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Abstract

The recent Great Bustard Action Plan summarizes the main recommended lines of action to preserve current populations and their habitats in Europe. Among others, captive breeding is mentioned as a method to save clutches found in the field whose hatching success probability is suspected to be low for any reason. Birds hatched from these clutches have been used to either build up small captive-breeding flocks that ensure preservation of the genetic pool of seriously threatened populations once these may be extinct, or to be released into the natural populations as juveniles. In this paper we evaluate the viability of captive breeding in the light of new results of a recent study of juvenile Great Bustards during their maternal dependence period, family break-up and dispersal. The few data available on survival of captive-bred young after being released suggest that they suffer a high mortality, probably due to the lack of the experience acquired in natural conditions from their mothers. The negative effects of imprinting by their human keepers, particularly in relation with display and mating, has not been sufficiently investigated. These and other aspects make captive breeding questionable as an effective method, as compared with habitat protection measures.