

Report: Fact finding mission no. 2 in Romania (18-21/06/2018)

June 2018



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This report was prepared by Valeria Salvatori and Yorck von Korff following a visit in the Romania within the activities planned for the Service contract for the establishment of regional/local platforms on coexistence between people and large carnivores. The opinions and evaluations contained are those of the authors and do not reflect the position of the European Commission.

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1. Context

The mission described in this report was carried out by international staff (for names see Annex A) of a service contract with the European Commission Directorate-General for Environment (Contract nr. 07.027739/2017/771819/SER/ENV.D.3). This service contract foresees “the establishment of regional/local platforms on coexistence between people and large carnivores”.

The impacts of large carnivores – notably bear, wolf, and lynx - recently have reappeared and intensified with regard to a wide range of human activities, including the economically costly depredation on livestock and pets. In some countries, hunters perceive carnivores as competitors for shared prey species and in some situations, predation can influence traditional game harvests and hunting. In some exceptional cases, large carnivores (mainly bears) can be a risk for human safety, and fear of both bears and wolves is often expressed by rural residents in recolonization areas. Although the real impact of large carnivores can be mitigated through the adoption of adequate tools in a technical way, the disagreement among different sectors of the society about the core issue about presence of large carnivores can result in social conflicts. Experience has shown that these conflicts can escalate to very high levels and can dominate political discourses in some countries.

In many cases, reintegrating large carnivores into the fabric of the European countryside requires making a number of adjustments to the practices of many sectors, including agriculture, forestry, hunting, transport, and refuse treatment, as well as dealing with the general concerns of many rural residents. The social perception of such needed changes can be either positive or negative, resulting in difficult situations to be managed. Often, the nature of conflict is mainly social, and in this case no technical tool is expected to achieve full success if not welcomed and implemented through a shared decision making approach. Many management measures may be highly controversial and / or expensive, so it is crucial that their adoption can be justified by involving the interested parties in a participatory way.

Due to the diversity of European situations there are no solutions that work in all contexts. It is therefore necessary to identify the range of potential solutions and then pick the combination of measures which work best in different local contexts.

In 2012 the Directorate General for the Environment of the European Commission (DG ENV) launched an initiative for the conservation and sustainable management of large carnivore species, based on dialogue with, and involvement of, relevant stakeholders, with a view to ensuring their commitment to the long-term conservation of large carnivores in coexistence with humans in Europe. In 2014 the EU platform on coexistence between humans and large carnivores was established, with the vision "*To promote ways and means to minimize, and wherever possible find solutions to, conflicts between human interests and the presence of large carnivore species, by exchanging knowledge and by working together in an open-ended, constructive and mutually respectful way*".

The platform represents a tool for sharing views and issues at a higher level, but somehow lacks the direct contact with local issues. There is a need to implement pilot activities that could serve as models for other contexts, and to show how and where the participatory approach offers an effective means to move large carnivore conservation from the purely ecological to the social dimension, thus taking full account of the perceptions, emotions and values of the local communities, and launching a shared responsibility process whereby actions to be implemented are selected on a common ground wherever that appears possible. Therefore, it is the primary aim of this project to set up local platforms of stakeholders in areas where high levels of conflicts are detected, in order to promote dialogue among different interest groups. The project will support stakeholders, where this is desired, to reach agreement about key actions to implement in order to mitigate the impact of large carnivores on local human activities and smoothen the social conflicts that hamper the conservation status of the large carnivore population involved. The project also aims at improving the communication flow with the European stakeholder platform on large carnivore coexistence, as well as promoting the existence of the local platforms through ad-hoc communication activities thus contributing to the promotion of stakeholder participation at different levels.

In our offer to the Commission for this service contract we initially proposed eight potential sites for setting up regional dialogue platforms based on interest previously expressed in letters of support by local stakeholders. As only three or four platforms can financially be supported, we explored through distance interviews with contact persons of all eight sites the current conflict situation and opportunities for interventions. Based on these preliminary interviews, we suggested a choice of preferential sites where our intervention would potentially be most beneficial considering the situation and our own competencies (perceived match). Eventually, the European Commission-DG ENV decided on the final choice of sites. One of these sites is in Romania.

