

AMONG BEARS

Brown bears in the heart of Europe

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When you think about big predators, Central Europe might not be the first place that comes to your mind. But there is much more to Central Europe than just cultured lands and in fact many wildlife species as well as large predators including brown bears don't need complete wilderness to thrive. What they need is appropriate habitat and sufficient food sources. And all of this is available in Central Europe in diverse locations.

Even though large predators themselves don't necessarily need pristine wilderness for their survival they are crucial components in our European ecosystems and their presence enables processes related to wilderness and species depending on wilderness to start thriving again. **They are drivers for wilderness and rewilding ambitions!**

Moreover, large predators are on the rise again in Central Europe but tolerance and acceptance for them is still dragging behind. We need to bring further attention to this topic and use **gripping imagery and visual storytelling** to turn people into advocates for big predator and wilderness protection. Not least because of the fact that **Europe is the only continent where large predators grow in numbers**. Wolves, lynxes and bears are on their way back.

A statement we often hear is the following: „But we don't have any more space left for large predators in Central Europe.“ – Central Europe may be densely populated but there are definitely appropriate habitats available and able to provide a home e.g. to bears occasionally spreading particularly from southern Slovenia and Trentino/Italy.

The bears are on their way back to the Alps, but are we ready for them?

Can we deal with bears occasionally visiting a garden or orchard in a village because they might be attracted by mature plums? Can we continue livestock farming and hunting? And what about recreational activities and tourism? Can coexistence work in Central Europe?

Probably the best example for tourism and the presence of large predators comes from the **Polish Tatra**. Here, 3 million visitors per year occasionally cross path with one of the 55 local bears.

Hunting on bears in Slovenia is allowed to a certain degree. On the one hand side it helps to increase people's tolerance but it is also quite controversial. The **official management strategy of „deviation feedings“** with corn can be considered equally controversial. But: At least there are bears, which is still not the case for many other places in Europe. And Slovenia has found ways of using **wildlife tourism with a focus on bears** as a source of income. Lessons to be learned for other countries.

Livestock farmers from Slovenia, Slovakia or Trentino, who already employ protective measures such as fences and guardian dogs are not always delighted because of the presence of large predators but they are aware that their practices have to adapt to adapting conditions and the good news: **The implemented measures, if done properly and well maintained, work!**

And these measures don't just work down in the valley but also high up in alpine regions where resistance from livestock farmers usually is the strongest. On Swiss Alps losses of sheep are down to less than half the amount they were before wolves showed up and corresponding livestock protection measures were implemented! Increased protection works and is even beneficial for livestock farmers.

The conservation efforts of the past decades undertaken by European countries show effect, now it's up to us to adapt to these new situations. Coexistence already works, at least in some places of Europe. All it takes is **a little tolerance**, the willingness to implement measures and an open mind to live alongside the wildlife at our doorstep.