

2007: a Grim Year for Nature in Greece

Alexandros A. Karamanlidis
Research Associate, ARCTUROS
3, Victor Hugo St.
54625 Thessaloniki; Greece
Email: alkar@bio.auth.gr
www.arcturos.gr

The year 2007 will remain in the collective conscience of Greeks as the most tragic year since the end of the second Big War. The forest fires that ravaged the country left more than sixty people dead, hundreds more homeless and millions of acres of precious Mediterranean forest burned. Amidst such a catastrophe it has been difficult to draw attention to the plight of Greece's most endangered terrestrial carnivore, the brown bear. Despite some encouraging signs such as the establishment of management bodies for the country's national parks, there has been still little tangible progress in the effective protection and management of critical brown bear habitat. In the meantime, negative human – bear interactions in Greece seem to be increasing. Bear – car collisions have emerged as a significant mortality factor for the species in the country. On the 21st of July a seven month old male bear was killed while crossing a road in the Prefecture of Florina; the third incident at the same spot and the tenth fatal incident recorded since 2003. A month latter, a young bear was injured at the “Egnatia” highway (see story, “Getting a Second Chance,” on page 13 of this issue). This is the second incident of its kind on a highway, during the construction of which, a significant amount of human and logistic resources have been invested in order to mitigate its negative impacts on wildlife.

Following three bear attacks on humans in the last three years, one of which resulted in the first recorded human fatality in the country, another person was injured by a bear in late August while watering his corn crops.

The attack took place near the town of Kastoria, far from the usual habitat of the species. Reacting to the inability of state authorities to step in, the NGO ARCTUROS, which has 15 years experience in protecting the species in the country, has taken urgently needed conservation actions. In the case of bear – car collisions a memorandum with guidelines on how to effectively deal with the problem was prepared and distributed among all relevant state authorities. To address the issue of bear attacks on humans, ARCTUROS is continuing its information campaign on the reasons that lead bears to venture so far from their “natural” habitat and how to behave during a bear encounter.

Building highways in Greece the bear-friendly way: the “E65” highway

One of the most important accomplishments in bear conservation in recent years in Greece has been the consideration of environmental management and sustainability in the planning and construction of large infrastructure projects. Following an almost decade-long legal battle, the NGO ARCTUROS and other environmental groups managed to “convince” the Greek State to adopt a holistic approach in the construction of the “Egnatia” highway. In practice, this has translated into the construction of enough tunnels and green bridges in order to ensure habitat connectivity for the endangered brown bear in Greece (see also Karamanlidis & Mertzanis 2003). ARCTUROS has carried out the first part of an environmental study, prior to the construction of the highway, and is currently involved in the second part of the study during the construction of the highway.

Acknowledging the expertise gathered during these efforts, the Greek State has appointed ARCTUROS with the task of carrying out a similar environmental study during the construction of the “E65” highway.

The north-south “E65” highway will connect to the east-west “Egnatia” highway in the Prefecture of Grevena, which is one of the most important areas for the species in the country. In the first phase of the project, which started in September 2007 and will take place prior to the construction of the highway, the two top predators in the area, bears and wolves, will be studied. Using satellite telemetry, infrared video cameras and indirect signs of presence, scientists from ARCTUROS will study the activity patterns of these two carnivores in order to propose appropriate mitigation measures. In addition, genetic material collected from bears will provide additional information on the genetic diversity of the species in the area and will complement information gathered by ARCTUROS during the “Hellenic Bear Register” project. Finally, a separate part of the study will deal with compensation measures towards local inhabitants and the long-term environmental sustainability of the highway. ❁



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