

TALKING WITH PEOPLE

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION WITH COMMUNITIES



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As an American conservation biologist based in Missoula, Montana, I had always dreamed about working internationally. As fortune would grant, during 2015–2016, my family and I had the chance to live and work in Slovenia. Sovereign since 1991 and a member of the European Union, Slovenia provides critically important habitat for several large carnivore populations in central and southeastern Europe. In 2015, I was invited by the Slovenia Forest Service to act as a technical advisor to the LIFE DinAlp Bear project – a five-year effort that seeks to manage and conserve brown bears (*Ursus arctos*) as one large population across Slovenia, Croatia, Austria and Italy¹. A major aspect of the work entails reducing human-bear conflict with local communities and improving prospects for bears to recolonize the southeastern Alps from the Dinaric Mountains of Slovenia and Croatia.

One of the most rewarding aspects of my work in Slovenia was the receptivity and interest from my Slovenian colleagues to learn how to better engage with local people and communities for bear conservation. In Slovenia, my sense is that there is great opportunity for grass-roots, bottom up conservation, particularly in a post-communist environment where there is an appetite for more local control in decision making. This became clear when I started my major project: *A Guidebook to Human-Carnivore Conflict: Strategies and Tips for Effective Communication and Collaboration with Communities*².

Since Slovenian Damage Inspectors were an important audience for the guidebook, it of course made sense to solicit their input and to ask them what skills they needed to improve. Over the course of the project, I interviewed dozens of inspectors and felt like their engagement, excitement and interest in the

book was emblematic of a new change occurring in Slovenia – the growing appetite for a participatory democracy and an engaged citizenry.

The guidebook was a pleasure to write and I have presented it at formal meetings with hundreds of Slovenia Forest Service personnel, to Croatian bear damage inspectors and to carnivore managers in Italy.

The guidebook offers new tools and innovative approaches for field-level practitioners who want to conserve and manage brown bears and wolves that inhabit human-modified landscapes. Additionally, it offers practical tips for effective communication and proven strategies for building partnerships and collaborations with people who live with large carnivores. One of the most important facets to large carnivore conservation is to develop positive working relationships among wildlife managers, local communities and other stakeholders whose collaborations are fundamental for addressing, reducing and preventing human-carnivore conflict in a meaningful way.

My book targets those who inspect damage by large carnivores and those who directly manage these challenging animals, but many lessons from the guide can be used by NGO personnel and others who are engaged more broadly in nature conservation. For those on the front line of carnivore conservation, my hope is that the guidebook prepares them in their critically important roles as wildlife ambassadors by providing communication skills and knowledge to work with a diversity of stakeholders. Ultimately, this guide will prepare the reader to engage with communities using a participatory approach that bridges theory and practice in a clear and understandable manner.

¹ <http://dinalpbear.eu/home-page-1/>

² http://dinalpbear.eu/wp-content/uploads/ENGLISH_Guidebook_Seth_Wilson_WEB2.pdf