

# Management strategy to handle welfare problems of captive brown bears (*Ursus arctos*)



## Case study on captive brown bears in Georgia

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NW&S



## **PREFACE**

This study is the result of my internship period at Alertis, fund for bear and nature conservation, Rhenen. The internship period is part of the Master programme 'Natural Resources Management' at Utrecht University. Academic supervision during the internship was provided by Dr. Jos Dekker, Section Science, Technology and Society. At Alertis I was supervised both by Dr. Margje Voeten, senior project manager 'Conservation and Welfare' and Koen Cuyten, project coordinator 'Welfare'. The internship period at Alertis took place from 1<sup>st</sup> of February 2006 until 14<sup>th</sup> of July 2006. The period in which the case study of captive bears in Georgia was visited, took place from May to June 2006, for a period of three weeks.

My experiences within Alertis have been highly informative and interesting. I had both the opportunity to work independently as well as to experience a working environment of a small, dedicated conservation organization. Since this study focuses on captive bear problems abroad, the opportunity to visit Alertis partner organization in Georgia, South-eastern Europe, was worthful. It opened my view for the practical application of this study.

Within this study I tried to combine different disciplines together to show the interdisciplinary character of the subject. Obtained knowledge from my Master programme Natural Resources Management became useful in this way.

I would like to thank my supervisors Dr. Jos Dekker, Dr. Margje Voeten, as well as Koen Cuyten for their advice and enthusiasm during the internship period. The meetings were very useful. I also want to thank the team of NACRES, Alertis partner organization in Georgia, Tbilisi, in particular Irakli Shavgulidze, Bejan Lortkipanidze and Mari Shikhashvili. Their dedication to the subject, hospitality and support during the trips to captive bears are unforgettable.

## SUMMARY

This study aimed to create a manual for the management of welfare problems of captive brown bears in Europe. This manual is meant to be especially useful for non-governmental organizations (NGO's) that want to solve welfare problems of captive brown bears. Alertis, fund for bear and nature conservation, aims to give organizations abroad advice about solutions to the welfare problems. This study was part of the Master programme 'Natural Resources Management', at Utrecht University.

The study consisted of three parts. The first part, literature study on welfare problems of captive brown bears, was used as a background on the manual. The second part of this report consisted of a manual to guide in the management of welfare problems of captive brown bears. The third part consisted of a case study on current welfare problems of captive brown bears in Georgia, South-eastern Europe.

The literature study described several topics that are important for management of welfare problems of captive brown bears in Europe. An overview was given of current status of brown bear populations, threats and public attitude towards bears. International legislation concerning brown bears was explained as well. Enforcement of already existing treaties, such as effective implementation into national law, is often missing and should be controlled more strictly in future. Next to that, the legal status of brown bears kept by private persons was found not to be described specifically into legal frameworks and therefore needs consideration. Several subjects need emphasis in legislation, most importantly the development of specific international welfare living standards for captive brown bears and law enforcement. The literature part was finalized by a survey of strategies performed in the past by NGO's to handle welfare problems of captive brown bears.

There is a need for NGO's and governmental bodies to find sustainable solutions to solve welfare problems of captive brown bears. The call for advice from parties concerning management of captive brown bears highlighted the importance of a manual for guidance. Up to today, no manual had been developed to guide parties in the management process of solving welfare problems of captive brown bears. In this study, a manual was developed to give an answer to this need.

The manual can be used as a guideline to find suitable management strategies to handle welfare problems of captive brown bears. The manual gave advices for surveying and analysing problems, and the selection of a strategy. The first part of the manual was a survey that consisted of a step-by-step questionnaire, in which information from different stakeholders was needed. The questions were accompanied by suggestions, highlighted in the text boxes at the end of each subject.

The survey consisted of seven main topics:

1. The current legal status of the brown bear and law enforcement
2. Status of wild populations/ illegal trade
3. The current situation of captive bears
4. Intentions of the owners of the captive bears
5. Public awareness and opinion
6. Groups working on welfare problems
7. Feasibility of confiscating the bears and their possible placement

By answering the question included in the survey, several problems could be detected. With an assessment the most important problems could be revealed, together with main strategies to solve them. In the second part of the manual, these strategies were described, together with actions to be taken.

The main strategies described in the strategic part of the manual were:

1. Adjustments to national legislation
2. Law enforcement
3. Support and cooperation needed
4. Establishing a bear registration system
5. Improving living conditions of captive bears
6. Informing and rehabilitating the owners
7. Public information strategy
8. Confiscation of captive bears
9. Establishing a bear sanctuary for the short and longer term
10. Placement of the bears elsewhere

The case study aimed to test the manual and was made possible with the cooperation of NACRES (Noah's Ark Centre for the Recovery of Endangered Species), Alertis' partner organization in Georgia. The case study on captive bears in Georgia detected suitable strategies for this particular case. A three-week visit to partner organization NACRES was made to collect information for answering questions of the survey. In total sixteen captive bears were visited to collect information, of which nine bears were kept by private persons. Next to that, the strategic part of management was discussed with NACRES. The manual proved to be a useful tool for receiving a clear view on several complex, interrelated problems in Georgia. Application of the survey showed that poaching pressure and lack of enforcement by governmental bodies probably are most important problems to handle within the management process. The survey revealed that these problems need strong focus in development of definite strategies for an action plan. Although national legislation concerning conservation of brown bears was present in Georgia, this was not enforced. The case study made clear that cooperation between different groups is important. In Georgia, the involvement of the Ministry of Environment within the management process has shown to be necessary.

The created manual can be a useful tool for future development of management strategies to handle welfare problems of captive brown bears. The case study has shown the utility of the manual for NACRES, working on welfare problems in Georgia. The usefulness of the manual for other NGO's, needs to be investigated in future.

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