

Activists cheer record baby prospects for Pyrenees bears

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Newborn bears next to their mother at the Aran Park in the Spanish Pyrenees village of Bossost in 2016

The number of bears in the Pyrenees mountains separating France and Spain rose to 64 last year, including 16 cubs, animal rights activists said Thursday, heralding the strong revival of a population that had been threatened with extinction.

"It's a record—never before have nine litters been detected in the Pyrenees since we started studying the bear [population](#)," the Pays de l'Ours (Bear Country) and Adet et Ferus associations said.

In the early 20th century around 150 [brown bears](#) roamed the French Pyrenees along the Spanish border, but by the 1990s they had nearly all been killed by hunters.

France began reintroducing them in 1996, with two females, Ziva and Melba, first taking up residence in the Pyrenees, followed a year later by a male.

Twenty-five years later they have gone forth and multiplied—to the dismay of sheep farmers particularly, who say the predators are devastating their flocks.

The 64 bears counted by the animal rights groups and the French Biodiversity Office (OFB) in 2020 was up from 58 in 2019.

Their toehold in the mountains is not yet secure—around 50 actively reproducing bears, with sufficient genetic diversity, are needed for the population to be self-sustaining, the associations said.

That is the goal of the French government's 10-year bear plan for 2028, though the government has yet to replace three bears killed last year, at least two of them by gunshot.

Farmers have made no secret of their anger at the re-introduction effort.

They have blamed bears for the losses of hundreds of sheep, some of whom jumped off cliffs to their death to avoid attack, and complained that compensation programmes have not offset their losses.

Fierce protests have been held, often with support of local officials, since the government resumed introductions of brown bears from Slovenia in 2018.

Proponents say however that the threat to livestock is easing, with just 369 attacks attributed to bears last year and 636 [animals](#) killed or injured, compared with nearly twice that number (1,200) in 2019.

"The progress has been notable, and it proves the feasibility of this project, but further efforts are needed," the associations said.

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