

# Census could be blessing or bane for Romania's bears

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Activists fear a rise in killings if the census finds the protected species is not that endangered. .

Romania will soon conduct a census of its protected brown bears using

DNA for the first time, with tensions raised between villagers fearing further attacks and conservationists warning against looser hunting laws.

Incidents with hungry bears descending into villages have sparked the ire of residents, in a country that has seen around 100 attacks over the last three years.

A hunting ban loophole that allows the shooting of so-called nuisance bears is already being abused, say activists, who fear a rise in killings if the census finds the species is more numerous than thought.

Sport hunting—which attracts amateurs from all over the world in search of a "trophy"—has been banned since 2016.

But in a recent controversial case, environmentalists accuse a Liechtenstein prince of killing a brown bear, named Arthur, on a March hunt in the Carpathian Mountains—using a permit to shoot a female bear seen as a nuisance to residents.

Activists say the 17-year-old bear was the country's largest, observed for years in the area.

Yet while the hunting ban loophole may be abused, residents are also fed up with rampant bear attacks—and want protection.

## **'Villagers frightened'**

Last month, a bear killed a shepherd and seriously injured another in the eastern part of the forested and mountainous Transylvania region.

"The situation has become untenable," Marton-Csaba Bacs, mayor of Bixad village in central Romania, told AFP.



Activists say the 17-year-old bear named Arthur was the country's largest, observed for years in the area.

"Every day, bears ransack orchards and attack sheep. They even entered the courtyard of the clinic... The villagers are frightened."

In neighbouring Harghita, Environment Minister Barna Tanczos's home county, bears were seen on a train station platform and even in a restaurant kitchen, according to the police, who were called upon 12 times in a single weekend last month to keep them away.

In this tense context, the results of the census may lead to a tug of war

between environmentalists and the defenders of hunting.

While activists welcome the census project, they fear it could lead to the hunting ban being lifted if authorities deem there are too many bears.

"Collecting samples and interpreting statistics in a transparent way is crucial," Cristian Papp of the World Wildlife Fund told AFP.

## **Analysing faeces**

Romania has long been known as having the largest population of brown bears in the EU, but just how many of the protected species actually roam the Carpathians remained unknown—until now.

In the coming months, 400 experts and volunteers will take samples of faeces and hair for DNA analysis, thanks to a EU fund of 11 million euros (\$13 million), Tanczos told AFP.

Authorities say figures from the 1990s of more than 6,000 brown bears spread across some 30 percent of the country, especially in the Carpathians, are underestimated.

Whereas the methodology used so far—counting tracks in mud and snow—is unreliable, the collection of droppings and hair will make it possible to create a database of samples, each one duly stamped with a barcode, according to the minister.

The procedure can provide a wealth of information, including an animal's sex and family ties, says Robin Rigg, president of the Slovak Wildlife Society, who has used the same methodology to count wolves.



The census project also entails the creation of a bear sanctuary.

### **'Massacre being prepared'**

By casting a wide net, the number of samples "should be about three times bigger than the expected animal population," said Djuro Huber, a professor at the University of Zagreb.

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Last month, Bucharest adopted a decree giving local authorities the right to permit nuisance bear shootings, speeding up a laborious process that

could take weeks.

Now, in a matter of hours, aggressive bears could become a legal target—a move widely condemned by activists.

"A massacre is being prepared against these often starving animals, which are victims of logging, the destruction of their habitat and an attempt at demonisation by groups of hunters," the Brigitte Bardot Foundation said in a letter to Romania's president.

Tanczos has dismissed such accusations as "unfounded", saying that the first option to deal with nuisance animals will always be their relocation, though he admits human-bear relations "have deteriorated".

"If the state does not intervene, there's a risk that desperate people will resort to illegal solutions to settle this conflict," he said.

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