

# Bestia non grata?

The EU Habitats Directive is calling for greater biodiversity, but Europe's conservation campaigners are finding that when it comes to the reintroduction of large carnivores and other wild animals maligned by local rural populations, emotions run deep. **Nick Kettles** tracks a beast of an issue



**F**rom Catalonia in the South, through the Ariège and Béarn, to the Basque country in the North, both locals and tourists are used to seeing Nationalist slogans daubed in white paint on Pyrenean mountain roads. But now a new clarion call is vying for their attention: *Non Ours* (no bears) and *Mort aux Ours* (death to the bears.)

The bears in question are (or were – see box, page 25) five Slovenian bears – one male and four females – released in 2006 after the last native female brown bear, Canelle, was shot by a hunter two years earlier. Her death in 2004 meant less than 20 bears remained in the entire 200-mile mountain range, and prompted the French government to pledge to double the population.

The slogan-painters in question are a group of local farmers who accuse the omnivorous bears of attacking livestock as an alternative

food source. They continue fiercely to campaign against further reintroductions. One anti-bear farmer told the Associated Press: 'This is shameful. War has been declared.'

The battle between the conservationists and farmers has not been pretty. Twelve pots of glass-laden honey, labelled *Caution: Anti-Bear Poison* were found by a hiker shortly after the first release. A pro-bear local mayor was taken hostage by protesters who laid waste to his village hall and later issued death threats against him.

One local professional who helped in the reintroduction of the animals has been physically threatened and had a dead sheep dumped on the doorstep of the family home. A local conservation group experienced the same.

But since the reintroduction of the bear, estimated figures of livestock killed only amount to a few hundred each year, which, out of more than half a million sheep region-

wide, amounts to less than 0.01 per cent.

A thorough public consultation was first undertaken and, under the terms of the reintroduction, farmers are well compensated for any losses. According to AVES (Association de Protection des Espèces Menacées), whenever a herder claims a lamb, kid or calf has been killed by a bear, the government gives him the benefit of the doubt and still pays the indemnity – even if the young animal might have been taken by a dog.

Farmers have been aided with funds to pay for shepherds and to purchase 'patous' – anti-bear guard dogs of the Great Pyrenees breed, which were used widely in the region before the demise of the bear at the beginning of the 20th century. Local pro-bear activists have even paid for helicopters to take farmers to altitudes where livestock is usually left unattended to graze in summer months (again, only since the demise of the bear).

## Bears as scapegoats

So, given this level of support, what exactly has drawn the ire of farmers so forcefully?

Sylvie Cardona, secretary general of AVES, believes farmers are sensitive because of the difficulty the industry is facing. 'French (sheep) farmers are in competition with farmers in other countries (like New Zealand). They have economic problems, and they're putting the blame on the bears.'

Although France receives more subsidies than any other EU state, the majority of these go to large cereal farms and agribusiness. With unemployment high, many French youths leave rural areas for more lucrative city jobs, leaving fewer people to take over the farms when older farmers die. It's true that since 1999, more than two million people have relocated to the countryside, but most are city people, and ex-pats from Holland, Germany and the UK looking for a slice of 'la vie tranquille'. All of which significantly undermines 'attachement au terroir' – the strong sense of belonging – that the rural population feels for the land.

It's not unusual for rural lobby groups, especially those under economic pressure, to exaggerate the threat of wildlife, whether native or reintroduced, and make them a scapegoat for other problems.

In the UK we hear the same high emotions from farmers who claim that badgers are spreading tuberculosis among cattle and destroying the industry. This in spite of research suggesting the main vector of bovine TB is cattle infecting cattle – and possibly infecting badgers too.

When the beaver's reintroduction to the Highlands was proposed some years ago, Robin Malcolm, who owns a 5,000-acre estate adjacent to one of the proposed trial sites said: 'Beavers are a destructive pest and that's why they were killed 400 years ago. They are destructive to agriculture, forestry, and fisheries. This is... the imposition of an alien species.'

Among farmers facing the threat of illegally released wild boar on the edge of Dartmoor, one claimed: 'If we don't get these pigs sorted out when we start lambing it could be devastating. With the amount of lambs we would lose there would be no income at all.'