2. Purpose of this report

In this report we will inform all interested parties about the work our team carried out between 18th and 21st June 2018 in Romania and an interview at a distance on 23rd of June. This includes the objectives of our work, the approach we used, whom we met for which reasons, as well as some conclusions from our mission together with possible next steps.

3. Brief timeline of the mission

Date	Time of the day	Place and action
18 June	Afternoon	Team arrives in Bucharest, internal briefing about knowledge on the current situation and relationships among stakeholders
19 June	Morning	Interview with Mr. Nicolae Manta, at the Ministry of Environment
	Afternoon and evening	Travel to Braşov, interview in Braşov at ICAS and travel to Miercurea Ciuc (Harghita County)
20 June	Morning	Meeting at Harghita County Council
	Afternoon and evening	Travel to Braşov, meeting ICAS staff to see bears in various situations (natural habitat and urban settlements)
21 June	Morning	Debriefing, travel to Bucharest airport
23 June	Morning	Skype interview with Fundatia Conservation Carpathia

4. Purpose of the mission

The purpose of the mission was threefold with regard to the overall project objective of setting up a regional/ local stakeholder platform in Romania:

- Gain an initial understanding of the willingness of the Ministry of Environment to get involved in the project
- Collect information at regional level and assess feasibility for establishing a regional platform
- Foresee possible next steps

5. General approach to our intervention

Our approach has three parts (see von Korff and Salvatori 2018): A **first fact finding phase** that started with our first mission to Romania in May 2018, and continued with the present mission.

A **second phase** in which we suggest a specific process to follow during the platform meetings has also started with regards to the regional platform in Romania, and will continue remotely.

For the **third phase** we will contract a local facilitator or request one of our team staff (according to the situation) to begin facilitating the platform meeting.

At **all times** in this process our team will remain:

- Neutral with regard to the issues under discussion. The only suggestions we will make are on the process to follow but even here we remain open to changes whenever they are requested by the participants.
- In support of each stakeholder by way of understanding what is important to her/ him.
- Transparent with regard to the decisions that we are intending to take on the process and the reasons for them as well as on the decisions that already have been taken (as far as we are aware of them).
- Confidential with regard to who told us what in the preliminary interviews of the first phase. Nevertheless we will feedback information – to the EC-DG ENV but also to the stakeholders – about the general points that were raised and the overall situation albeit without indicating who stated which point (this is a purpose of the current report) unless the respondent authorized us to do so.

In accordance with previous considerations, we will never propose any solution to the issues under consideration. Our role will remain that of a third party in support of all the other parties. Therefore the solutions will have to come from the local stakeholders themselves. If the latter can reach consensus on these solutions they will be more appropriate for the specific local context, as well as more lasting than any solution suggested by external experts.

6. The meetings

6.1 Persons met

The following table gives an overview whom we met, when and where.

Table 1. Persons met

Persons met during a specific interview (including organizational affiliations)	Place	Date and time of the day
Mr. Nicolae Manta, responsible for Large Carnivores within the Biodiversity Directorate	At the Ministry of Environment headquarter in Bucharest	Tuesday 19 June 2018 at 9.45 am
Dr. Georgeta Ionescu (Researcher), Dr. Ramon Jurj (Project Manager LIFE for BEAR project). Prof. Ovidiu Ionescu (Univ. of Transylvania)	ICAS office, Braşov	Tuesday 19 June 2018 at 3 pm
Mr. Borboly Csaba (president of Harghita County Council), Mrs. Kopacz Emöke (Councillor Harghita County Council), Mr. Demeter László (Pogány-Havas Association), Mr Dan Ocheşelu (Vrancea County Council), Mr. Kelemen A. Márton (Mureş County Council), Mr. Könczei Csaba (Agricultural Department of Covasna County), Mr Fodor István (Mayor of Bodoc), Domokos László József, Kósa Ildikó, Szabó Szilárd (Harghita Environmental Protection Agency), Szócs Zoltán (Covasna Environmental Protection Agency), Adrian Aldea, Onofrei Monica	Harghita County Council in Miercurea Ciuc	Wednesday 20 June 2018 at 9.30AM
Mr. Alexander Gridan and Ramon Jurj (ICAS), Mr. Benedek Barna (Director of Porsilva Hunting association, Malnaş Hunting ground), Mr. Ghiţă Irinel (Mayor of Buşteni), Mr Nisipasiu Alin (Manager of Sinaia / Prahova hunting ground)	Covasna county, Buşteni city (Prahova)	Wednesday 20 June 2018 at 5 pm
Mr. Christoph Promberger (Carpathia Conservation Foundation)	At a distance via Skype©	Saturday 23 June 2018 at 10 am

