



## Presidents Column

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### The major challenges facing bears...

Most IBA members will remember the Strategic Membership Survey carried out in 2016. Although the results of this survey were presented at the IBA conference in Anchorage, Alaska, USA, in 2016, some of the insights from this survey are worthwhile to re-visit. The survey received 125 anonymous responses, or a return rate of 20.3% (based on 616 members). One of the most important questions asked was “What are the 3 major challenges facing bears and their ecosystems in your research area in the next decade?”.

There was a wide variation in the answers, ranging from global issues, such as climate change to very local issues, such as the pressure from emotional environmental groups. However, some very clear trends were obvious. The 4 major challenges ( $\geq 20\%$  support among respondents) facing bears and their ecosystems in the next decade according to IBA members are habitat degradation (73%), human bear conflicts (49%), climate change (31%), and illegal trade in bear parts and poaching (29%).

It was not surprising that, habitat degradation and loss were recognized by the vast majority of the respondents as the most important challenge facing bears in the future. As one respondent formulated very eloquently: “Habitat loss! This is a problem just about everywhere. Of particular concern is habitat loss in developing countries, due to expansion of agriculture and human harvest of timber products, legally and illegally.”

Habitat degradation and loss as well as climatic change are maybe the most important challenges facing almost all mammals. Due to their charismatic image and their large space requirements, bears are excellent model species to understand and find potential solutions for these challenges that benefit not just bears, but also many other species.

In general, human-wildlife conflicts are a major management and conservation issue. Due to the fact that bears can and sometimes do injure or kill people, they present a special challenge. Another issue specific to bears, and a few other mammals, is their value as animal pharmacy. The healing powers assigned to bear gall bladders leads to poaching of wild animals as well as the farming of bears, often under horrible conditions.



**...and how IBA was asked to assist members in their work to face these challenges.**

The logical follow up to the question on major challenges facing bears was “How can IBA be of more direct assistance to you in your work?” A wide variety of answers were provided, however, the 3 major ways forms of assistance ( $\geq 20\%$  support among respondents) members suggested were financial support (30%), improvement of the internal communication among members (27%), and that IBA should become a more pro-active authority and leader on bear-related topics (20%).

In general, respondents seemed to struggle with finding funds for bear-related research as well as for conference attendance. A respondent stated: “Financial support is always a limiting factor, so of course more opportunities for funding are welcome.” Respondents generally understand and support that most grant and travel support go to “developing” countries, however, some respondents also pointed out the need for increased funding opportunities available to managers and researchers in North America. As you’ve likely read in our monthly email updates, Council has begun the process to hire an Executive Director. One of the main responsibilities for the Executive Director will be to increase IBA fundraising activities and by extension, increase the grants program. Very recently Council also adopted a Strategic Plan that aims to add regional strategies and priorities in all parts of the world. The goal is to allow grant applicant to be assessed based on regional needs and priorities so that members from North America or western Europe are not competing for funds with members in South America, Asia, or eastern Europe. More details on this plan will be provided in the next President’s column.

A response that nicely summarizes how IBA should go about communication: “Communication, communication, communication. Provide ways to find out what colleagues are learning, communicate with them, info on what works and what doesn't, the recent bear literature in IBN is excellent, etc.”. As steps on the way to better communication, in addition to our conferences, Ursus and IBN, IBA is has a Facebook page and has created a new and more interactive website. Our Director of Transition and new IBA Communication Team (Jennapher Teunissen van Manen, Agnieszka Sergiel, and Alexander Kopatz) recently started to provide monthly updates and eblasts with information on the latest IBA activities and news. These eblasts have resulted in much positive feedback and interactions between IBA and its membership, but also among members. An excellent example is the eBlast that was sent out in June about the proposed Pebble Mine project in southwest Alaska, USA. In response to the eBlast two members that have projects in the area contacted IBA and were able to collaborate with Council and other IBA members that were in the process of preparing an official letter for comment on the proposed project.

In general, respondents suggest that a more visible and active IBA playing a larger political role would assist them (and by extension, bears and their management and conservation issues) in their work. Several respondents mentioned also position statements, as



summarized by this comment: “Developing white papers, or position statements, on major issues such as climate change, human-bear conflict, etc. might assist many bear managers in their jobs, because there would be the clout of a respected international group behind the position statements”. There is often a fine line between objective position statements based on rigorous scientific evidence and advocacy, and IBA strictly aims to provide objective statements based on the best science available. A request for a position statement must fulfill several strict criteria for Council to consider it; these criteria can be found on our website in our [Policy Guidance Document](#). The Policy Guidance Document is an official process that was voted in by the Council of 2016 to provide guidance for future Councils when reviewing requests for position statements or letters. A good example is our most recent position statement on radio-collaring of bears in close cooperation with the IUCN Bear Specialist Group.

The above feedback by members have helped Council shape a direction for IBA to move forward to in the future, to be better informed to fulfill our [mission statement](#) and for IBA to better understand the world’s 8 bear species through scientific research and collaboration with communities, conservationists, managers, students, and partnerships with like organizations across the globe.

Internally, we refer to this process as “transition”; computer scientists may be better served with the term “upgrade”, while ecologists may better understand the term “evolution” of IBA. In whatever way you refer to it, the goal of this process is to grow as organization but to remain the inclusive organization that has made IBA able to thrive for 45+ years as an all-volunteer professional society of colleagues and friends and, to create a win-win situation that will benefit our members, our partner organizations, and most of all bears and their management and conservation world-wide.