



Oso en Asturias - Program for the conservation of the brown bear in Asturias

LIFE98 NAT/E/005305



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Project description:

Background

The brown bear is listed as 'endangered of extinction' in Spain and listed as a priority species by the Habitats Directive. A population of 70-80 bears survives in the Cantabrian Mountains, separated in two completely isolated nuclei. The easternmost subpopulation is the most endangered one, due to a shortage of adult females and absence of recruitment.

The principal threats to the Cantabrian bears stem from hunting (poaching and accidents during legitimate hunts), loss and degradation of habitats, human disturbance (opening of new tracks in the wild and a growing tourism activity) and a very restricted gene pool.

This project run parallel to other conservation efforts focusing the same species and also funded with LIFE in the bear's distribution area, acting in complementary zones to each other and testing different management ways that may favour the survival of the target species.

Objectives

The main target of this project was to better control the hunting activity in private hunting reserves placed in municipalities that make up the margins of the species' distribution in Asturias, also implementing a series of habitat

management measures for the benefit of the bear in collaboration with the relevant hunting associations.

These measures consisted of collaborating with the surveillance of private hunting grounds (aimed at controlling illicit hunting, eliminating illegal traps, and accompanying the hunts when they took place in sites where a potential conflict with the conservation of the species existed) and, when necessary, suspending hunts in areas frequented by bears. The disturbance to the hunters was to be compensated either through financial payments or in kind, through performing restoration works that could improve the habitat of both the game species and the bear. Awareness raising seminars for hunters were also to be organised to complement the fieldworks.

Parallel to this, collaboration with SEPRONA (the Guardia Civil's nature protection unit) was to be reinforced to combat poaching. A training seminar for SEPRONA's rangers was planned to aid reinforcing collaboration. Publication of a manual on bear protection and a regular information bulletin to disseminate project activities, were also foreseen.

Results

The final goal of the project was to increase the brown bear population in the project area, and the figures recorded there at the end of the project -permanent presence of 14 to 19 brown bears, and 28-35 individuals using the site as their feeding and dispersal range- showed a trend towards an effective population increase of about 10% when compared to the data presented at the beginning of the project (13-17 permanent and 26-32 passing through). The distribution range of the species also increased in recent years in the area considered, as new signs of bears' presence were detected in three areas: Southern Ibias, Santo Adriano and Amieva.

These results should be considered satisfactory, but they and the overall project must be interpreted in the wider and longer term framework of conservation efforts that have been implemented in the last 15 years in the Cantabrian mountain range through several projects carried out by different institutions, mostly with the financial support of the LIFE instrument. Altogether, the situation of the species in its Cantabrian distribution range has improved notably and this population, listed as priority in the Annex II of the Habitats Directive, is close to turning into a "successful story" in the framework of the Natura 2000 implementation.

The main project activities were surveillance and field monitoring actions, which were carried out by a team of 7 wardens who were employed and duly equipped to fight against the main threats for the species in this region: poaching, accidental shootings in the legal hunts and the illegal use of snares to combat vermin. Though these threats remained after the project finished, no brown bears were found dead in the target area in the whole project's duration period thanks to the work undertaken by the beneficiary and the collaborative framework established with the official environmental police (SEPRONA). This absence of incidents could be one of the reasons for the increase in the species' population trends. As an important pump-priming effect, it should be noted that the cooperation with the SEPRONA was kept and reinforced after the project's

end.

One important activity carried out was seeking for snares (typically placed by the peasants to fight the wild boar, a species that has experienced a population explosion in recent years causing damages to their crops). Overall, 106 snares were removed from the wild by the FAPAS field patrols. The number of snares detected can be judged as moderate, considering that 12 snares had been removed in just one month in the same area in 1998. This short number of snares was understood as the beginning of the decrease in the use of this illegal unspecific method of controlling pests, and probably a consequence of the pressure of the project wardens and the SEPRONA.

The project anticipated the attendance of the FAPAS staff to 20% of the legal hunts celebrated in the target hunting grounds. This action was satisfactorily covered with the presence of the wardens in 261 hunts. According to the beneficiary this presence, beyond the very positive effect of reducing hunting accidents, caused also a change of attitude of part of the hunters towards the bear, and the conservation requisites for this species are not considered a problem for the hunting activity anymore.

