ECR 2025 Biodiversity and Global Changes: A Conservation Perspective
6 – 9 May 2025 – L'Aquila 2nd Conference for Early Career Researchers in Conservation Biology

Red Deer Conservation Approaches in Türkiye From Past to Present

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ABSTRACT

Deer have held a significant place in Turkish culture since ancient times. The traditional nomadic lifestyle of Turkic tribes, characterized by hunting and herding, often overlapped with the habitat of deer. Among these tribes, deer hunting is strictly regulated, with the hunting of fawns and pregnant females strictly forbidden. This prohibition stems from ethical considerations and the belief that such actions bring misfortune. Big game, including deer, was reserved for the elite, with the public barred from hunting them. Organized hunting expeditions were common, with much of the game meat being distributed among the people. In the late Ottoman period, the decline of hunting organizations led to unregulated hunting practices. After the establishment of the Republic, the 1937 Hunting Law aimed to protect red deer on paper; however, widespread poaching continued well into the early 2000s. Scientific studies on red deer began around the 1990s, marking a delayed interest in their conservation. Despite increased awareness in recent years, improved economic conditions, and nearly a century of conservation status, red deer populations remain vulnerable. The primary threats include poaching, predation by wolves and other predators, some forestry activities that disregard the habitat needs of red deer, and human-induced stress. Although limited population growth has enabled controlled hunting for tourism, with fewer than 100 red deer hunted annually over the past 20 years, there remains a lack of effective long-term strategies and comprehensive scientific studies to address these threats.

INTRODUCTION

The history of the Turks from Turkestan (Central Asia) to Anatolia has been shaped by their nomadic lifestyle and deep connection with nature. In Turkestan, nature and animals, especially deer, held a significant place in the culture and mythology of Turkic tribes. Among nomadic Turkic tribes, the deer was seen as a symbol of harmony with nature, fertility, and guidance. In Turkic mythology, the deer appears as a guiding spirit or a sacred being.



Figure 1. A traditional depiction of nomadic Turkic life in Turkestan

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Since early Turkic times in Turkestan, hunting was an essential aspect of steppe culture, serving not only to fulfill subsistence needs but also as a social activity and a form of military training for young men. This deeply rooted tradition continued through the Seljuk and Ottoman periods, where hunting practices became more organized and institutionalized. Both empires developed structured hunting systems, and large-scale royal hunts—often led by the rulers themselves—became prominent events. Red deer were among the most valued game, appreciated for both their meat and their symbolic link to nobility and strength.



Figure 2. Scene from an Ottoman Miniature: Bayezid II's Hunt near Plovdiv (Formerly Filibe), (Nakkach Osman, 1584-1588)

CONSERVATION & LEGISLATION

- **Early Turkic Societies:** Hunting was governed by strict ethical rules. Fawns and pregnant females were never to be hunted, reflecting a moral approach to wildlife. These customs show an early awareness of sustainable hunting practices.
- **Ottoman Period:** Red deer hunting was highly regulated and reserved for the sultan, palace officials, and provincial governors. The public was prohibited from hunting red deer. As the empire weakened, state hunting institutions declined, royal interest waned, and enforcement in rural areas diminished. By the late 19th century, poverty and the lack of oversight contributed to widespread poaching.
- **Republican Era:** In 1937, red deer hunting was officially banned, but weak enforcement allowed poaching to continue for decades, causing sharp declines across much of their historical range in Türkiye. In 2003, the hunting law was revised, yet red deer retained full protection, with only a very limited quota permitted for hunting tourism.



~90-year Conservation Status



Achievement?



KEY THREATS

	Continued illegal hunting in most red deer habitats
	The high density and uncontrolled populations of natural predators in many areas
	Some forestry activities that do not consider the habitat demands of red deer
	Stress caused by human activities
	The presence of stray dogs in deer habitats
	Poor disease surveillance and prevention efforts among red deer populations

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Limited population surveys indicate that in many regions of Türkiye, red deer density remains below 2 individuals per 100 hectares. The cumulative impact of ongoing threats hinders long-term population stability and natural recovery. To ensure the future of red deer in Türkiye, developing a coordinated, science-based national management strategy and enhancing inter-agency collaboration is essential. Increasing public awareness and promoting community-based conservation approaches will also be key to achieving sustainable outcomes. Continued research, systematic monitoring, and adaptive management practices are crucial to secure the long-term survival of red deer populations in Türkiye.

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