

BROWN BEARS IN AUSTRIA
10 Years of Conservation and Actions for the Future

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INHALT

	Seite
SUMMARY	5
1 INTRODUCTION	6
2 A “SHORT” HISTORY OF BEARS IN AUSTRIA	7
2.1 The Ötscher Bear – Corn Telemetry and Rnergy Drinks	8
3 HOW EVERYTHING STARTED	9
4 THE REINTRODUCTION PROJECT	10
4.1 Chronology.....	10
4.2 The Early Years, 1989-1993	11
4.2.1 Central Austria	11
4.2.2 Southern Austria	12
4.3 Mira’s Orphans.....	13
4.4 1994 – The Year of Change	14
4.4.1 Central Austria	14
4.4.2 Southern Austria	15
4.5 Nurmi Changed Everything	15
5 THE LIFE YEARS 1995-1998	17
5.1.1 Central Austria	18
5.1.2 Southern Austria	19
6 THE MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR BROWN BEARS IN AUSTRIA (Summary by Arbeitsgemeinschaft Braunbär LIFE)	20
6.1 Advocates and the Bear <u>E</u> mergency <u>T</u> eam (ET)	21
7 SOME ASPECTS OF BEAR ECOLOGY IN AUSTRIA	22
7.1 Home Range of Released Bears	22
7.2 Damages.....	22
7.3 Scat Analysis.....	24
8 BROWN BEAR CONSERVATION ON A PAN-EUROPEAN LEVEL	25
8.1 The Large Carnivore Initiative for Europe (LCIE) (summary by W. Pratesi Urquhart, LCIE Co-ordinator).....	25
8.2 The European Brown Bear Action Plan – A Summary	26

8.3	Austria and the Action Plan	27
8.3.1	Actions Regarding Species Conservation	27
8.3.2	Actions Regarding Habitat Protection	29
8.3.3	Actions Regarding Conflicts with Humans.....	30
8.3.4	Actions Regarding Nuisance Bears.....	32
8.3.5	Actions Regarding Public Involvement in Brown Bear Management	33
8.3.6	Actions Concerning Public Awareness, Education and Information	34
8.3.7	Actions Regarding Research and Monitoring	35
9	BROWN BEARS IN AUSTRIA – QUO VADIS?	36
10	ACKNOWLEDGEMENT.....	37
11	LITERATURE	38
	ILLUSTRATIONS.....	39

SUMMARY

The present report of the Federal Environment Agency – Austria provides a detailed account of the bear's return to Austria. Beginning with a stray migrant from Slovenia in 1972, the Austrian bear project has evolved into an important conservation program. Ten years ago, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF Austria) released the first of three bears in the Northern Limestone Alps of Austria. This event marked the start of the reintroduction project and the commencement of the Austrian bear project.

Throughout the last ten years the bear project has gone through various phases and changes:

- The reintroduction project from 1989 to 1993.
- The “trouble year” 1994.
- The LIFE program from 1995 to 1998
- The conservation program according to the guidelines of the management plan.

There were several activities that had to be carried out in order to prepare for the brown bear's natural resettlement of the Eastern Alps: an insurance company had to be found that was willing to compensate for the damages caused by bears; scientific data concerning brown bears in the Alps needed to be collected; and ways had to be found to gain the acceptance of the groups which opposed the project. It took some time but by 1989 Austria was ready to commence its bear project.

In the next four years the bear project would encounter some problems but nothing would compare to the “trouble year” of 1994. The amount of damages caused by bears reached a height never seen before. It was not just the high number of damages that were worrisome it was also the behaviour of the “nuisance” bears as these animals were approaching occupied houses; thus, the public became nervous and their attitude towards the bears changed drastically. WWF had to cancel the reintroduction program and develop new methods to conserve the brown bear population of Austria.

The LIFE program was the next phase in the bear project. The main activities of this program were: development of a management plan; creation of a large scale public awareness program; foundation and training of a bear emergency team; reduction of damage caused by bears; and improvement of international co-operation. The funding from the European Union LIFE program made the development of these activities possible.

After the LIFE program was finished the conservation of brown bears continued due to a co-operation between: the governments (Federal and Provincial); the Ministry of Environment; the Hunter's Association; the Federal Environmental Agency; and WWF Austria. This co-operation secured a nation-wide homogeneous process for bear conservation. There have been financial limitations on the bear project since the end of the LIFE program, however the project has benefited in other ways, such as the implementation of the management plan which was a very important step for bear conservation in Austria.

A Large Carnivore Initiative for Europe was launched in 1995 and WWF Austria was involved in the campaign from the start. This initiative produced an “Action Plan for the Conservation of the Brown Bear”, which identified topics and actions necessary to the survival and protection of the brown bear specific to the countries involved in the initiative. It is hoped that the creation of this initiative will encourage political co-operation on an international level as it has already helped develop strong international relationships between scientists.

There is a good chance that the population of brown bears in Austria can reach a secure level because they have a high reproductive rate and they tend to move across small distances. However, the behaviour of bears has changed due to their interaction with humans resulting in an increase of damages. Their most serious threat is the negative attitude that humans have towards bears. In order to ensure the survival of brown bears in Austria humans have to learn how to live in harmony with these endangered animals.