

The drums of war are beating louder: Media coverage of brown bears in Romania

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Brown bear waiting on the roadside for food scraps (National Road 2D, Vrancea, Romania). Credit: Dr Silviu Chiriac (EPA Vrancea)

With more than 7,000 individuals populating the Carpathian Mountains and neighboring areas, Romania has the highest density of brown bears in Europe. As they often inhabit human-dominated landscapes, conflicts with people are not uncommon.

Researchers from the University of Bucharest and Chelonia Romania explored how Romanian [media](#) depict human-bear interactions, publishing their study in *Nature Conservation*.

"The media play an influential role in how the public perceives [brown bears](#), thus, it can promote human-wildlife coexistence or exacerbate future conflicts," they say.

The study found that [news stories](#) related to brown bears became common in Romanian media only after 2016, following the instatement of a provisional one-year ban on culling, and increased abruptly in 2021 following the whistleblowing of an alleged trophy hunting event.

The majority of reports were about human-bear interaction, hunting, and poaching, offering little context and information on how to avoid conflicts. Articles on the ecology and biology of brown bears were rare, which indicates less consideration of the ecological significance and the impact of human activities on their conservation status.

The attitude towards brown bears, perceived from the studied articles was predominantly negative (53%; 380 articles). In these articles, the authors used phrases such as: "At any moment the people can find themselves in front of a hungry bear;" "Beyond the horror they live with every day, they have lost their patience and trust in the authorities;" and "People are afraid of the worst."



Rescuing a bear trapped in wire-snare in an orchard (Vrancea, Romania). Credit: Dr Silviu Chiriac (EPA Vrancea)

Even when reporting sightings of bears near populated areas and encounters with no casualties, Romanian media promoted a negative image of bears to their readership. "Focusing on alarming messages without offering evidence or advice can increase fear and undermine efforts to protect the species and the welfare of society," the researchers said.

Importantly, the team found that media did not consult wildlife and conservation biologists when reporting on human-bear interactions or bear hunting and poaching events. "This can be because the experts are reluctant to be part of the debate, or because the media may not be

interested in bringing more scientific context to their reports," they reason.

"In conclusion, increasing the frequency of reporting interaction events with alarming messages can only lower the level of tolerance for wildlife and negatively influence [political decisions](#) regarding the management of the brown bear population."

The researchers call for publishing detailed and evidence-informed news as a means to educate people to avoid [conflict](#) and facilitate the implementation of effective wildlife [conservation](#) and management strategies.

"Evidence-informed news can help authorities better understand conflicts and create bottom-up pathways toward an optimistic future for brown bears and Romanian society," they conclude.

More information: Andra Claudia Neagu et al, The drums of war are beating louder: Media coverage of brown bears in Romania, *Nature Conservation* (2022). [DOI: 10.3897/natureconservation.50.86019](https://doi.org/10.3897/natureconservation.50.86019)

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