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Turkey's New Wildlife Corridor Aims to Bring Balance Back to Biodiversity Hotspots

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A harsh decline in Turkey's carnivorous populations has included the extinction of the Caspian tiger, pictured.

Holding the title of the "Biodiversity Superpower of Europe," Turkey is one of the only countries that is home to three out of 34 biodiversity wildlife hotspots in the world: the Caucasus, Irano-Anatolian, and the Mediterranean. However, due to the lax approach taken by the government regarding environmental regulations, Turkey ranked 109th out of 132 countries in the 2012 World Environmental Performance Index. These low rankings are representative of the harsh decline in its carnivorous population. The Asiatic lion, Iranian cheetah, and Caspian tiger are already extinct, while others such as the gray wolf, brown bear, lynx, and caracal are on the brink of extinction.

KuzeyDoga, an NGO led by University of Utah professor and Turkish national Dr. Cagan Sekercioglu, who was responsible for pushing the government to take up this cause and spearheaded efforts to establish Turkey's first Wildlife Corridor that was publicly announced in June 2012. Covering 23,500 hectares and 82 kilometers in length, the corridor extends from the Sarikamis Forest–Allahuekber Mountains to the Black Sea and Caucasus forests in Turkey and Georgia.

Wildlife corridors serve as "traveling avenues for wildlife species between two similar yet fragmented habitat areas." As well as providing a safe passage for animals by connecting isolated populations of wildlife across the northeast through a process of reforestation, the wildlife corridor promotes trans-boundary conservation. As two thirds of the corridor is already covered with forests, the government has planned to plant an additional 4.5 million trees to fill the remaining area. Apart from reforestation, park rangers will be hired to ensure the full protection of the corridor, officially labeled a "Protected Forest."

Over the last couple of years, Dr. Sekercioglu has raised concerns over excessive dam construction, the draining of wetlands, and over-irrigation, as the government pours more and more money into development projects. Four thousand dams and hydro-electric power plants have been commissioned to be built by 2023. The building of the wildlife corridor is the first step towards restoring the balance and preserving Turkey's natural habitat.

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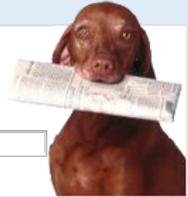
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