

Letter to the Editor

Avian influenza – bi-communal waterbird counts in Cyprus

Sir

The first island-wide waterbird monitoring programme in Cyprus started in June 2007. The Unit of Environmental Studies of the Research Center at the University of Nicosia is carrying out this project together with Turkish Cypriot scientists, the Turkish-Cypriot Biologists Association, the Cyprus Game Fund and the Cyprus Veterinarian Association, with support from the United Nations Development Programme's Action for Cooperation and Trust in Cyprus (UNDP-ACT) and the United States Embassy. The project is carried out under the auspices of the Emergency Disease Forum (EDF) which is an informal bi-communal platform created by UNDP-ACT to ensure an efficient channel for immediate communication and cooperation between veterinary and health experts in the event of a disease outbreak on the island.

So far, Greek and Turkish Cypriot conservationists have carried out nearly 2 years of joint counts of waterbirds at 27 wetland areas throughout all districts in Cyprus. When considering that some of the wetland areas are broken down into distinct count

sectors, reaching a total of 50 sectors, this is an impressive amount of data that has been collected for the first time ever in Cyprus. The waterbird counts take place every month, and are carried out by 7 dedicated teams of birdwatchers and ornithologists from both communities.

The aim of the project is to establish an island-wide waterbird surveillance programme to improve the capacity to detect a potential avian influenza outbreak and possible routes of transmission of the virus, and generally to better understand the movement patterns of waterbirds throughout Cyprus. Regular surveillance of waterbirds has been carried out by the Research Unit of the Cyprus Game Fund in the southern part of Cyprus since 1993, while a similar surveillance system did not exist until now in the northern part of this island.

A joint database containing information from all Cyprus has been created and a book presenting data from the first year of the study has been published and disseminated to relevant stakeholders. In the meantime, 2 documentaries about the project have been prepared by a local television channel, and the project has been presented at local and international conferences.

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