



FOCUS GROUP REPORT

Action A.2: Attitudes of humans toward bears and bear management

Prepared by Aleksandra Majić, Tadeja Rome and Slaven Reljić

March, 2015

Univerza u Ljubljani



Contents

Contents.....	2
Introduction	3
Description of methods	3
Results	5
About the sample.....	5
Bear-human conflicts	6
Bears feeding on anthropogenic food sources.....	6
Damages in agriculture / hunting	7
Danger for human safety	8
Support/appreciation and roles in bear management	8
The most important problems of bear management.....	9
Perception about population size.....	10
Hunting (of bears)	10
Poaching	11
Tourism	11

Introduction

Apart from the expert knowledge of the project team members, small structured in-depth group interviews were chosen as the most appropriate method for collecting qualitative data on public opinions about bears and bear management.

The purpose of implementing focus groups was to identify and document the ranges of attitudes, opinions and perceptions present among local inhabitants in a qualitative way. This is needed as a base for preparation of a targeted quantitative questionnaire to study public attitudes towards bears and bear management in the project area.

Description of methods

We were interested in opinions of inhabitants of our project area. We chose communities that were candidates for participation in conflict mitigation measures actions (C1 and C2) or were in other ways interested in participating in the project (i.e. information and dissemination actions). A particular care was taken to include an area where bears are only sporadically present but conflicts are high (alpine area in Slovenia) and a particularly active sheep farmer was approached.

“Snowballing” method was used to recruit participants. Once first contact was established, this person was asked to invite other potential candidates. Apart from the interview in the alpine region which was carried out in the person’s home, all meetings were organized locally in community buildings. Refreshments for participants were provided by the project. With participants’ approval, all meetings were audio-recorded for later analysis. All participants will receive project’s t-shirts and hats (once they are produced) as a sign of gratitude for their participation.

Focus group discussion was carried out according to a previously defined and agreed topics and questions presented in Table 1. In addition to these, several questions related to the non-consumptive use of bears in tourism (e.g. bear viewing, photography) were added to the interview guide used in Slovenia.

Table 1: Question guide developed for implementation of the focus groups.

Topic	Questions
Introduction	Go round the table, everybody introduces themselves briefly (e.g., occupation or whatever else they find important, what is the first thing that comes to your mind when you think of bears).
Personal experiences with bears	Do you have any personal experiences with the bears? Can you tell us briefly what happened? Any positive experiences? (e.g. observing a bear in a ZOO) <i>Probe for feelings</i> – how did you feel when this happened?

Conflicts	<p>What are the problems that bears cause to people in this area?</p> <p>Which one of the mentioned problems so far would you pick as the most important to be dealt with?</p> <p>Are there differences between individual bears in the ways how they behave, in your view?</p> <p>If they are extremely against bears, probe into personal history of being against bears, reasons for this, social influences etc, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you remember when and why you came to be of this opinion about bears? • What about your family and friends – do they share your view? <p>But make sure you ask the same questions to all participants, so that you don't single out the negative ones!</p>
Solutions	<p>What would be the best solutions for these problems (probe for whatever they have mentioned as a problem- you should make notes when they mention problems!)?</p> <p>Who do you think should be responsible for implementation of these solutions? (<i>probe for government, land owners, anyone else?</i>)</p> <p>If funding for prevention measures would be secured, do you think it would be successful? What would be the main obstacles, if any?</p> <p>Would all this have any effect on how people perceive bears? What would be different? Why?</p>
Bear management	<p>Can you tell me about bears in this area?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are they often seen by people, what do they feed on, how many young do they have, are there too many or too few,.... <p>Do bears <i>belong</i> to this area, in your view?</p> <p>How should the bears be managed and by whom?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Also probe for habitat management in general <p>How do you think local people should be involved in bear management decision-making?</p> <p>What is your view on bear population size estimates?</p> <p>Who provides information on bears that you trust?</p> <p>What do you think are the biggest problems in bear management (in Slovenia)?</p>
Hunting of bears	<p>What is your opinion about bear hunting? Is it justifiable? Why?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you think is necessary (or good) to hunt bears (in Slovenia)?

