



2020 TOP 100 GOOD PRACTICE STORY

Title of the Story: Bear watching programs as a method of conservation brown bear population in Kočevsko region

Destination Name: *(include any state, province or region)*

Kočevsko

Country: Slovenia

Submitter name: Nevenka Klun

Email address: Nevenka.klun@kocevsko.com

Position: Head of Tourism Department

Nomination Category: *(Please check the boxes that indicate the focus of your story)*

- Culture & Communities
- Environment & Climate
- Nature & Ecotourism
- Islands & Seaside
- Immediate responses in dealing with the COVID -19
- Post COVID -19 recovery
- One of the 17 SDGs* *(if yes, which one)* Click or tap to choose

*The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), also known as the Global Goals, were adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015 as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030. The 17 SDGs are integrated—that is, they recognize that action in one area will affect outcomes in others, and that development must balance social, economic and environmental sustainability. What are the Sustainable Development Goals? <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals.html>

For further information on Tourism for SDGs: <http://tourism4sdgs.org/>

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Address each aspect of your good practice story in the different sections being specific including relevant quantitative and qualitative information.

Issues faced

Kočevsko – “The Secret Forest of Slovenia” is one of Europe's most forested areas, as more than 80% of the surface is covered by forests. Therefore it is not surprising that in this area, one of the few in Europe, still all three big beasts can be found in their natural environment: bears, wolf and lynx. Slovenia is among the countries with the highest density of brown bears (*Ursus arctos*) population in the world, and most of the bears in Slovenia are located in the forests of Kočevsko region.

The brown bear population in Slovenia has one of the highest local population densities and also reproduction rate. The population is in favorable conservation status and is increasing in number and space. Brown bear population has increased in abundance and also distributed spatially over the area. First genetic estimation (the most reliable estimates) of the population was done in 2007 and the second in 2015 (LIFE DINALP BEAR project). In this period, 41% population growth has been detected.

That is why our bear population was until last year traditionally actively managed also through regular cull quotas. Planning of those allowed the population still to grow and preserve it in stable condition. Last year, some NGOs pressed charges to those management practices, so the cull was stopped. However, the politics adopted an intervention law and call the managers and researchers to propose the “intervention” cull quotas (which was similar as proposed as the regular for this year).

In Slovenia we use 3 different monitoring techniques for collecting brown bear population indicators

- monitoring of bear mortality and reconstruction of population dynamics;
- systematic counting of bears at permanent counting sites;
- non-invasive genetic sampling.

The results of all three techniques are complementary and overlapping. Non-invasive genetic sampling is carried out every eight years and in years in-between population dynamics are monitored with reconstructions based on mortality and forecasts based on counting site census. Adding to that the monitoring of damage cases on human property and human-bear conflict rate and public opinion surveys (Human dimensions research), which are conducted every five years, for the evaluation, if bear density is reaching the socio-economic carrying capacity of the environment or not. Based on these 3 techniques and supported with socio-economic factors the cull quotas are determined.

The bear is an important natural heritage, part of untouched nature and one of the most charismatic species in the European area. The goal of modern society is to preserve the bear and enable the viable population to be restored, which is why we as a society must learn to coexist with it and maintain a positive attitude towards it. But conflicts between humans and brown bear populations in Europe remain an ongoing threat to the conservation status of bears and steps must be taken to improve co-existence. Measures need to tackle such challenges as a lack of understanding of bears’ socio-economic and environmental value, inflated estimations of the risk of bear attacks leading to a lower tolerance of bears.



Human negative attitudes towards bears are, besides experienced damage, mostly linked with the lack of the knowledge, especially biology, ecology and behavior. Besides so called “traditional knowledge” effective practices are of great importance to promote positive attitudes toward bears and consequently coexistence with bears. Majority of people, especially those with more knowledge of the species, are not scared of brown bears, or better said, not afraid of visiting the nature in areas, where brown bears are constantly present.

Therefore it is of utmost importance for the conservation of bears to address the conservation challenges and to increase the knowledge and acceptance of this charismatic species. Organized actions in the field of ecotourism can contribute to a more responsible non-consumptive use of the bear and increase its value in the eyes of the local population and influence the formation of constructive personal beliefs and values.

