

**INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION
FOR BEAR RESEARCH AND
MANAGEMENT (IBA)**



Razor wire and other fences threaten ecological connectivity and endanger wildlife:

A joint statement by the International Association for Bear Research and Management and the IUCN Bear Specialist Group

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This letter is in reference to the current establishment of impenetrable fences by several European countries along their borders. These fences aim to control and direct the current, substantial human migration into the Schengen area of the European Union (EU) member states. The International Association for Bear Research and Management (IBA) and the Bear Specialist Group (BSG) of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) are concerned that these fences likely form a severe threat to the long-term viability of large mobile mammal species, such as brown bears and other large mammals with large spatial living requirements. The IBA is a professional organization of biologists working to support science-based management and conservation of the world's eight species of bears. Our organization is comprised of approximately 600 professional bear experts from 47 countries. We conduct international conferences, publish a peer-reviewed scientific journal "*Ursus*," and sponsor research and conservation projects worldwide.

The Bear Specialist Group (BSG) is a conservation organization focused on alleviating threats to bear populations across the world. It is one of 130 taxon-specific Specialist Groups within the IUCN, which is the largest and oldest conservation organization in the world. The BSG has 190 members, representing nearly all of the range countries where bears exist. You can learn more about our respective organizations at www.bearbiology.com.

Europe still harbors areas with high biodiversity of large mammals. Large carnivores, such as brown bears, wolves, and Eurasian lynx, are priority species for conservation in the EU, and are listed in Annex II and Annex IV of the EU Habitat Directive (Directive 92/43/EEC). Management and conservation of these species is challenging due to their large spatial requirements. Their successful conservation in Europe relies on the ability for populations to expand and for individuals to move among subpopulations. The EU Habitat Directive specifies that Member States must thus establish an inter-connected system of protected areas for these species.

The Dinaric Mountain range harbors one of the largest and most important metapopulations of brown bears in Europe. The Dinaric-Pindos population consists of inter-connected subpopulations, and ranges from Greece via Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Croatia to Slovenia. Croatia and Slovenia are particularly important in this ecological network of bear subpopulations, both as core habitat and as an arena for wildlife movements into adjacent mountain ranges, i.e., the Alps.

Landscape connectivity is the degree to which the landscape facilitates (e.g., forested or mountainous areas, or Natura 2000 sites) or impedes (e.g., human structures, such as highways and fences) animal movement, which has been identified as one of the most important factors affecting the conservation of brown bears in the European Brown Bear Action Plan adopted by the European Commission. Landscape connectivity is vitally important to allow bears to move for seasonal food resources, mating opportunities, and to replenish areas with high mortality

rates. Most importantly, interchange among small subpopulations prevents their genetic and demographic isolation, which can cause local extinctions.

The existing and planned razor wire fences along the Slovenia and Croatia borders cut directly through core areas of brown bear distribution and areas crucial for the connectivity of bear populations. Bears and other mammals are likely to be effectively stopped in their dispersal movements and inter-population connections cut off. This threatens population viability and therefore the favorable conservation status of subpopulations (as defined by the EU Habitat Directive) of bears and other large mammal species in Slovenia, Croatia, and adjacent countries, as populations become fragmented into smaller segments. It has recently been documented that the already established razor wire fences cause serious injury or death to wildlife, and there is evidence in the scientific literature that impenetrable fences and barriers have negative effects on dispersal and conservation of mammals.

Thus, the fences are in conflict with the headline target of the EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2020 (EBS), stated as “Halting the loss of biodiversity and the degradation of ecosystem services in the EU by 2020, and restoring them in so far as feasible, while stepping up the EU contribution to averting global biodiversity loss.” In particular, Targets 1 (“Fully implement the Birds and Habitats Directive”) and 2 (“Maintain and restore ecosystems and their services”) are negatively affected. Developing and maintaining landscape connectivity is an essential key step outlined in the “EU Green Infrastructure Strategy” for implementing the targets of the EBS. Protected areas, such as Natura 2000 sites, and their connectivity and integration in the unprotected landscape form the backbone of Green Infrastructure, and are essential to enable the movement and dispersal of species, to reduce the fragmentation of habitats, and to render ecosystems (and thus also large mammal populations) more healthy and resilient.

The IBA and BSG understand that the current situation is extremely challenging for the countries directly affected by the recent migration of people. However, impenetrable border fences likely have unintended, yet serious negative consequences for the long-term persistence of threatened large mammal populations.

Hence, the IBA and BSG urge the governments of Slovenia and Croatia to reconsider the ongoing construction of razor wire fences along their borders, to consider removing them or portions thereof, to develop measures to mitigate their effects on wildlife, or at the very least, to consider these fences as temporary. If these fences become permanent features, they will undo decades of international cooperation in cross-border wildlife conservation and re-endanger relatively healthy metapopulations of large carnivores. Mitigation measures diminishing the threats of these fences to wildlife populations are of crucial importance for the conservation of biodiversity in Europe.

We offer our assistance with any future assessments or planning of border obstacles in relation to large mammal conservation and landscape connectivity. We thank you for the opportunity to share our scientific opinions and hope that you will accept our offer to contribute to your future planning efforts.

Respectfully yours:



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