Unfortunately, this good relation with the hunters was not duly authenticated on the field through long-lasting arrangements with them. One of the key actions of the project was setting up formal agreements with the most important hunting associations (Belmonte, Quirós, etc) for their involvement in the conservation of the brown bear. These agreements were not signed with all the expected associations, but at least those existing with the associations "Astur" and "Grado" were renewed, and a new association, "Teverga", was included in this scheme. Indeed, the insufficient co-operation of some associations did not allow for the full achievement of some of the results expected, such as the cancellation of 1-2 hunts per game reserve when or where the conditions for hosting bears made their presence likely. Some cereal sowings and the bush clearances planned as compensatory measures for the hunting associations in exchange for their surrender were consequently not completed either. Once again providing information, raising the awareness of the hunters and developing patience for medium term strategies raised as essential elements to achieve a good understanding among parties too often confronted.

The original idea of signing agreements with the hunting associations to involve them directly in the conservation on the species, was an innovative and potentially demonstrative action valuable for other NGOs and administrations all through Europe, where unwise hunting is a common factor of confrontation with conservationists.

Habitat management actions sought both improving the habitat for the species and raising the awareness of local peasants on the likely benefits for them of the conservation works done in the framework of the Natura 2000 network. So, some 3500 cherry trees were planted in private estates of several municipalities, within important areas for the brown bear. Besides, electric fences were given out to the Grado's municipality hunting association for they installed them, and 700 tree protectors were distributed in Amieva, as an alternative measures to control pests instead of the placing of snares, and 14 beehives were protected to avoid damages caused by bears. These measures were completed successfully.

The awareness generated in the neighbouring area of Ponga by the tree

plantations carried out within the project had a clear incentive effect, with LEADER funds being requested to finance the plantation of 3.000 additional cherry trees in this area.

The EC support implied a reinforcement of the reputation of the NGO FAPAS among the institutions, hunting and farmers associations, and allowed them to continue with the difficult tasks they try to carry out for bear conservation in this area.

Another remarkable pump priming effect was the establishment of a new and optimum collaborative framework between the different NGOs involved in the brown bear conservation in the Cordillera Cantábrica. The relations between FAPAS, the FOP (Brown Bear Foundation) and the FOA (Official foundation of the Asturias government) achieved a very satisfactory understanding that allowed them coordinating the efforts in favour of the brown bear and avoiding any clash or negative interaction between their activities.

The beneficiary tried to use the brown bear as a flag of the conservation and distinction of the project area. This idea, if further developed, could provoke significant positive socio-economic effects in the future, enhancing the visibility of the local products and improving the tourism possibilities. Regarding the direct socio-economic effects of the project, it caused the direct employment of 13 persons (2 part time and 6 temporarily hired).

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Environmental issues addressed:

Themes

Species - Mammals

Keywords

endangered species, population dynamics, protected area, controlled hunting zone, mountainous area

Target EU Legislation

- Nature protection and Biodiversity
- Directive 92/43 - Conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora- Habitats Directiv ...

Target species

Ursus arctos

Natura 2000 sites

SPA	ES0000055	Fuentes del Narcea y del Ibias
SCI	ES1200008	Redes
SCI	ES1200009	Ponga-Amieva
SCI	ES1200011	Peña Ubiña
SCI	ES1200012	Caldoveiro
SCI	ES1200041	Peña Manteca-Genestaza

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Beneficiaries:

Coordinator	FAPAS, Fondo Asturiano para la Protección de los Animales Salvajes
Type of organisation	NGO-Foundation
Description	FAPAS is a Spanish pioneering NGO that has been working in the region of Asturias (Spain) since the 70's. Since its creation it contributed notably to raise the awareness of managers, stakeholders and, chiefly, of the general public, towards the natural heritage of the Cantabrian Mountain Range, and has particularly focused its work on the conservation of the Spanish population of brown bear (<i>Ursus arctos</i>).

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Administrative data:

Project reference	LIFE98 NAT/E/005305
Duration	01-JUL-1998 to 30-JUN -2001
Total budget	754,977.98 €
EU contribution	528,484.59 €
Project location	Asturias(España)

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Read more:

Project web site	Web site with information about the LIFE project and the usual activities of FAPAS.
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