline. The European Green Belt initiative offers excellent possibilities to start new and coordinate existing programs of the European mink conservation along the European Green Belt. It is recommended to strengthening the execution of Bern Convention (Recommendation No. 31/1991), as well as to create the Pan-European information platform dedicated to the European mink conservation and protection.



■ historical geographical range
■ current geographical range