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Brown Bear – Human Conflicts In Greece

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In an environment increasingly dominated and shaped by the presence of humans, survival of large carnivores will depend largely on not just the amount of their intact habitat we preserve but also on how we address the inevitable conflicts of this coexistence. Monitoring and assessing human – wildlife conflicts is the first critical step in implementing an effective conservation strategy.

With a population of brown bears (*Ursus arctos*) numbering approximately two hundred despite a twenty



Figure 1a. Car damaged in a collision with a bear in Northwestern Greece in Spring 2009. Figure 1b. “Attention - Bear crossing” – Greece gets its first “bear” signs.

year conservation effort,, Greece has yet to design and implement a nationwide scheme that will accurately record and effectively deal with bear – human conflicts. Now, with such conflicts steadily rising and the well-being of both humans and bears at stake, Greece must make some important decisions and take crucial steps before it is too late. Two issues are currently the top priorities:

1. Bear – vehicle collisions:

Since 2003 more than 25 bear-vehicle collisions have been recorded in the western nucleus of the species in the Pindos mountains. With not more than 200 individuals estimated in this region, this recent rise has turned into a nightmare of significant impact on the local bear population. If no immediate action is taken to reduce these collisions, we may be witnessing the impact of mere mortality by accident into a threat to the survival of the species. In the first semester of this year alone, six collisions were recorded (Figure 1a). State authorities in cooperation with local NGOs are trying now to find solutions to this thorny issue. As a first practical measure the NGO ARCTUROS designed and erected the first “bear” road signs in the country (Figure 1b). The signs have now been approved by the local authorities of the Prefecture of Western Macedonia, and 36 of them are in preparation and will soon be placed on secondary national roads. In an encouraging act of environmental awareness, Egnatia S.A., the managing body of the major highway in the region, has offered to place such signs

on the highway as well. The urgency of the situation is highlighted by the fact that the Minister of Environment has requested to be kept informed in person by NGOs, such as ARCTUROS, about the severity of the problem.

2. Human – bear encounters:

Bears in Greece are increasingly less wary of humans and are more and more often seen in close proximity to human settlements. Such “visits” are often associated with the search for food at unsecured garbage dumps. The reactions of rural communities have varied; some communities have taken pride in these unlikely visitors, while others are fearful of the potential impact on human population. Due to recent incidents in northwestern Greece where a village was raided by bears, local authorities have considered translocating some problem individuals. They were reminded that this controversial measure is most effective in areas where there is plenty of intact habitat for bears, which is unfortunately not the case in Greece. Two previous attempts to translocate bears in the country were not successful as the problem individuals either approached human settlements again or returned to their capture point. Until scientifically sound and thorough discussions involving all stakeholders on how to deal with such problems are initiated, the Emergency Response team of ARCTUROS has maintained a non-invasive approach to the problem and is currently visiting affected communities informing them on how to best deal with these encounters. 🐻