

LIFE 05 NAT/RO/000170

Enhancing the protection system of large carnivores in Vrancea County

Conservation Plan for the after-LIFE period



Focsani, 2010

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Project history and situation analysis

Vrancea County, located at meeting point of three Romanian provinces, includes in its limits mountainous, (Vrancea Mountains), hills and plain habitats. The project site is located in Vrancea Mountains and Subcarpathians Curvature.

Vrancea Mountains and Subcarpathians acts as the second area populated by large carnivores (considering the density), being the host of 6,5% of the bears population in Romania, 5,5% of the European lynx population in Romania and 3,7% of the wolfs population in Romania. But these stable populations need protection because are located in an area where the pastorate is the most important economic activity.

Vrancea County is a region, from Romania, in which the nature preservation, mainly of the large carnivores, suffered one of the most dramatic evolutions from the surfaces under protection point of view. These surfaces were drastically reduced in 2000, threatening the habitats and species of a conservative interest existence.

In 2002, at the beginning of the LIFE Nature 8576 “*In situ conservation of large carnivore in Vrancea County*” project, it is possible to say that in Vrancea County the activities related to biodiversity conservation were inexistent. After the 2002 moment, an ample program for protection of large carnivores and subsequently of their habitats, which uses telemetry studies, an educational campaign, the establishment of some demonstrative areas for the night collars protection, the establishment of an ecological network of protected areas for the protection of large carnivores etc. The practical results of the project consists of the establishment of an ecological network of protected areas that to fulfill the local requirements of the large carnivores protection.

In addition, two smaller projects for the conservation of some protected areas were developed: Lacul Negru and Tisita, which aimed the establishment of a minimal infrastructure for visitors. The projects were coordinated by ADD Focul Viu and were funded by the Partnership Foundation from Miercurea Ciuc.

The necessity to strengthen the results obtained in the project was the basis for substantiation of a new application for finance in order to implement a LIFE project in the entire area of distribution of the three species of large carnivores in Vrancea County.

Thus, in 2005, the European Commission approved financing the LIFE Nature project “**Enhancing the protection system of large carnivores in Vrancea County**” (LIFE05 NAT/RO/000170). This project was implemented by the EPA VN in partnership with CCMESI – Bucharest University, County Council Vrancea, DS VN and ADD FV, in period 1 November 2005 – 30 November 2009

The aim of the project is to enhance the large carnivores protection system from Vrancea County and to correlate the local network for large carnivores protection with the European ecological network Natura 2000

Project objectives

- To include the protected areas belonging to the local network for large carnivores protection in the Natura 2000 system;

- To implement the management plans for the protected areas included in the local network for large carnivores protection in accordance with the Natura 2000 requirements and the forethoughts of the local plan for the large carnivores protection;
- To prevent the loss of the large carnivores population due to the direct or indirect poaching phenomenon and to prevent conflicts between large carnivores and local inhabitants;
- To raise awareness on the social-economic benefits that is generated by the inclusion of the protected areas in the Natura 2000 system.

Results

- An increased efficiency of the large carnivores protection activities through the inclusion in the Natura 2000 network of the protected areas from the local network for large carnivores protection;
- An increased management capacity of the protected areas that are part of the local network for the large carnivores protection by the establishment and implementation of management plans in accordance with the requirements of the Natura 2000 and the forethoughts of the local plan for large carnivores protection;
- Large carnivores population mortality control due to conflicts with local inhabitants through the establishment of the Animal Rescue Mobile Unit (ARMU) and Large Carnivores Rehabilitation and Monitoring Centre (LCRMC);
- Improving the protection system for sheepfolds, orchards and crops protection in habitats populated by large carnivores, by building an area which to demonstrate the efficiency of the modern protection systems
- Implementation of a campaign for raising awareness on large carnivores vulnerability and on the social-economic and conservation benefits of the Natura 2000 in Vrancea County

At the time of the project beginning there were some serious threats jeopardizing large carnivores protection system created in 2002-2005. Analysis of threats identified at the beginning of the project, compared to the actions implemented and obtained results can be seen in the following tables.

