

Project

BEAR FRIENDLY LABELLING

PROMOTING COEXISTENCE WITH BEARS

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1. Background

Population densities of brown bears (*Ursus arctos*) in the northern Dinaric Mountains (Fig. 1) are among the highest in Europe (Jerina et al., 2013). The bear population in the region is growing and bears are also recovering in the Alpine region of Slovenia (Skrbinšek et al. 2018). Forest landscapes in the northern Dinarics are tightly intertwined with fields and settlements. Bear habitat therefore overlap considerably with human activity.

Bears are charismatic species but due to their large habitat requirements and opportunistic feeding behaviour, they cause damage to communities living within their home ranges (Morehouse and Boyce,

2017). Conflicts between humans and bears remain an on-going threat to the conservation of bears in human-dominated landscapes, therefore facilitating coexistence between people and bears is essential to their long-term persistence (Carter and Linnell, 2016).

Improving coexistence between bears and people is one of the main goals of the 5-year LIFE DinAlp Bear project (LIFE13 NAT/SI/000550) that started in 2014 (Figure 1 shows the project area). Project partners and collaborators from Croatia, Slovenia, Italy and Austria are striving to establish transboundary bear population monitoring and reduce human-bear conflicts through effective damage prevention measures and restricting bears' access to anthropogenic food sources. To increase tolerance towards bears within the local community, the project promotes responsible use of bears through tourism and bear friendly products.

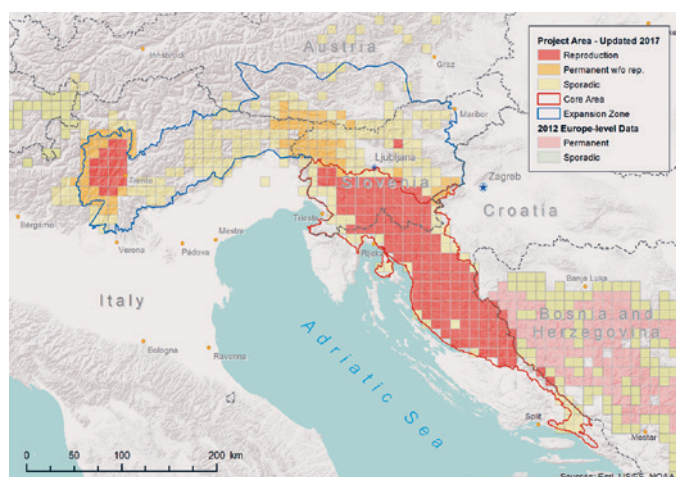


Fig. 1 Bear distribution in the LIFE DinAlp Bear project area, showing areas of permanent presence with reproduction, permanent presence with no reproduction and sporadic presence in the core project area (Dinaric Mountains) and expansion zone (Alps).
(Source: Skrbinšek et al., 2018)



Fig. 2 Bears in the northern Dinarics present new opportunities for local communities.

(Photo: Miha Krofel)

2. Non-consumptive use of bears

Non-consumptive forms of wildlife-based activities usually involve observing, photographing or otherwise interacting with non-captive wildlife, in contrast to consumptive forms like hunting and fishing (Higginbottom, 2004). Nowadays, the non-consumptive use of wildlife is changing the landscape of the tourism sector, providing ample opportunities for the effective conservation of species and the development of alternative sources of revenue for local communities (Karamanlidis et al., 2016). To maximize their conservation impact, wildlife-based ecotourism initiatives should directly contribute to the mitigation of threats, which is achieved through the generation of revenue for conservation efforts, increased community education and stewardship (Altmann, 2016).

Although bears are hunted in many European countries, they are increasingly valued alive in the context of wildlife tourism, as well as for conservation and educational reasons (Fig. 2). A nine-month study, titled *The Economic Impact of Bear Viewing and Bear Hunting in the Great Bear Rainforest of British Co-*

lumbia, found that bear viewing tourism generated 12-times more in visitor spending than trophy bear hunting (CREST, 2014). If carefully planned, bear-related ecotourism activities can have multiple benefits for tourism, local communities and bears. Bears can represent a core of the marketing strategy in rural regions, facilitating development of unique and diverse tourism products, which can finance and promote conservation efforts and raise awareness about the importance of bears and coexistence measures on the local and international level (Karamanlidis et al., 2016).

On the other hand, poorly managed bear-related tourism can lead to processes such as food conditioning and habituation. Food rewards may encourage undesirable behaviours, such as exploring the vicinity of settlements, increasing the level of conflicts between people and bears (Penteriani et al., 2017). Regulations on bear ecotourism and guidelines for the development of bear-related tourism products are therefore needed.

