New Hope 140 Years after Extirpation of Brown Bears in Białowieża Forest, Poland–Belarus

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Brown bears (*Ursus arctos*) were extirpated in the Białowieża Forest (nowadays straddling eastern Poland and western Belarus) at the end of the 19th century. The last resident bear was killed in 1879 —140 years ago.

In 1937, the decision was made to reintroduce bears in Białowieża Forest for conservation purposes. It represented the first reintroduction program of a large carnivore in the world (Samojlik et al. 2018). That winter, the bear “Lola” gave birth to 2 cubs in a special cage placed in Białowieża National Park, in the heart of the forest. These cubs were allowed to gradually go into the wild by themselves, without contact with humans. Both managed to survive. At that time, the restocking via the release of captive animals was the only option (now, wild animals are captured and translocated to the area of reintroduction). At the end of 1939, when Soviet troops occupied Białowieża Forest, Lola was freed from her cage, and other captive bears were also released. The outbreak of World War II spoiled what might have been a successful reintroduction project. Reproduction in the wild (records of young animals or family groups) was documented for 8 years and bear presence for 13 (Samojlik et al. 2018).

Since 1950, bears have been recorded occasionally in Białowieża Forest, which since World War II is shared between Poland and Belarus. In 1963, bear tracks were observed in the Belarusian area (Buchalczyk 1980) and in 2003 a bear was observed in the “Wild Swamp” area in Belarus. In June 2010, a hunter reportedly saw a bear in the Polish side of the Forest. For that reason, the management plan for the brown bear in Poland, still not implemented, recommended to include the Podlasie region in the monitoring program (Selva et al. 2011).

This spring 2019, a bear and its signs have been observed on repeated occasions on both sides of the border. In the beginning of June the bear and its tracks were observed in the Belarusian side, and in mid-June presumably the same animal was seen and camera trapped in the Polish side, still very close to the border. His signs were observed back in the Belarusian part of Białowieża Forest a few days later and then never again.

In 2005, an estimated 80 - 100 bears resided in Belarus, with their range restricted to the northern and east-central parts of the country (Sidorovich 2006). Recently, bears seem to have recolonized Naliboki Forest, west of Minsk (capital and largest city in Belarus). Since 2011 they have become residents in this area and their numbers seem to be increasing (www.sidorovich.blog). This forest is about 170 km from Białowieża Forest, so it is not unexpected that occasional bears would make this trek, and eventually some should remain, as Białowieża Forest offers very good habitat for bears (Fernández et al. 2012). In 2012, an attempt to reintroduce bears in the Belarusian side of the Białowieża Forest was abandoned. This was a sensible decision, as bears
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have shown they can naturally come back.

It is not strange that large carnivores would suddenly appear in places where they have been absent for years. They can travel long distances, even in heavily humanized landscapes (Bartón et al. 2019). For example, the bear “Iwo” (5-year old male) moved from Tatra Mountains in Poland to the Gorgany Mountains in Ukraine, crossing Slovakia twice and visiting Hungary. He traveled more than 3,500 km, crossing roads and other barriers, during the 2-year period of GPS tracking. The farthest distance between 2 locations in his trip was 360 km. Unfortunately, long-distance dispersers have a high likelihood of being killed before they can reproduce and genetically “connect” different populations or start new ones (Bartón et al. 2019).

Bears are recolonizing areas where they used to be present decades or centuries ago all across Europe (Chapron et al. 2014). This year has been particularly rich in such records. For the first time since 1843, Portuguese authorities have confirmed the presence of a bear (www.wilder.pt). A dispersing bear was observed in spring for a week in Montesinho Natural Park, northeastern Portugal, probably coming from the Cantabrian Mountains. In the Czech Republic, a female bear is still wandering around the Beskydy Mountains since she arrived in autumn 2018, probably from occupied bear range in the western Carpathians (www.carpathianbear.pl). This spring, collaborating Czech and Polish bear teams attached a GPS collar to her. Such events are excellent opportunities to foster transboundary cooperation. Due to the high conservation value of long-distance dispersers, measures to avoid accidental shooting in recolonization areas could be taken (e.g., banning hunting temporarily), as was done in Hungary when “Iwo” was passing through there.

The bears appearing in northeast Poland, Portugal, and the Czech Republic have all caused damage to unprotected beehives. A prompt reaction from authorities is vital to mitigate conflicts; damage should be quickly compensated and people should get support to protect their apiaries. People not used to coexisting with bears should be informed about how to behave during encounters. It is important to keep calm, follow basic rules and never feed bears (www.carpathianbear.pl). Arrivals of dispersing individuals should be a sign for responsible institutions to take the appropriate steps for proper management of waste and to start implementing methods of damage prevention.

If the bear population in Belarus keeps increasing, and the connectivity of the landscape is not worsened by road and infrastructure expansion, bears should hopefully settle in Białowieża Forest. This will be very good news for the ecosystem that will see restored functions and interactions. For the bears, which now mostly inhabit mountain refuges away from human settlements, this would allow use of a lowland area. And for humans, this is a good opportunity to learn how to share the landscape with bears and enjoy them. Białowieża Forest has been an historic reference in conservation, and could be an example to follow in this respect as well.

Literature Cited