6.2 Meeting procedure

The different people were met for different aims, thus no pre-defined structured questionnaire was followed for gathering information. While the meeting with Mr. N. Manta was aimed at informing the National Authority representative about our work and collecting eventual expression of interest to be involved, the meeting with Mr. R. Jurj was aimed at understanding his perception of the conflict. The meeting in Miercurea Ciuc was aimed at collecting information about the possibility to support an exchange of information and facilitate collaboration at inter-county level. While meeting Mr. Promberger the semi structured interview that we used for the first fact finding mission was used. In all meetings an introduction about the project and our role was provided, so that our interlocutor was aware about the objective of our presence.

6.3 Results

As we assured semi-confidentiality (no reporting on who said what, just providing general impressions) to our respondents and as the number of respondent was very small and as bear management in Romania continues to be contentious we will limit the report to a general description of the

understanding we had of the situation in each of the meetings held, plus an assessment of feasibility of different intervention options. We confirm the conclusions and findings resulting from the previous fact finding mission, especially a blocked situation between hunting organizations on the one hand and nature NGOs on the other at the national level (von Korff and Salvatori 2018¹).

6.3.1 Issues

6.3.1.1 Involvement of Ministry of Environment

The position of the Ministry of Environment is supportive of our possible intervention. N. Manta nevertheless suggested to start with a regional platform, possibly supported by county governments. The intention of the Ministry is to go ahead with the Bear Action Plan and coordinate a project for its implementation. There is awareness of the fact that the situation at national level is polarized. A neutral body that could represent a facilitator of the process other than the Ministry itself was not seen.

6.3.1.2 Role of ICAS

The National Institute for Research and Wildlife Management (ICAS), in its Brasov branch, is coordinating the LIFE for Bear project (LIFE13NAT/RO/1154), which includes an action devoted to the development of the Action Plan for Bear management in Romania. The draft Action Plan has been discussed in 4 meetings before it was sent to the Ministry of Environment early this year. A public debate was held in the Romanian Parliament in May for collecting final amendments in order to produce a consolidated version of the document. The latter was sent to the Ministry in late May this year.

ICAS has set up a team of experts that ensures intervention on critical situations, and has re-located over 300 bears in the last 10 years. Only 25% of the relocations were successful, and there is the impression that those that worked better were close to the border to Ukraine, thus survival of the bears may not be ensured (bears might be shot at the other side of the border).

According to ICAS, accidents with bears in road and train tracks have been increasing three fold. Dangerous situations of bears approaching urban areas have also increased. Bear poaching has risen four times higher than it was three years ago. The Action Plan includes the establishment of “regional teams” that could increase the efficiency of interventions in the different areas of the country where bears are present at high densities.

ICAS would be willing to collaborate at regional level with neighbouring counties for implementation of coordinated actions for bear management. According to ICAS interventions are urgently needed as the bear population has increased in the last years. The work done so far (prior to 2016) has ensured a stable population of bears. ICAS considers that recognition of the role of game managers is an important factor, as they usually invest resources and energies. Otherwise their capacity and motivation may cease.

A mention was made about a media reportage in PROTV that accused Mr. Ionescu of conflict of interests.

A recent press release from AGVPS was mentioned, in which distrust towards environmental NGOs was expressed.