The same story is repeated in Scotland, where multi-millionaire Paul Lister, owner of the Alladale estate in the Highlands, wants to reintroduce ancient British animals including grey wolves, boar, brown bears, lynx, beaver

and elk into an enclosed 're-wilding' reserve. 'McSerengeti', as it has been nicknamed, will eventually spread over 250 square kilometres – bigger than the city of Glasgow.

In spite of reassurances that fences will be secure, the animals tagged and compensation paid for livestock losses, as well as that the estate will be an economic force for good in the local community, the local response has been mixed.

At an early public meeting a picture of a man who had been mauled by a bear was passed around. Naturally, the National Farmers Union fears the possibility of wolves attacking sheep. Locals and the Ramblers' Association Scotland have also raised concerns about the risk to the public.

## Atavistic fears

Considering the infinitesimally small numbers of livestock lost in the Pyrenees where there are no enclosures, and how small the risk of an attack on a human is – you're more likely to be killed by a domestic dog than a wolf, and 374 times more likely to be killed by lightning than by a bear – it's reasonable to wonder where else these fears come from. Obviously change doesn't come easily to people who have become used to a particular way of life over long periods of time, but local history, myth and folklore certainly plays a part.

In the 19th century, the Pyrenees was the home of bear-taming. The 'montreur d'ours' was a primary cause of the bear population's decline, because hunters would kill the mothers in order to get their cubs.

The Pyrenees is also rich in bear folklore, evoking a time when 'wild beasts' were more numerous and attacked the herds and their shepherds. One village festival near Perpignan celebrates the rescue of a young maiden kidnapped by a bear, and shaving its fur returns it to a more human form. It has been a long time since the local population lived at peace with the bear.

John Linnell of the Large Carnivore Initiative for Europe (LCIE) says in many cases carnivores can become symbolic of a range of wider conflicts, for example those between urban and rural, or traditional and modern, values. When two Slovenian bears were reintroduced to the Pyrenean Ariège region in the 1990s, they came to symbolise the deep distrust with which the fiercely independent 'Ariègeois', like many in the south-west, view any scheme, however well-intentioned, imposed by the government in Paris.

It doesn't help, too, that we use animals, including the bear, as metaphors to describe a range of moral positions and experiences in everyday speech. For example: 'Investors, mauled by a bear market, come clawing after their brokers.' As Adrian Franklin, author of *Animals and Modern Cultures*, points out, other metaphoric terms commonly used to describe unwanted species include: invasive, threatening, stealing, noxious, infestive, virulent, deadly and detestable, all of which derive their meanings from the realms of war, disease or theft.

Sometimes, says Stephan Harding, author of *Animate Earth: Science, Intuition and Gaia*, these are views reinforced by television.

'There is a neo-Darwinist narrative evident in many popular TV wildlife programmes, which emphasises the competitive aspect of nature,' he says, 'and yet you could edit the



**Top:** research suggests badgers don't spread TB

**Middle:** beaver dams can control watercourses

**Bottom:** wild boar root out heavy vegetation

## A complexity of habitats

European Union Council Directive 92/43/EEC – the Habitats Directive for short – is designed to promote the maintenance of biodiversity and promote the reintroduction of native species including Europe's large carnivores: the bear, wolf, wolverine and lynx.

However, while its objective is lofty, its fulfilment is by no means straightforward. As John Linnell of LCIE points out, there is no wilderness left in Europe. 'There are many areas of semi-natural habitat, often with high conservation values, but no large areas where carnivores can roam without coming into contact with humans.

'In their absence we have forgotten how to share our living space with potentially dangerous large animals. When large carnivores return, we have to readapt the way we keep livestock. Europe is also home to five million hunters. To be successful we must be supported by the people who live in Europe's wilder nature-rich areas.'

But it's not easy to please everyone. For example, while the Eurasian lynx population is healthier, the Iberian lynx is perilously close to extinction, with only 150 left on the Spanish peninsula. Decimated by a declining population of rabbits, which make up 90 per cent of its diet, its natural habitat was threatened by an EU-funded road-building project. Female lynx will not reproduce until they have their own territory.