Threats identified at the beginning of the project	Actions implemented and results achieved at the end of the project
<p>The lack of scientific information necessary for the establishment of some protected areas belonging to the Natura 2000 network</p> <p>The implementation of the Natura 2000 network in Romania, and consequently in Vrancea County, has as main obstacle the lack of scientific studies that basing on to be able to select the sites that will be included in the network. Vrancea County is a very important area from the biodiversity point of view, with e new structure of protected areas. Unfortunately, these are not evaluated singularly, the existing evaluation considering only the habitats requirements of the large carnivores. Thus, at the moment, there is no scientific study for each protected area that would make possible the integration into the Natura 2000 network</p>	<p>The establishment of the Standard Data Forms for the proposals on the establishment of Natura 2000 sites and the submission to the competent authorities</p> <p>Simultaneously with obtaining of some scientific information as a result of implementing on field monitoring activities of large carnivores, there were scientifically basis the standard forms required to draw up official documentation for the proposing for integration the local network for protection of large carnivores into the European ecological network Natura 2000.</p> <p>The Ministry of Environmental officially approved through Disposition no. 776 from 05.05.2007 for declaring the communitarian interest sites as integrate part of European ecological network Natura 2000 in Romania, all proposed sites of the project. Now, there are approved at national level Standard Data Form, 8 sites having a total surface of 40 102, 71 ha, placing Vrancea County in the top of 10 counties in Romania as surfaces of protected areas.</p> <p>Validation of the entire surface of the Putna-Vrancea Natural Park, as key element of local Ecological Network for large carnivore's protection, was an element which confirms once again scientific results obtained through project implementing LIFE02NAT/RO/8576 and LIFE05NAT/RO/000170. Through declaring these surfaces as Natura 2000 sites it was certified once again the chances that large carnivore species to benefit of a viable protection system</p>
<p>The low capacity of administration of the local network for large carnivores protection and of the future Natura 2000 sites.</p> <p>The design of the local network for large carnivores protection is an innovation in approaching the biodiversity conservation in Romania. This network, which includes under protection very important surfaces, is administrated bases on the local management plan for large carnivores. The misunderstandings of the management implications, and also the management of the protected areas without considering the needs for protection of target species and habitats can lead to a diminution of the network efficiency. Also, the protected areas within the local network for large carnivores protection are highly susceptible to become Natura 2000 sites, in this case the information on the management way being totally inexistent.</p>	<p>The establishment of management plans for the existing protected areas included in the local network for large carnivores protection (including the Putna-Vrancea Natural Park), in accordance with the local management plan of the large carnivores and the standards from the Habitats Directive</p> <p>In order to strengthen the protection system, it was necessary to develop individual plans for each protected area in part (including Putna-Vrancea Natural Park). These plans integrates the principles presented in the local management plan for large carnivores, the principles of the Habitats Directive and of the Guidelines for Population Level Management Plans for Large Carnivores, prepared by Large Carnivore Initiative for Europe.</p> <p>All management plans for Natura 2000 sites within the local network for large carnivores protection have been made in working groups involving local stakeholders and were subjected to numerous lines of public debate.</p> <p>The management plans of the 8 pSCI belonging to local network for large carnivore's protection were finalized in July 2008, and represents at present working tools of the protected areas managers.</p>

The lack of a reaction unit at regional level in the cases in which injured animals are found

With the LIFE02/NAT/RO/8576 project “*In situ* conservation of large carnivores from Vrancea County”, it was developed intense activities of large carnivores monitoring and the tranquillization of more than 40 wild animals, 23 of which were large carnivores. An emergency situation appeared in the field as the project team was solicited for the release of poached snare-caught animals. Thus, 8 bears were released, being snare-caught in several ways: by their neck, trunk or foot. At the moment, an intervention unit does not exist, being necessary to dispose off technical and human resources from the monitoring activities. The equipment was improper for this kind of interventions because we were in impossibility to give medical care to injured animals. This type of intervention must be correlated with the wounded animal surveillance and releasing, as can possibly to get infected.

