your swissnex Boston

Art meets Science at “Footprint”

by Ines Morgan, Junior Project Manager and Christine Luiggi, Communications Manager

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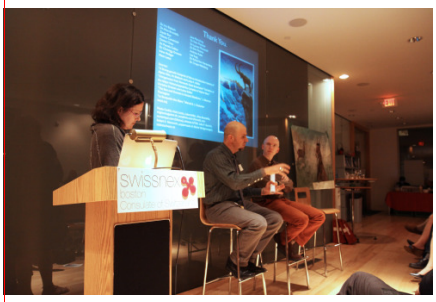
On September 30th, artists and scientists gathered at swissnex Boston to learn about research on alpine ibex populations (coming out of University of Zurich) and to discuss possible methods for building the data into a multimedia art installation. Heading this initiative, called “Footprint,” is Dr. Lukas Keller, from the University of Zurich, and artist Edward Monovich from Massachusetts College of Art and Design. Both were in attendance to present, discuss, and field questions.



The evening was moderated by Jane Marsching, Professor at Massachussets College of Art and Design.

She opened the evening with remarks on the importance of connecting art and science, because nowadays, being that our ecologies are vulnerable, scientists are faced with interdisciplinary, cultural and historical challenges. Therefore, scientists seek creative and procedural alliances that can allow for new ways of understanding and contextualizing their research– linking science with art can help to amplify the message, because art is a tool for transformation, understanding, and community.

Jane Marsching ended her speech by indicating that the collaboration of Dr. Keller and Edward Monovich can offer a lens for understanding and responding to the urgent and often rapid changes occurring in our ecologies.

Professor Lukas Keller, from the Institute of Evolutionary Biology and Environmental Studies in Zurich then took the podium to present his research. He described how local extinctions have increased over the past three centuries, and that sometimes endangered animal populations are introduced retroactively.

The ibex is one such population. In 1821 the ibex population was at a count of only 50. With the help of an aggressive re-introduction program, it had grown to 3000 by 1900… and today there are over 14,000 ibex living throughout the alps.

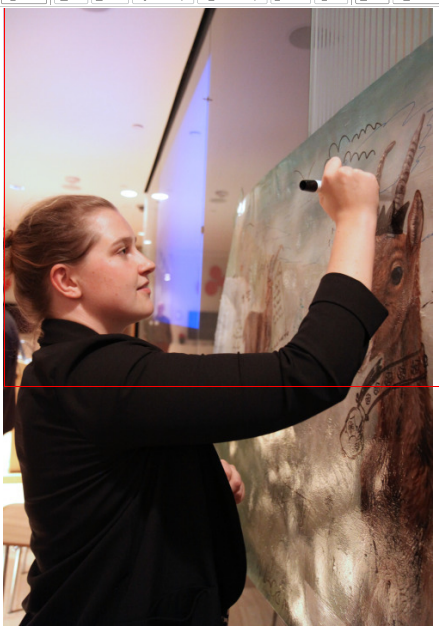
Inevitably with such large growth over such a relatively short period of time, inbreeding is rampant. The equation that appears as part of this event’s title (link) describes the inbreeding levels of such a population over time.

Consequently, the Swiss ibex population has only three distinct genetic groups, divided geographically. Dr. Keller drove the point home that this “genetic clustering” is a result of human intervention, not biology.

Next, artist Edward Monovich took the podium. He described his passion for mountain goats, which was realized during a trip in Colorado. Then, in 2012 he took a mini-sabbatical in the Bernese Oberland, where his interest in ibex populations was sparked.

Over this past summer, Monovich visited the Institute of Evolutionary Biology in Zurich, and then traveled to Gran Paradiso National Park to track ibex in the wild. He also visited Piz Albris, one of the largest colonies of ibex in Switzerland.

Ultimately, Monovich seeks to create an art installation that acts as a lens for Dr. Keller’s research. He presented some of his ideas for this exhibition, still in the early stages.



To conclude, Monovich understated that Human efforts can create a very positive change. Switzerland has been very active in the preservation of the Alpine Ibex and has helped achieve this reintroduction successfully.

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