But common sense is now prevailing. Spanish authorities have scrapped the plans, recognising that they menaced other species including the imperial eagle, Iberian wolf and black stork.

same footage differently to show the amazing co-operation self-evident in the wild, and therefore offer a more balanced view.'

Author George Monbiot suggests these atavistic fears have their source in a mindset that offers a view of the land fundamentally opposed to the idea of greater biodiversity:

'It's a human tendency to stamp out anything that might represent competition or a threat to our authority,' he says. 'It emerges from the same emotional spectrum as the genocide perpetrated by colonialists seeking to create a blank slate upon which they could build their empires. This subject cuts to the very heart of our humanity. In part this is an illusory desire for control and mastery over the ecosystem, which ultimately is

impossible, although – evidently – you can create an illusion or idea of control by killing off and eliminating wild animals, even if it's not conclusively proven there is a threat.'

Clearly we have never been very good at sharing our

space with 'others'.

This view of a 'wild'

that must be contained and controlled, is not representative of all farmers, landowners and rural interest groups, but it can inform inflammatory headlines – such as *Psycho bear tears apart eco-idyll* – and therefore discourage rational debate. Moreover, it can divert our attention away from more important issues like understanding how climate change affects the chances of ecosystems adapting naturally.

As the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change points out, without intervention the resilience of many ecosystems is likely to be exceeded by the continuing impact of climate change and other influences on global change, especially changes in land use and overexploitation. If this happens the structure and biodiversity of most ecosystems will be disturbed and compromise the services (natural, cultural, spiritual, recreational and aesthetic) they currently provide.

It's a vicious cycle. Population growth, market-driven urbanisation, intensive farming – all further consequences of industrialisation – have impacted native

habitats and the species they support, and further reduced climatic stability, by upsetting the delicate balance of the intake and outtake of carbon dioxide.

## Finding harmony

It's false to think that the reintroduction of animals to their native habitats is being done for sentimental reasons only, a restoration ecology that wants to return nature to a pristine condition.

The reintroduction of animals such as the bear invite us to consider how the conservation of natural habitats and the ecosystems they support can help us respond to climate change, and yet to do this we must first reconsider the fundamental question: 'Who or what is nature for?' Is it just for us? Or do other species have equal rights to exist and flourish?

The bear offers a unique perspective, because as a large mammal, not unlike us, it needs lots of room to roam (sometimes over 200km). When we clash with wild animals, whether reintroduced, or still clinging to what remains of their native habitat, might we not ask 'have we been too greedy in our desire to control and rule over all we survey?'

This is not to suggest we leave nature to re-find its balance without our intervention – it is too late for that. According to Diane Walkington, head of species programme at WWF UK, choices and priorities must be made, and we must accept that we may lose some animals. There is not enough time or money to save all of them. Ecological importance must be a prime consideration in making our choices, not just cultural significance, charisma or appeal.

But, according to Hugh Fullerton-Smith, Alladale Reserve Manager, once choices are made, we need better education about the true risks an animal might pose and the central role it plays in helping manage the land and improve biodiversity. 'It's a process that takes time to communicate', he says. 'You have to appeal to people's love of nature and explain why what you are doing will be good for conservation, as well as making it more beautiful. For example, our wild boar will root out the vast swathes of heather and bracken that not only prevent the natural regeneration of other flora and fauna, but also provide a natural habitat for the ticks that cause Lyme disease.'

The Scottish Wildlife Trust and the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland believe wolves will improve the ecosystem by reducing the

red deer population, currently estimated to be over 500,000 animals, close to the land's natural 'carrying capacity'. This would reduce the need for expensive culling and, experts believe, result in a marked increase in plant and birdlife biodiversity.

Derek Gow, a specialist in wetland mammal conservation, says beavers are integral not only in improving wetland ecosystems that currently rely on human intervention, but also in breaking Britain's boom-or-bust water strategy.