Establishing the intervention unit and a rehabilitation centre at regional level for injured animals in poaching activities (mainly large carnivores)

The Intervention Unit is composed by **Animal Rescue Mobile Unit (ARMU)** and **Large Carnivores Monitoring and Rehabilitation Center (LCRMC)**. LCRMC represents a rehabilitated building placed in Lepsa Funicular point, implying the existence of spaces for granting medical care and temporarily held and represent base for animal shelter and field work for the team. The second component is the ARMU, materialized in the utility vehicle, according to veterinary ambulance. Simultaneously with the phase of building rehabilitation and construction of holding and animal treatment spaces, were carried out steps for procurement of materials and medical equipment specific to ARMU and LCMRC. For assuring the efficiency of this protection system for wild animals, there have been conceived and produced 500 posters and 5000 leaflets, in order to promote this unit in the eastern part of Romania.

During the progress of the project LIFE 05NAT/RO/000170 “*Enhancing the protection system of carnivore in Vrancea County*”, between November 2005 and November 2009, Animal Rescue Mobile Unit has been engaged in specific actions of intervention to:

- save from poachers snares of **18 specimens of the species *Ursus arctos***
- relocation in natural habitats of **2 juvenile bear specimens**
- capture in order to relocation of **a habituated bear**
- confiscation from illegal owners and subsequent placement of **4 orphan bear cubs** at Rehabilitation Center of Orphan Bears in Balan/Harghita County
- acquisition from illegal owners and placing in a rehabilitation program of **3 specimens of the species *Capreolus capreolus***, and **2 specimens of the species *Cervus elaphus***

The lack of understanding about responsibilities and advantages of the Natura 2000 sites of the local authorities, landowners, local communities and tourists

The project implementation area benefits now of a legal protection system, very well trigged. Following the LIFE 8576 project, a natural park appeared in the maximal density area. The main form of propriety is private, and the main economic activities are wood exploitation, livestock growth and orchards. The local network for large carnivores protection, but also the Natura 2000 sites, will induce a change in the management practices, a change that should not be perceived only as a constraint.

Implementing of an awareness campaign for:

- promoting the protected areas network for large carnivores conservation
- preventing poaching and human-large carnivores conflicts
- Promoting the social and economic benefits of implementing the Natura 2000 network and local network for Large Carnivores protection
- promoting the concepts of large carnivores conservation and Natural 2000 in the children’s environment

Awareness campaigns have been implemented based on a strategy resulted from the analysis of target groups perception on large carnivores and ecological network of protected areas. Numerous published and disseminated informational materials, and meetings organized with local stakeholders helped people to change their negative attitudes towards the protection of

	wolves, bears and lynxes in Vrancea County. In the same context we can now say that much of the local people understood the functioning of the Natura 2000 network and have accepted that sustainable development of mountain village area can only be achieved through the integration of nature conservation needs in policy for local development.
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<p>Conflicts with the local inhabitants due to the attacks over the orchards, crops and night collars.</p> <p>The electric fences protection systems used for the night collars generated very positive results. At the demonstrative night collars the losses being almost eliminated. In this way, the wolf poaching cases were reduced to the level that it makes imperceptible by our intensive monitoring and surveillance activities. The action must be continued for a wider dissemination of these results. Also clearly demonstrated was the fact that the poaching appears as a “solution” to wild boars and bears attacks over the orchards and cultivations. The snares installed for wild boars are frequently causing injures to bears and deer’s. The development of the protection system to orchards and cultivations appears as a necessity for an increase in the efficiency of the local network for large carnivores protection.</p>	<p>Implementing the sheepfolds’ electrical protection system and extending it to orchards and crops</p> <p>High density of specimens of wolf, bear, lynx in the project area and the interpenetration of natural habitats with those used by locals for livestock or crops, created a permanent source of conflict. Overlapped with the lack of damage compensation systems, created a negative attitude of locals towards large carnivores, which often is finalized with killing the problem specimens.</p> <p>The solution promoted and implemented specifically on field in this project was to protect in demonstrative purpose some of the most frequently attacked sheepfolds and crops, showing in this way that a good protection system can minimize damage with low-cost in both sides.</p> <p>Thus, in this LIFE project it was provided annual operation of the 6electric fences at sheepfolds from localities Barsesti and Vintileasca and 6 electric fences for orchards and crops in Soveja, Vidra and Barsesti areas. In total, in the 4 years of project implementation, there were installed 36 electric fencing systems in areas of maximum conflict.</p> <p>At the end, it was made a cost-benefit analysis, which was communicated to livestock farmers and owners of crops, in order to promote the system efficiency.</p>
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Based on the analysis of existing threats in early of 2005 and comparing these with the present situation, we could make a brief SWOT analysis.