6.3.1.3 Possibility to establish a regional platform in the Central Carpathian Region

The attendants to the meeting were all interested in bear management, and involved in different levels and issues. After a presentation of IEA staff a discussion was held about the possibility to establish a regional collaboration among the counties that host the majority of the Romanian Bear population. It

¹ Yorck von Korff and Valeria Salvatori 2018. Report: Fact finding mission nr 1 in Romania (9-12 May 2018)

was reported that at county level some level of collaboration between NGOs, hunters, game wardens and Public authorities (EPAs) exist, but it would be beneficial to expand such collaboration through coordinated actions at Regional level. Although diversity among counties exist, in that economic drivers are different, thus priorities may be different, a general consensus about the importance to mitigate the impact of bear on human activities (i.e., damage to agriculture and livestock production) as well as the risk of accidents with humans was expressed.

The system in place for compensation of losses due to bears is considered unsatisfactory and should be improved, and most importantly integrated with damage prevention, according to the participants. The traditional livestock management structure has changed in the last decade (also due to incentives from the EU) and support is now needed for small livestock producers.

Collaboration among different actors, including game managers, is of paramount importance for bear estimates, according to participants, and a coordinated system could be set up following good examples from specific projects. Several participants pointed out that recognition to game wardens and hunters should be given, even considering paying them for contributing to the data collection for bear population estimates.

A strong need to speed up the procedures for urgent interventions was highlighted as well as higher level of independence and responsibility at county level vis a vis the national level. As an example the number of individual bears to be removed, as approved by the Ministry of Environment, should be managed at county level, according to some of the participants, instead of having the National Administration allocating bear removal at the level of hunting ground. The collaboration at inter-county level would ensure correct estimates of bear population and identification of “problem” bears to be targeted by any eventual intervention under derogation from strict protection regime.

A suggestion was made that EPAs would take the responsibility to authorise removal of problem bears as documented by supporting evidence, and according to a consolidated protocol.

Proposal to establish regional or county-level intervention teams to deal with critical bear situations was made. Suggestions were made to promote the use of bear as an economic opportunity (e.g., bear watching and tourism).

A request for concrete examples from abroad was made, for particular bear management issues.

The urgency of facilitating the collaboration work was underlined and all the participants expressed willingness to contribute at the condition that it would lead them to concrete solutions, not just talking to each other.

6.3.1.4 Impact of bears and social conflict

Large carnivores presence is often, if not always, associated to variable levels of impact on human activities, depending on the local ecological and socio-economic situation. In Romania the impact of bears on human activities is mainly related to agricultural and livestock raising economies at local scales. The bear population has also an impact on social security, given that individuals occur in urban and peri-urban areas as well as agricultural areas and forest areas near human settlements.

According to some of our respondents, as pointed out in the previous section, such impacts could potentially be mitigated through technical interventions, possibly organised in an integrated and coordinated manner, and examples exist on how they could be implemented if the social context allows it. The issues can be tackled through a collaborative platform at regional level that would act in a coordinated manner for the implementation of best practices. An issue of how to pay off the work done by game managers has been raised by some respondents and alternatives to trophy hunting were suggested.

On the other hand the social conflict that exists around the presence of bear in Romania seems to be rather on the national than the local or regional level (though not all our respondents would completely subscribe to this). This conflict involves mainly hunters, gamekeepers and some affiliated organizations on the one hand and several nature protection NGOs on the other. Driving forces of this conflict seem to be differing values and positions, but also doubts about the constructive intentions of the other side. The debate or disagreement appears to be around the role of different bodies (either

public or private), sometimes also different persons, and the technical approaches used to reach the final goal. This raises issues of distrust, lack of recognition, respect and transparency.

Ironically, all the stakeholders we have met seem to converge towards the well-being and conservation of a healthy bear population.

We were not able to identify a neutral institution other than the Ministry of Environment who could manage the conflict, but at the time of our visit, the parties did not seem to be prepared to engage in a dialogue with each other. Some respondents thought that the Ministry of Environment currently lacks of the capacity for managing such polarised conflict. We thus confirm the findings that emerged in our previous mission with regards to the relationships among stakeholders at the national level, and we report them below:

*On the **national level**, the perception of some of the parties are currently characterized by mutual mistrust. Some parties doubt the stated motives of the others with regard to their actions and believe that they talk in bad faith. A least one respondent expressed the suspicion that another party probably does not act not in good faith but with a deceptive intention. A few interviewees suspected others to act mainly out of financial interest. One respondent mentioned that various groups “hate each other”. At least two respondents mentioned that previous exchanges about bear management between some of the stakeholder groups were characterized by altered tones of voices and even shouting. At least one respondent mentioned that another stakeholder would use different and even contradicting statements in different settings and perceived this as intentionally deceptive.*

6.3.1.5 Safety issues

We had the opportunity to visit places where bears could be observed (ICAS personnel accompanying us to these places). We could, for example, see bears in Malnaş hunting ground, in Covasna County. This was semi-wooded terrain and the bears (a female with at least 2 cubs and a pair) seen at a distance through binoculars moved. No other mammal could be seen in the area (in similar situations a biologist would expect to see wild boars and other ungulates). There was a small group of apparently local farming folk moving on a horse-drawn carriage at a short distance from the bear on a pathway.

We also visited Buşteni city and the Valea Cerbului, where a camp site with tents and caravans is frequented by tourists (in the summer there will be several hundreds). The presence of refuses in large metal rubbish bins appears to represent an attractant for bears and we could observe at least two bears searching for food in the bins, without being disturbed by our presence (we were in the company of the Manager of the hunting ground, two game wardens and two members of ICAS staff). We also observed bears in the outskirts of the city of Buşteni, where urban housing blocks limit the forest edges, and where at least three bears were searching for food in rubbish bins, approaching private houses, and moving directly in front of entrance doors.

We recorded a sense of frustration of those who are responsible for the management of bears and people's safety (the manager of the hunting ground and the Mayor of Buşteni) who expressed worry about public safety and who would find the requests for permits to remove such bears too lengthy, complicated and inadequate for tackling such situations.

In the opinions of some of the respondents, such situations could be avoided with improved management, and rapid intervention teams would be extremely useful for this purpose. Furthermore, there was understanding that such situations could also call for lethal removal of individual bears, but only after any other non lethal intervention had been put in place.

7. The conclusions from the interviews (next steps)

After this second visit we confirmed the conclusions already drawn in the first mission, and also confirmed our willingness to support the interested parties in Romania through two pathways with regard to establishing platforms:

1. Provide support for setting up a regional, trans-county platform in the Central Carpathians.
2. Support on the national level if this is desired by the relevant stakeholders

7.1 Helping to set up a regional

The participants to the meeting held in Miercurea Ciuc agreed that such a platform could be potentially useful and function as a practical, useful activity that would immediately have some positive results in management of bears in the region. The support from our team would be essentially to facilitate coordination and reinforce trust among institutions from the different counties, reinforcing cross-sectorial collaboration and support the flow of information from international experts, as well as providing technical support for the establishment of protocols (e.g., protocol for population estimates, protocol for emergency interventions through fostering collaboration from international projects). The working group will need the support of the Presidencies of the Counties involved, the EPAs and the availability of the involved parties (listed in Annex B). The project would provide financial support for the workshop organisation and for a professional facilitator (to be identified).

7.2 Support on the national level

If stakeholders on a national level request this kind of support we offer a trust building workshop between the relevant parties in September or October 2018. This, however, appears not to be possible immediately, as the current level of distrust among the different parties lets them hesitate to engage in dialogue. Furthermore, it is our opinion that such a process can be initiated by external intervention, but will need to be taken on board by the Ministry of Environment in the second stage, which appears to be the only neutral party at the moment. We remain open for this opportunity and will continuously inform the Ministry of Environment about the developments at regional level, hopefully discussing eventual possibility to work at national level too.

8. Annexes

A) The members of the mission

Member	Function	Affiliation
Valeria Salvatori	Project coordinator	Istituto di Ecologia Applicata (Rome)
Stephen Redpath	Professor, Wildlife Biologist	University of Aberdeen (UK)
Yorck von Korff	Facilitator	Flow-ing (Montpellier)

B) List of potential participants

Counties involved:

Braşov, Covasna, Vrancea, Harghita, Mureş

Public Entities involved in each county:

County Councils

Environment Protection Agency

Other entities involved:

Hunting associations at county level

Managers of Natura 2000 sites

ACBD

Milvus

Carpathia Conservation Foundation