3. Guidelines for responsible practices in bear tourism

At international, national and regional scales, legislation, policy and various written guidelines are the principal tools used to manage impacts of tourism and other activities on wildlife (Higginbottom, 2004). We have developed guidelines to support tourism operators in taking precautions to minimize unintended consequences and maximize positive indirect conservation impacts of bear tourism (Karamanlidis et al., 2016). The following are the main highlights of the guidelines:

1. Viewing groups should be small and under the constant supervision of a qualified guide (Fig. 3);
2. Interpretation should include an overview of bear biology, ecology, behaviour and coexistence measures to enhance visitor education;
3. All precautions need to be taken to avoid human food-conditioning and habituation in bears.

The document also gives basic recommendations on the development of bear-related tourism programmes, which should not be based solely on bear observations, but should include learning about human-wildlife coexistence heritage within local communities in the region. In addition to these guidelines, we propose that a portion of revenues from bear-related tourism activities be invested directly in activities promoting conservation of the species or improvement of human-bear coexistence.



Fig. 3 Tourists in bear watching hides should be under the constant supervision of a qualified guide.

(Photo: Irena Kavčič)

4. Bear friendly label

To award practices that contribute to better coexistence between bears and humans, the LIFE DinAlp Bear project has developed a bear friendly label (Fig. 4). Since the label was introduced in October 2015, 55 providers of products and services in Slovenia, so-called 'bear friendly ambassadors', have been awarded the label. Three different categories were defined for bear friendly label: farming, tourism and active promotion. Each category has a different set of criteria which need to be fulfilled to obtain the label. In December 2015, a labelling committee was formed comprising experts from different fields of expertise (tourism, damage prevention measures and large carnivore conservation). The committee screens each application on an individual basis. The whole application process is designed to be an opportunity for applicants to receive feedback that helps them meet the criteria and includes possible suggestions on upgrading their practice towards better coexistence with bears.

Farmers and beekeepers that received electric fences from the LIFE DinAlp Bear project for effective large carnivore damage prevention are regularly visited in the field by the Slovenia Forest Service team. They inspect the correct use and maintenance



Fig. 4 Bear friendly label developed within the LIFE DinAlp Bear project.



Fig. 5 The bear friendly label can be applied to a wide variety of local products that contribute to human-bear coexistence.

(Photo: Irena Kavčič)

of electric fences twice per year. There is no regular audit of bear friendly ambassadors awarded in the tourism and active promotion categories: they are trusted to maintain the standards they met during the application procedure. Monitoring is mostly done by regular communication with the ambassadors and customer feedback, when possible.

4.1 Bear friendly farming

Farmers and beekeepers are part of the community that is most impacted by the presence of bears in their territory and the first to experience conflict situations with large carnivores. For successful coexistence with large carnivores, they need to adopt protection measures such as effective electric fencing of livestock, beehives and property or use of livestock guarding dogs on pastures. The bear friendly label can be used on products like honey (Fig. 6), jam, meat and milk products to recognise the use of effective protection measures, therefore reducing the number of human-bear conflicts. So far, honey products from 27 beekeepers, milk and meat products from five goat breeders and fruit products from one farmer protecting orchards during the fruit ripening season have been labelled as bear friendly.

As farmers suffer most losses due to living in large carnivore areas, engaging them in tourism activities might encourage them to become more supportive of bear conservation. The label gives them a sense of recognition of their committed use of conflict mitigation measures and shows them the opportunities based on the presence of bears. Local bear friendly apicultural and agricultural products can become important parts of the culinary offer in tourist facilities, farmers can be directly promoted within tourism programmes (e.g. visiting a bear friendly beekeeper) and their products can be offered to tourists as authentic souvenirs, telling a unique story about the large carnivore coexistence heritage in this region.

Fig. 6 Bear friendly honey produced in a beehive effectively protected by an electric fence.

(Photo: Petra Draškovič Pelc)



4.2 Active promotion of bear conservation in the local area

Local products such as natural soaps (Fig. 7), clay ceramics, magnets, wooden souvenirs and many other handcrafted souvenirs in large carnivore areas already feature a bear motif, indicating their important value to people and culture. Besides having a bear motif, souvenirs labelled as bear friendly need to provide other relevant information about bears, their conservation issues or coexistence measures to raise awareness about these topics among tourists and other buyers. So far, souvenirs from 11 bear friendly ambassadors have been labelled as bear friendly. Such products can enrich the tourism offer in the areas where bear-related tourism is becoming increasingly popular and help to build up the positive image of the bear within the local community working to protect its heritage.



Fig. 7 A leaflet included with bear friendly handmade soap communicates key bear conservation issues.

(Photo: Petra Draškovič Pelc)

4.3 Bear friendly tourism

Within the tourism category, tourist accommodation, restaurants and bear-related tourism programmes can be labelled as bear friendly. Successful applicants must meet criteria related to raising awareness among tourists about proper behaviour in bear areas and prevention of bears' access to anthropogenic food sources.

Bear-related tourism programmes need to follow the responsible bear tourism guidelines (Karamanlidis et al., 2016) to minimize negative impacts of tourism activities on bears. Programmes should not be based solely on bear observations but rather include experiencing the bear habitat, recognizing signs of their presence, as well as learning about coexistence and local environmental stewardship efforts (Fig. 8).