This highlights strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities of the present system for protection of large carnivores in Vrancea County. We have to say that threats are generated mainly at national level because of inability of the state to ensure funding activities of protected areas management, conservation of species and habitats of communitarian interest. Another important threat derives from the failure to pay compensation for damage caused by large carnivores to livestock or crops. Basically, although the legal system exists, it has no necessary levers for real operation. In this context our effort of changing local attitudes is more difficult.

In terms of opportunities designed to strengthen the system of large carnivores protection, we must point out that beginning with 2010, EPA is implementing in the Eastern Carpathians, Vrancea, a new project funded in the LIFE + framework.

This project (LIFE08NAT/RO/000500), implemented in partnership with EPA Covasna, EPA Harghita and two local NGOs, will ensure the functioning of the structures created through LIFE projects implemented during 2002-2009, and will ensure the maintenance of favorable conservation status of large carnivores within this region.

The **Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development** will insure the support for implementing the actions proposed as part of the proposal submitted by the Vrancea Environmental Protection Agency, with the goal of conserving the most representative sample of brown bear (*Ursus arctos*) population of Romania, by implementing the best practices and demonstrative actions in the Central-Eastern part of the Eastern Carpathians.

Considering as opportune the demonstrative application of the best practices necessary for conserving viable populations of this prior specie, the **Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development**, will support the application of the results and methods implemented within this project at national level in the habitats populated by brown bears through adopting the methodology, guides and studies achieved in the project.

The successful implementation of such activities will encourage the use of the conservation methods demonstrated in the project in other similar areas and will help improving the ecological coherence of the Natura 2000 network. Therefore, the Romanian Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development is fully supporting the coordinating and associated beneficiaries in the implementation of this project in Romania.

The project's implementation area is overlapping the Central and South Eastern surface of the Eastern Carpathians, remarkable by the presence of favorable habitats for large carnivores, which comprehends the core of maximal concentration in Romania of *Ursus arctos* population. The region developed generally on the North-West and South-East line, corresponds from administrative point of view with the mountain area of Vrancea, Covasna and Harghita counties.

The whole surface of these 3 counties which overlap the project's site is 1.519.603 hectares (15.196 square km's). On this surface approximately 550.000 hectares (5500 sq. km's) are covered by forests and represents bear habitats. Estimations realized by the local wildlife management units on the whole region of the project indicates the size of the bear population at approximately 2300 individuals.

SWOT analysis

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Very good stage of large carnivores conservation• Very good stage of conservation for species characteristic habitats• Local network for large carnivores protection, with administrators valid for 6 of the 8 sites• Integrating local network of large carnivores protection in the European ecological network Natura 2000• Existence of management plans for all protected areas integrated into the Natura 2000 network• Existing information infrastructure• Personnel involved in sites administration and management of large carnivores has vast experience in domain• The conflicts were reduced through using modern systems for protection of crops and orchards• There is a rapid intervention unit having specialized equipment and personnel that can intervene to save exemplars of poached large carnivores• There is a modern center for rehabilitation and monitoring of large carnivores• Very good public image of Life projects implemented locally to conserve large carnivores	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Overall problematic operation of national protected areas' policies• Financial non-involvement of Romanian state in nature conservation and management of protected areas• Large fluctuations in the forest property• Legislation in management of wild fauna incompatible with the Habitats Directive• Failure to correctly apply notwithstanding the protection status afforded by the Habitats Directive• Poaching rate is still high outside Vrancea County• No compensation for damage produced by large carnivores to crops and livestock• No compensation for restrictions imposed on landowners in certain areas of Natura 2000 sites• Failure to apply minimum conservation measures for large carnivores in neighboring counties• Assessment of large carnivore populations is achieved at national level only based on a single method, the results being more than uncertain• Increasing the number of cases with habituated bears and bear cubs remained orphans
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Finalization of the NATURA network in the Vrancea County• Increased funding opportunities through EU funds• Financing by the European Commission of a new LIFE + Nature project for the conservation of large carnivores (LIFE08NAT000500);• Extend the brown bear conservation actions in the Eastern Carpathians simultaneously with maintaining the intervention structures created by previous LIFE projects• Extrapolation of experience accumulated by current staff to other partners at national level, and creating the premises for the implementation at national level of the evaluation methodologies applied in Vrancea• Involvement of two local NGOs increase the chances of attracting private funds;• Involvement in the large carnivores conservation of minority nationalities (Hungarians ethnic) will increase the chances of local acceptance of conservation measures of large carnivores and their habitats• Increased national media attention towards the problem of solving conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Abolition of environmental public structures following the financial crisis and the policies based on economic interests• Possible abandonment of the protected areas policy agenda• Lack of funds for compensatory payments• Uncontrolled growth of economic activities• Expansion of already existent manmade threats (poisoned baits, poaching, illegal hunting etc)• Fragmentation of habitats used by large carnivores because of infrastructure• Increasing conflict with the local population due to large carnivores population growth or expansion of human activities in natural habitats• Maintaining at national level of some negative images of large carnivores

