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Abstract: The range of the brown bear in Italy is limited to the population of the central Apennines, and to a residual population of three old individuals in the Adamello Brenta Natural Park (central Alps). Some individuals are occasionally recorded on the eastern Alps, arriving from Slovenia and Austria. A translocation project aimed at re-establishing a viable population of at least 50 bears in the central Alps was proposed by the Adamello Brenta Park administration, in cooperation with the Province of Trento. A feasibility study was conducted 1998, and it indicated that the translocation had good probabilities to be successful in the medium to long term. A survey on the attitude of the local population towards the brown bear has been done, and 80% of the residents had a positive opinion towards it. The reintroduction, coordinated by Andrea Mustoni, started in 1999. The goal is for the population to increase, through natural reproduction of the relocated animals over the next 20 to 50 years, to a total of 50 animals in the Central Alps.
Brown Bear Reintroduction in the Italian Central Alps

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The brown bear in Italy is limited to the population of the central Apennines, and to a residual population of three old individuals in the Adamello Brenta National Park (central Alps). Some individuals are occasionally recorded on the eastern Alps, arriving from Slovenia and Austria. A translocation project aimed at re-establishing a viable population of at least 50 bears in the central Alps was proposed by the Adamello Brenta National Park administration, in cooperation with the Province of Trento. A feasibility study was conducted in 1998 by the Italian National Wildlife Institute which analyzed: causes of population decrease, habitat suitability, cost of the project, potential impact of bears to human activities, and attitude of residents toward bears. A survey on the attitude of the local population towards the brown bear, carried out through 1,500 telephone interviews, indicated a positive opinion by 75% of the residents; which increased to over 80% when the provision was included that bears will be constantly monitored, and that problem individuals will be removed or destroyed. As a result, an emergency team has been created, trained rangers to aversion and trapping techniques. The feasibility study indicated that the translocation had good probabilities to be successful in the medium to long term. In the central Alps there are still about 1700 km² of suitable habitat for the bear, that can sustain a population of about 50 animals. The predicted cost of the project is high, but it is considered acceptable by the administrations funding the translocation, and funds for damage prevention and compensation have also been approved.

On the basis of the positive results of the feasibility study, the project was approved by the Italian Ministry of Environments and by all relevant authorities. The reintroduction is partly funded by CINEF through a European LIFE program, and is carried out in cooperation with the National Wildlife Institute and with the authorities of Slovenia, where bears are captured.

The reintroduction, coordinated by Andrea Mussoni, started in 1999. Other members of the Italian team are veterinarians Edoardo Lattuada and Cristina Fraquelli, and park ranger Alberto Aprili. Captures in the Medved-Kocjave Reserve of Slovenia were organized by the Slovenian Forest Service and coordinated by Marko Janko. The bears receive, transport and release of the bears followed four priorities: operator safety, animal health, government directives, and radio-collared ear tag installation.

In 1999, a male (Marun, 3.5 years old, 99 kg) was trapped on May 26 and a female was trapped four days later (Kika, 3 years, 55 kg). Each bear was transported by air conditioned van to the central Alps immediately after capture, a trip of about 12 hours. The accompanying veterinarian used a video system installed in the van to constantly monitor each animal. In the first year after release, using eight people in the field daily, the two bears were located twice a day by radio-telemetry. They moved less than expected and did not cause any damage to livestock or bee-hives. The female moved in an area of about 19,000 hectares, while the male, after several months of limited activity, last December started increasing his activity, first moving in a valley about 35 km from his previous home range, and then going farther westward.

On the basis of the encouraging results of the first year, we decided to release four more bears (2 males, 2 females) in 2000, last May Danza (female, about 100 kg. 3.5 years old), Joe (male, 180 kg. 5 years old), Irm (female, 113 kg. 5 years old) and another male (140 kg, 5.6 years old) were captured in Slovenia, each was equipped with a radio-collared and two ear transmitters, and transported to Italy under the supervision of a veterinarian. After release, Danza traveled around the area, but came back to the release vicinity after a few weeks. Joe and Irm have been associated for more than two years.

We hope to translocate another female this year. Slovenian data suggests that females may already be pregnant in May. We must wait until next year to know if Danza or Irm are pregnant.

By 2002, we plan to release at least four more bears, arriving at a minimum of nine animals (6 females, 3 males). The goal is for the population to increase, through natural reproduction of the released animals over the next 20 to 50 years, to a total of 50 animals in the Central Alps.

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