'We have massively bodged water management by draining wetlands, bogs and the like to make sure the land holds as little water as possible for agriculture,' he says. 'We've straightened rivers and streams to turn them into drains, and the net result is we have either too much in the winter or none at all in the spring or summer. We need to put sponges back into the landscape and beavers would do this for us.'

Although not immediately obvious, the bear is also integral to maintaining biodiversity. Known as an umbrella or keystone species, in protecting the bear we also protect a large

number of other species that depend on the same habitat. The roles it plays are similar to those of the boar, but it also 'recycles' cadavers through eating them – including, in spring, those animals killed by avalanches in the winter – and distributes through its faeces the seeds of the plants and berries it eats (not unlike the way birds do).

### Our sense of vulnerability

The way we see animals has an integral effect on the way we frame our relationship

## 'Who or what is nature for? Is it just for us? Or do other species have rights to exist and flourish?'

with them. From the menageries of the 19th century, where we viewed animals as the monstrous other, via zoos, safari parks and of course television, our interest in wild, exotic animals has developed progressively from one of idle curiosity to genuine concern. Yet in all these situations, we are still removed from the wild, whether behind zoo bars, the windscreen of a Land Rover or a television screen. There is no opportunity for

reciprocal encounters, where we may really face our sense of vulnerability about the wild.

Living cheek by jowl with 'the wild' also brings us up against some tough questions. If we live in a world where all species have a right to exist and flourish, would this include other animals we find it less easy to love, like the much-maligned feral cat (Rome, for instance, has more than 250,000 of these animals)? Urban householders may say no, but anti-vivisectionist group PETA would say yes.

In the case of large carnivores, John Linnell

says it's simply a matter of changing the way we think: 'People will need to accept the right of these species to exist, and be willing to share space in the landscape and a part of nature's productivity with them. People need to be willing to live with something slightly wild close to their homes. Large carnivores have repeatedly shown their ability to live with us humans – we just need to find a way to live with them.' **E**



### The Death of Franska

In April 2006, Palouma and Franska were the first of four female Slovenian bears to arrive in the Pyrenees, to boost the exclusively male population of 18. A further two females, Hvala and Balou, and a male Sarousse, were to arrive shortly after. Due to the general movements of the bears (fitted with tracking devices) being made public, however, local farmers were soon able to single out Franska as having been responsible for the death of a number of sheep (the Pyrenees National Park claimed she was responsible for more than half of the 95 attacks carried out throughout 2006). Franska quickly became the focal point of the anti-bear protest, and with every dead sheep found, the campaign to have her removed intensified.

### Countdown

**April 2006:** Franska, thought to be six years old, is released in the Hautes-Pyrénées, equipped with tracking devices.

**May 2006:** Franska is located by anti-bear protesters and driven back by 'startling trackings' – the beating of the undergrowth with sticks, shouting and bell ringing. Appearance of anti-bears slogans such as: *Let us return the skin of the bear to show we have killed him.*

**July/August 2006:** After sheep are killed, further 'startling trackings' are carried out.

**Winter 2006/2007:** Franska hibernates.

**April-July 2007:** Franska's killing spree resumes. She is spotted close to villages, raising fears of an attack on people.

**July 2007:** The Environment Ministry admits it was misled about Franska, who is not a fertile seven years old, but more probably a 'menopausal' 17, which might explain her serial slaughter of sheep for fun.

**July 9 2007:** Seventy stockbreeders take to the mountain, some with rifles – officially a 'bear hunt.' Franska is seen in the lower hills and stockbreeders push her back with detonator blows towards the motorway.

**12 July 2007:** Further 'startling trackings'.

**26 July 2007:** The French Environment Secretary calls upon independent specialists for further advice before deciding whether to withdraw Franska. Experts suggest the hounding of Franska may have influenced her carnage.

**August 9, 2007:** Franska is killed by two cars close to Lourdes. The autopsy also reveals the presence in her body of small-gauge lead pellets.

**September 2007:** A month after Franska is killed, and a year after the death of Palouma, who accidentally fell from a cliff, two cubs born earlier in the year to another of the reintroduced bears, Hvala, are named Pollen and Bamboo, as a symbol of the continued growth of the bear population in France.