Financing sources

EAFRD - European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development

SOP Env, axis 4 - Romanian Sectoral Operational Programme for Environment - *“Implementation of adequate management systems for nature protection”* actions aiming to conserve biological diversity, natural habitats, wild species of flora and fauna by assuring an efficient management of protected areas, including Natura 2000 sites

Romanian Sectoral Operational Programme for Environment (SOP Env.) for the programming period of 2001-2013, foreseen under the priority axis 4 *“Implementation of adequate management systems for nature protection”* actions aiming to conserve biological diversity, natural habitats, wild species of flora and fauna by assuring an efficient management of protected areas, including Natura 2000 sites.

SOP Env. Axis 4 finances activities for maintaining or improving the conservation status of some species only in protected areas or Natura 2000 sites. As exception are eligible other actions if:

The actions are implemented in strategically areas. Strategically area means: a small value area, but necessary for implementing other activities which will bring high benefits to the species in the protected areas.

Actions implemented in the protected area or in their neighborhood, having objectives the improving of conservation status of the species in that protected area (ex: actions controlling invasive species to reduce the pressures over the home species).

In the frame of SOP Env, axis 4, activities implemented outside a protected area are eligible only if a clear statement from the competent authority that those areas will be declared as protected areas after project end is provided. In our case the project’s area overlaps the administrative territory of 3 counties, being impossible to declare the whole targeted surface as protected area or Natura 2000 site.

National Program for Rural Development (NPRD).

This program is not designated for habitat and species conservation actions, but mostly for actions promoting and developing traditional activities, for improving the efficiency of agricultural activities and generally for rural development. Through this program are eligible costs for purchase of machines and other agriculture equipments such as electrical fences for farms. These must be purchased for self utility through several integrated projects.

In the present case the project’s goal is to place the electrical fences in problem areas, with demonstrative reason, without letting them forever to the farmers. The fences will be placed in different locations during the project’s implementing period, to encourage the farmers to use such fences for life stock protection in order to decrease the conflicts, that activity being an extension of LIFE05/NAT/RO/000170 project on the surface of Covasna and Harghita counties.

Actor responsible (actual or foreseen)

EPA VN – Environmental Protection Agency Vrancea - local environmental authority responsible for monitoring of species, habitats of communitarian interest and regulatory of activities in Natura 2000 sites

EPA CV - Environmental Protection Agency Covasna - local environmental authority responsible for monitoring of species, habitats of communitarian interest and regulatory of activities in Natura 2000 sites

EPA HR – Environmental Protection Agency Harghita - local environmental authority responsible for monitoring of species, habitats of communitarian interest and regulatory of activities in Natura 2000 sites

Ministry of Environment – national environmental authority responsible with large carnivores conservation and Management of Natura 2000 sites

ACDB – Association for Biological Diversity Conservation (local NGO-s), administrator of SCI Poiana Muntiorul

ACNV – Association for Conservation of Nature Value (local NGO-s)

AOV – OS Naruja – Association of Obst from Vrancea of the Valea Putnei – administrator of SCI Cascada Misina, Caldarele Zabalei, Lacul Negru, Sindrilita