Methods, steps and tools applied

Because of all written and since brown bear is the most famous inhabitant of Kočevsko forests and the inspiration of many stories in our region we wanted to add our part in conserving this charismatic species by education of local community, local tourist guides and tourists and by giving our local people opportunity for additional earnings. We developed different tourist programs where people during guided tour through the forest and by visiting a “Bear Room” get to know a lot about biology, ecology and behavior of these animals. We educated local tourist guides and we also constructed special wooden hides from which tourist can observe bears during their evening activities in their natural environment from a safe shelter without influencing their life in any way.

We also give opportunity to all participants of “Wildlife Watching” programs to be social responsible by donating funds for “Bear Proof” compost bin which was specially designed under the Life Dinalp Bear project to minimize bear encountering to human settlements and preventing bear-human habituation. The “bear-proof” compost bin is made of massive oak wood, which, due to the strength and thickness of the battent, cannot be damaged to the degree that bear could reach the content. Also, the compost lid closes and opens in such a way, that it prevents bears from opening it with his paws. The “bear-proof” compost bin can thus help reduce conflicts between bears and humans, since they prevent the bear to get access to organic food and therefore reducing the frequency of bear visits to the settlements.

We also decided to give the percentage of funds (5%) from each of our »Wildlife Watching« programs to the purchase of the “bear-proof” compost bins. When we will manage to collect a sufficient amount of funds for each “bear-proof” compost bin, we will, together with the students from the local Woodworking school, produce it and place it on one of the most endangered locations in our destination.

The programs were developed in cooperation with our colleagues from Slovenian Forest Service and Biotechnical Faculty who work on important international project named Life DinAlp Bear project which aim is population level management and conservation of brown bear in northern Dinaric Mountains and the south-eastern Alps. More about this project is represented here: <https://dinalpbear.eu/home-page-1/>



During the development of the programs we had extensive education for tourist guides. Some of the “lectures” were open also for local public. On those lectures different experts explained a lot of topics about bears and successful co-existence with them in natural environment. We also hosted Simon Collier from Rewilding Europe who explained what is important during guiding this kind of programs and how to maintain sustainable expects during development and implementation of the programs. He also prepared Wildlife Guide Training Manual for the tourist guides. We also hosted James Phillips who organizes and implements bear observation programs in Alaska and who explained with what kind of challenges they are facing while running this kind of programs on Alaska for many years.

Three public presentations for the general public were also organized in which we presented to local residents the importance of brown bears, challenges and measures for successful co-existence with them and the tourist programs which we developed. More public presentations, workshops and discussions were organized also under the Life Dinalp Bear project in different parts of Slovenia <https://dinalpbear.eu/activities/e-public-awareness-and-dissemination-of-results/e1-public-awareness/>

We participated and helped to organize also photography exhibition with photos and information on bears. In the LAS project where we (in cooperation with Slovenia Forest Service from Kočevsko region) constructed hides, we prepared also a “Bear Room” in which larger local community and tourists can get a lot of general information about bears, monitoring and maintaining population, measures and good practices for monitoring population of bears, “Bear friendly” products and farmers and similar information. We also received a lot of leaflets and brochures from the Life DinAlp Bear project which local people and tourists who come to our Tourist Information centers or to the “Bear Room” can get.

Steps taken:

- discussions with local and foreign experts (Slovenia Forest Service, University of Ljubljana - Biotechnical Faculty, LPN Medved - The Special Purpose State Hunting Grounds, representatives of Life DinalpBear project, representatives of Rewilding Europe, ...),
- finding the best places for hides based on discussions with representatives of Slovenia Forest Service from Kočevsko region who were the main partner in LAS project in which we constructed the hides and owners of the hides, with local hunters from The Special Purpose State Hunting Grounds in the Kočevje region – LPN Medved, who are responsible for maintaining feeding grounds for animals and are the only ones who can feed them in nature and who know the already established paths of animals in the forest and foreign expert, Simon Collier, who used to work at Rewilding Europe company and has a lot of knowledge on this topic. We visited different locations and at the end based on all important factors (locations where bears have their already “established” paths, possibilities of settling a feeding ground there, wind direction, accessibility from the road – so tourists do not have to cross the arrival path of the bear, lightness of location etc.) choose best possible areas for the hides.
- construction of hides in cooperation with local craftsmen and based on suggestions and input from Slovene and foreign experts,
- discussions with local hunters and agreements of cooperation in which we defined that they are responsible for maintaining the hides, taking care of feeding grounds on those two locations and that they participate and take care for the safety of all involved in the evening observations on hides ,
- discussions with local farmers and beekeepers about their experiences with co-existence with



