



15 Years of Bears in Austria

Summary of a reintroduction and conservation project

Today Austria is also a bear country. In the last century, the last bear was killed in the Austrian Eastern Alps. The liberation from bears, but also from lynx and wolves was celebrated a lot back then. This was understandable under the historic circumstances; today the situation for the large predators has fundamentally changed.

In the northern Kalkalps the densities of the population and livestock have decreased by 50%. The stock of game in the core area of the bear population, the region around the 'Ötscher' and the 'Hochschwab', has doubled. This means a good situation for bears and their return. The monotony of forests and also the high opening up level of forested areas with roads affect the habitat of bears in negative ways. Additionally new adventure sports like mountain biking bring disturbances to the bear habitat.

The first bear after 150 years

In October 1973 a bear track could prove the first bear in the region of the 'Ötscher' in 150 years. This legendary 'Ötscherbear', who was thought to be only a phantom for a long time, immigrated to Austria from Slovenia. He was 4 to 5 years old when he settled down in Austria. His presence could only be noted when he searched for food at bee hives or deer feeding sites. Actual sights were rare.

The reintroduction

Already in the 80s there were thoughts of using this 'Ötscherbear' as the starting individual for a reintroduction project. It took 10 years, though, until the WWF took the initiative and did the first not totally uncontroversial step with releasing the female bear 'Mira'. In 1992 the female 'Cilka' followed and in 1993 the male 'Djuro'. All of these bears were caught before in the bear regions of Slovenia and Croatia. The released bears were equipped with radio collars to study their behaviour in the new habitat and to survey them.

The first offspring

Mira, the first released bear, was first seen with offspring in 1991. Thus the 'Ötscherbear' became the progenitor of the bear population in the region of the Lower Austrian and Styrian border. In this year Mira had three cubs, which is surprising for a female bear carrying for the first time and speaks a lot for the high quality of the habitat.

1993 Mira had 3 cubs and Cilka 2. Mira paired again with the 'Ötscherbear' and Cilka was obviously already pregnant when she got caught. These facts constitute a good precondition for the development of a healthy population. Up to now 27 young bears were born within the project area.

'Problem-bears' and bear problems

In the years 1993/94 one bear, soon to be called 'Nurmi', caused some excitement. The increase in cases of damage and the appearance of this not unbashful bear led to the shooting of two bears. After this action, the cases of damage were reduced to a low average. The image of the bears, though, was lastingly harmed. Thus further releases could not be thought of. The year 1994 showed further shortcomings that were not dealt with before. These shortcomings lay mainly in the cooperation with interest groups (conservation, hunting, apiculture, agriculture), but also in the collaboration of agencies. The most important revelation of the year 1994, however, was that without the acceptance of the population bears would have no future in this region.

Bear management

Brown bears that live in close proximity to humans in the cultural landscape of the Alps cause a lot of conflicts in the interests of humans and animals. Bears, being intelligent animals, can make the experience that where humans live, there is food. Thus they can lose their natural shyness and become a hassle. This behaviour has nothing to do with being aggressive or dangerous. The main task in bear management is therefore to maintain the natural shyness of the animals. With food conditioning bears are directly influenced. A special intervention troop, consisting of hunters, veterinarians, and wildlife biologists, organized more than a dozen such actions in the last years. A standardized approach is given through the establishment of a 'country spanning coordination centre for bear question', in which nature conservation and hunting rights agencies of the bear countries, the hunting community, and the ministry of the environment are represented. For the conservation of a migrating species like the brown bear a spacious region approach is necessary. Apart from the intervention troop and the coordination centre bear attorneys are a main part of bear management.

Bear attorneys

The bear attorneys (Georg Rauer, Bernhard Gutleb, and Walter Wagner) became important interfaces between wildlife biology, hunting, nature conservation, and agriculture. They assess damages, but mainly are contact persons for bear questions for the local population. Concerning scientific work, the bear attorneys research number, development, and behaviour of the bear population. They follow bear hints and try to get footprints as well as hair and faeces of the animals. With DNA analysis a family tree of the bear population in the Ötscher-Hochschwab region could be put together. All these conservation measures were made possible by the financial support from the EU-Life Program.

Present situation of bears in Austria

Currently there are 6-8 bears in Carinthia and 8-12 in the northern Kalkalps. In Upper Austria bears appeared last year mainly in the region of the National Park Kalkalps and were most likely migrating individuals of the Ötscher-Hochschwab population. The single bear in the Lungau in Salzburg seems to be a border crosser from Carinthia. The sporadic hints of bears in Tyrol might be based on a migrating individual from Italy. Therefore a total number of 15-20 bears can be assumed for entire Austria. The reason, why the population is not increasing more and maybe is even decreasing respectively, is unclear.

What does the future bring

A main point for a secure future of the Austrian bears is the assurance of migration from the South. Currently many infrastructural barriers, like highways or motorways, prevent immigration. The construction of 'green bridges' to cross these barriers and the preservation of already existing crossing possibilities, and mainly their connectivity, is one of the central tasks for the future. The positive attitude of the hunting community towards bears is very good and also necessary, as conservation of bears without the cooperation of hunters is not sustainably possible. Should you have questions concerning bears feel free to contact the bear attorneys anytime.

Authors: Dr. Georg Rauer for Lower Austria and Styria (0676 83488 600)
Mag. Bernhard Gutleb for Carinthia (0664 6202534)
Walter Wagner for Upper Austria, Salzburg, and Tyrol (0664 9894857)

<http://www.lcie.org/>