Adm PNPV – Administration of Putna – Vrancea Natural Park

DS Vrancea, Covasna, Harghita – Forestry Departments of Vrancea, Covasna, Harghita – local institutions responsible with the management of forest habitat and hunting management funds

Action proposed	Period of implementing	Actor responsible (actual or foreseen)	Necessary amount	Possible Funding Sources
Applying the provisions of the management plans achieved for Natura 2000 sites from Ecological Network for Large carnivores Protection in Vrancea County	2010-2015	ACDB, AOV – OS Naruja, Adm PNPV, DS VN	200 000 Euro	EAFRD SOP Env, axis 4 National Budget Own Resources
Elaboration of an efficient method for evaluate the actual conservation status of large carnivores population in the Natura 2000 sites	2010 - 2013	EPA VN, EPA CV, EPA HR, Ministry of Environment	20 000 Euro	LIFE + National Budget Own Resources
Monitoring the conservation status of wolf, bear and lynx populations in Vrancea County	2010-2015	EPA VN, Ministry of Environment, DS VN	150 000 Euro	SOP Env, axis 4 National Budget Own Resources
Analyze of degradation and fragmentation level of the brown bear, wolf and lynx habitats	2010 - 2014	EPA HR, Ministry of Environment	30 000 Euro	LIFE + National Budget Own Resources
Demonstrative application of a set of methods for quantitative and qualitative evaluation of brown bear population levels in the areas administrated by game managers	2010 - 2013	EPA CV, Ministry of Environment, DS VN, HR, CV	100 000 Euro	LIFE + National Budget Own Resources
Analyze of bear damages at the level of the whole project's area in order to find out where protection systems must be implemented	2010 - 2011	ACDB with local authorities	15 000 Euro	LIFE + National Budget Own Resources
Implementing at the level of the whole project demonstrative live stock and crop protection systems using proper equipments and repellent materials	2010 - 2015	EPA VN, ACDB	80 000 Euro	LIFE + EAFRD/ Own Resources National Budget
Extending the action area of the Animal Rescue Mobile Unit (ARMU) at the level of the whole Eastern Carpathians and insuring of fast interventions for capturing, relocating and monitoring of problem individuals. The saving of some exemplars of poached and snare trapped bears and wolf in the range of the Eastern Carpathians.	2010 - 2015	EPA VN, Ministry of Environment	150 000 Euro	LIFE + National Budget Own Resources
Creation of an operative entity on the whole surface of the project, which will asses the existing risks and necessary measures in situations created by problem bears. The reducing the cases when the killing of some individuals is the only solution, by promoting of alternative measures and extending at national level the experience gathered in the frame of the project	2010 - 2014	EPA CV, Ministry of Environment	100 000 Euro	LIFE + National Budget Own Resources

Extending the receiving capacity of the existing Bear Cub Rehabilitation Center, and improving it's functionality in order to ensure the saving of all cases. The rehabilitation of all abandoned and orphan bear cubs.	2010 - 2015	ACNV	130 000 Euro	SOP Env, axis 4 National Budget Own Resources
Reducing of juvenile mortality caused by human disturbance, with the protection of dens in the birth and cub nursing periods	2010 - 2015	EPA VN, EPA CV, EPA HR, Ministry of Environment	100000 Euro	LIFE + National Budget Own Resources
Elaboration of a strategy for implementing public awareness campaigns based on surveys of how local inhabitants perceive the target specie and the Natura 2000 ecological network	2010 - 2013	EPA VN, EPA CV, EPA HR, Ministry of Environment	30 000 Euro	LIFE + National Budget Own Resources
Public awareness rising campaign for promoting Natura 2000 sites, the large carnivores conservation actions and the methods for reduce human-bear conflicts.	2010 - 2013	EPA VN, EPA CV, EPA HR, Ministry of Environment	20 000 Euro	LIFE + National Budget Own Resources
Public awareness rising campaign for the products of the local farmers and traditonal handcrafts as tool to improve coexistence with bears in the Natura 2000 sites.	2010 - 2013	ACDB, local public authorities	50 000 Euro	LIFE + National Budget Own Resources