brown bears and agreements of cooperation,

- discussions with local tourist service providers and agreements of cooperation,
- development of tourism programs of observing brown bears and following signs of presence in their natural environment,
- education of tourist guides which included also a lot of field training,
- construction of »Bear Room« with interpretative boards and didactic aids on the characteristics and habits of bears, monitoring and maintaining of bear population, presentation of “bear friendly” products of our destination etc.
- promotion and marketing of tourist programs through different marketing channels
- agreement with representatives of Life Dinalp Bear that we can use construction instructions they prepared for “bear proof” compost bins also for the needs in our destination. Agreement with representatives of local Woodcrafting secondary school that they will produce those bins for the needs of our destination. Design of socially responsible action where all participants of “Wildlife Watching” programs and local people can donate their funds for construction of “bear proof” compost bins for the most endangered locations in our destination.

Key success factors

Actions of non-consumptive use of the bears, including education, organization and performance of tourist programs with appropriate observation and tracking and following of bear signs in the natural environment and the establishment of an interpretation center, provide opportunities for the effective conservation of endangered species, which at the same time enables the development of significant additional sources of income for local communities.

With all the activities, we increased the visibility of the area as one of the key locations for the preservation of the bear as a natural heritage. Through promotional activities and the implementation of new programs, we also made an important contribution to raising awareness of the importance of preserving the natural heritage. Preserved nature and the promotion of sustainable forms of tourism also make an important contribution to sustainable rural development. By training guides for the implementation of programs and involving farmers, beekeepers and other local providers in the programs, we also increased the opportunity to create new employment opportunities in our destination.

Lessons learned

There were some challenges with local hunters since their main source of income comes from other activities and they consider the hides as their places which are used for hunting and shooting animals as a part of their job. We solved the problem with education, with explanation that this could be additional source of their income and construction of separate hides which are used only for tourist purposes and placed on different locations than their hunting hides. There were some issues also with farmers since some of them have bigger problems with bears. Due to high number of brown bears in Slovenia, population management of brown bear is important in our country to maintain the number of bears manageable and co-existence with them possible. But last couple of years due to strong influence of some NGOs shooting of bears due to population management was stopped/ postponed for quite some time so farmers had bigger problems and hunters had less income from this source of their work. Due to that we had harder job to convince them that the main purpose of bear watching programs is not to stop brown bear population management, but to educate people and to maintain the manageable number of bears and co-existence possible.



Results, achievements and recognitions

- 3 different kind of programs of brown bear watching during which tourists get to know this charismatic animal and appreciate it even more after the experience,
- construction of 2 observations hides,
- design and equipment of “Bear Room”
- education of 16 local tourist guides and 4 local hunters to perform the programs,
- agreements of cooperation with local beekeepers and farmers who successfully co-exist with bears
- organization of more than 40 tours last year,
- design of social responsible action in which participants of “Wildlife Watching” programmes can donate funds for “bear proof” compost bins,
- provision of additional source of income for local people,
- better understanding and less conflicts with local hunters, farmers and beekeepers,
- less conflicts between local people and bears,
- recognition of one of the bear watching programs as SLOVENIA UNIQUE EXPERIENCES and promotion of it through Slovenian National Tourist Board promotional channels as one of the best experiences in Slovenia.

Additional references

<https://www.kocevsko.com/en/tours-and-trips/?category%5B%5D=4>

<https://www.kocevsko.com/en/tours-and-trips/observing-and-discovering-bears-in-their-natural-habitat/>

<https://www.slovenia.info/sl/edinstvena-doizivetja-slovenije/spoznajte-medveda-v-njegovem-zivljenjskem-okolju>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=11TI3s2jmqQ>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CEnp8SsXoE8>

