Industry must act now to safeguard biodiversity threatened by limestone quarrying, NGOs say

Title
It is well-known that limestone is a valuable material quarried worldwide for making cement and constructing our buildings. Limestone geology also creates incredibly beautiful formations of cliffs and intricate cave networks that are world famous, like caves in the Balkans and picture-postcard islands and coastlines in South-East Asia.

However it is much less well-known, or even researched, that habitats found in around limestone are incredibly important for very rare species restricted to small areas. And that, alarmingly, quarrying impacts are increasingly threatening these understudied species.

So a group of leading conservation NGOs including BirdLife International decided to join together to give this pressing issue an awareness and conservation boost. A new paper, entitled ***Extraction and Biodiversity in Limestone Areas,*** urges extractive companies, governments and scientists to protect this habitat before species are lost forever.

This week in London, the first global summit on *No Net Loss of Biodiversity* was held. The BirdLife Corporates team attended the event, led by the Business and Biodiversity Offsets Programme, alongside many participants from extractive business, NGOs, Government and civil society.

The event focussed on approaches to avoid, minimise, restore, and – if absolutely necessary – offset biodiversity loss. There are limits to what can be offset however: when it comes to irreplaceable range-restricted species such as those found in limestone areas, it is essential to avoid impacts in the first place. These prioritised steps, known as the 'mitigation hierarchy', are emphasised in the new briefing paper that was produced collaboratively by BirdLife International, Fauna & Flora International, the IUCN and WWF.

Vulnerable and irreplaceable limestone-restricted species

Limestone species are especially vulnerable to extraction for a number of reasons. Limestone habitats like cave systems can be intricate and complex, having taken millions of years to form by natural processes. Also, entire species may be restricted to a very small area (an individual cave or hill), like some cave species that have evolved entirely to life in darkness.

Expert specialists are also required to detect these hard-to-find species; in the absence of such expertise they can be overlooked in environmental impact assessments. For example a CEPF project1 that is surveying the distribution of Olm *Proteus anguinus*, an amphibian that is endemic to Balkan caves, had to develop new techniques to sample cave water for traces of Olm DNA in order to locate it.

It's as simple as this: one wrong blast from a quarry could wipe out entire species that we hardly know anything about.

Biodiversity on extractive business' radar

However, there is a growing recognition that biodiversity has a crucial role to play in the economics and practice of sustainability for the business sector. BirdLife is working with leadership companies in the extractive industry helping them to take positive action for biodiversity, which they are already doing.

> *"We hope that the paper helps the cement sector to effectively manage its biodiversity footprint in such sensitive areas,"*

said Charles Butt, CEMEX-BirdLife Partnership Manager.

> *"This will not only help to safeguard their reputations and license to operate but will help to protect the cave swiftlets, blind cavefish, giant cave spiders and other wonderful but undiscovered species that rely completely on limestone habitat for survival."*

Resources:

Download the new collaborative paper: **Extraction and Biodiversity in Limestone Areas**

IUCN SSC Cave Invertebrate Specialist Group: https://www.facebook.com/caveinvertebrates

Another CEPF project in the Mediterranean conserving species found in karst limestone can be found here: http://www.birdlife.org/europe-and-central-asia/news/bats-balkans-%E2%80%93-there-biodiversity-underground-too

1 The Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF) is a joint initiative of l'Agence Française de Développement (AFD), Conservation International (CI), the European Union, the Global Environment Facility (GEF), the Government of Japan, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and the World Bank. A fundamental goal is to ensure civil society is engaged in biodiversity conservation. More information on CEPF can be found at www.cepf.net. BirdLife International, including its Middle East office and the BirdLife partners DOPPS/BirdLife Slovenia and LPO - Ligue pour la Protection des Oiseaux/BirdLife France, is providing the Regional Implementation Team (RIT) for the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF) in the Mediterranean Basin Biodiversity Hotspot.