Fig. 8 Bear tourism programmes should include experiencing the bear habitat, recognizing signs of their presence and learning about human-bear coexistence.

(Photo: Aleksandra Majić Skrbinišek)

The bear friendly label promotes funding of large carnivore conservation through tourism revenues. Bear friendly tourism programmes are offered by different tour operators that have agreed to allocate at least 5% of revenues to nature conservation non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Recipients of these funds were selected via an open call based on their

previous activities related to large carnivore conservation. This contribution is a step forward toward responsible tourism financially contributing to nature conservation efforts, which is one of the basic principles defined by The International Ecotourism Society. Five tour operators, offering 11 bear friendly programmes, signed contract agreements with NGOs in 2017. So far, €1,008 from bear friendly tourism programmes were donated to selected NGOs during the May to October bear watching season in 2018. Moreover, the label was awarded to five tourist accommodation facilities in the bear region.

5. Promoting bear friendly offers

To promote bear friendly ambassadors and bring attention to responsible bear tourism practices, we have created the Discover Dinarics web portal (www.discoverdinarics.org), which has been online since March 2017. Within the portal, there is a map displaying an inventory of bear friendly products, enabling users to quickly find a bear friendly offer in their proximity. The portal enables direct inquiries for best practice bear friendly tourism programmes offered by different tour operators who are willing to donate part of their revenues for large carnivore coexistence.



Fig. 9 Stand promoting bear friendly offers and the Discover Dinarics portal at a tourism fair.

(Photo: Irena Kavčič)



Fig. 10 Educational seminars for tourist guides and hunters interested in bear-related tourism, held at the Biotechnical Faculty, University of Ljubljana, in January 2016.

(Photo: Irena Kavčič)

To make bear friendly products more known and to increase awareness of the benefits these products have for human-bear coexistence, the LIFE DinAlp Bear project promotes the Discover Dinarics portal and the bear friendly label through publications, presentations on projects events, study tours, agricultural and tourism fairs (Fig. 9), public events and scientific conferences. The story about promoting responsible wildlife tourism and wildlife friendly practices is shared as part of a branding campaign communicating the benefits of Natura 2000 areas for nature and people (www.natura2000branding.eu). An educational seminar for tourist guides and hunters was organized to present relevant legal aspects, basic bear biology and ecology, tourist group management and recommendations for development of bear tourism programmes (Fig. 10).

A study tour for a limited number of journalists and tourism agents to present the highlights of best practice bear tourism programmes was organized in September 2017. Development and outcomes of the bear friendly scheme and bear tourism products were presented at the 26th International Conference on Bear Research and Management, held in Ljubljana from 16th to 21st of September 2018. A bear friendly market was organized during the conference, where ambassadors were able to present and sell their products to conference attendees. In March 2019 we organized a workshop for current users of the label in cooperation with a marketing agency, to receive feed-

back on their use of the label and to obtain marketing recommendations for future development of the label.

Organizing events where participants can share ideas with each other and socialize has proven to be an important way to give something back to the community and has helped in the process of new applicant recruitment via word of mouth communication.

The bear friendly label promotes the use of coexistence measures that can also easily be applied to other large carnivores, such as lynx and wolves, so we will continue to promote its use in future large carnivore-related projects. We have also proposed to the Ministry of the Environment and Spatial Planning to include a budget for bear friendly labelling in the Action Plan for Brown Bear Management in Slovenia.

6. Benefits of the bear friendly label

A questionnaire to receive feedback from current users of the bear friendly label was developed in March 2019 and we received 34 responses. More than 90% of respondents believed that their customers have a positive or very positive response to the label and 94% will continue to use the label after the end of the project. Most respondents (62%) estimate that the label increases the market value of their products or services. They believe customers are becoming increasingly more aware of nature friendly and responsible tourism practices and are more likely to buy, or are willing to pay extra, for bear friendly labelled products and services. A large majority of respondents (92%) communicate the bear friendly story to their customers, which shows that the label is a good platform to raise awareness about bear conservation, responsible tourism practices and human-carnivore coexistence measures. Sharing positive stories about bears in areas where they are often perceived as a burden may enhance perception of the value of the bear within local communities.

Tourism can finance and promote conservation efforts. Through the bear friendly label, wildlife tourists can recognize responsible bear tourism programmes that channel some of the revenue raised from tourism into conservation and human-bear conflict mitigation activities. Moreover, wildlife tourism increases the demand for agricultural products and local handicrafts. The bear friendly label provides a link between farming and tourism and gives farmers an opportunity

for more active involvement in ecotourism activities, increasing their potential to generate an alternative income source. The label communicates the unique story of human-bear coexistence heritage in the region to tourists and empowers them to choose programmes and products that support on-the-ground conservation of bears, while supporting associated communities.



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