	<p style="text-align: center;">Why?</p> <p>Why do you think some groups approve and some oppose bear hunting?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which are those groups? <p>Are there any cases of illegal hunting of bears here?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you think about these? • Under which conditions would this be justifiable, in your view?
--	--

Results

All together we've carried out five in-depth interviews, four of which were focus groups and one traditional one to one interview. The interview (coded SLO3) was carried out in the Alpine part of Slovenia and with a sheep breeder. The focus groups were carried out in Slovenia (coded SLO1 and SLO2) and in Croatia (coded HRV1 and HRV2).

About the sample

SLO1: Eight local inhabitants of villages in the area of Cerknica, where density of brown bears is high. Some of them are hunters; there is also a breeder, a teacher of natural sciences in elementary school, a herbalist and a mushroom picker. Some of them are also dog owners. All of them say that they had at least indirect experiences with bears (experienced damage, seen footprints). They respect the animal. Those who visit forest regularly (hunters, teacher) often see bears, others saw bear on the road (car) or didn't see it at all. Herbalist points out that she has never seen a bear, but she is afraid of them, even though she doesn't know why (fear). Breeder points out that he saw a fresh bear footprint near his house in the village in daylight in January 2014 and concludes that bears don't hibernate at all (negative feeling). Herbalist also saw footprints in the area where children play (fear). Participants say that in their area there is a lot of bears, some of them are problematic bears, people can even distinguish particular bears by fur colour. Bears destroy field crops, fruit trees, feed on garbage containers, bales, and even take some sheep, encounters with humans. They believe that bears belong to this area since there are a lot of forests. But they point out that there shouldn't be too many bears.

SLO 2: Eight local inhabitants of villages in the area of Pivka, where the population of brown bears is not so dense (periphery zone). Some of them are hunters, there were also a cow breeder, a cyclists, a tourist guide, an owner of a horse ranch and an employee of the municipality Pivka responsible for tourism. They didn't have any bad experiences with bears. Most of them encountered bear - in the woods or on the road, driving a car. None of them is said that they are afraid of bears. According to the participants there are bears in the area, but they don't do so much damage in this area. All of the participants think that bears belong to this area.

SLO 3: Sheep farmer from the Kobarid area. He believes bears are only "passing by" in his area. He mentioned several times that he's afraid for his children's safety. He has experienced

damage done by a bear to his sheep flock. He never saw a bear. He has a negative experience, because he and his child saw fresh carcass (bear prey) in the alpine meadow, therefore the bear was in the vicinity. He stresses out that this was very negative experience for his child, who couldn't sleep for quite some time. According to the participant, there are 6-7 bears in the area at the moment, one of them is problematic. He points out that bears don't belong to this area, they never have, and that this is only (and has ever been) transitional area for bears.

HRV 1: Seven local inhabitants of Kuterevo - village where bear sanctuary is located (some are forest workers, construction workers, farmers, manager of the bear sanctuary). Even though encounters with bears seem to be quite often, they describe them as special events. Bears are "beautiful to see" (admiration). They mention that bear is "taking care of its own business", call the bear "king of the forest". One person was attacked by a female bear and was hospitalized for 20 days - he pointed out that it was his own fault since he wanted to admire the cubs from up-close. Another person encountered a bear near a carcass in the forest but has retrieved right away. One person mentions bears regularly visit his vegetable garden. According to the participants there are 7 female bears in vicinity of the village. In recent years there are more bears. They feed with everything they find - fruits, carcasses, there is plenty of food for bears here. They don't attack sheep. Bears absolutely belong to this area, probably in highest densities in Croatia.

HRV 2: All six participants are hunters from Lika area. One is a driver, carpenter, forester, MSc in economics. They all are mentioning damages that bears cause (in hunting) already in the introduction part. They all have seen and encountered bears in many occasions and they mention that bears are afraid of humans and that they run away. Two persons mention that meeting a female with cubs is the only circumstance when a person should retrieve, otherwise its bears that should move away. One person mentions bears making problems in traffic (he had to wait for a bear to move off a road) and damaging feeding stations for wild boar. One person mentions that bears are dangerous.

Bear-human conflicts

Bears feeding on anthropogenic food sources

SLO1: Bears are coming to settlements, where they damage orchards (fruit trees), eat field crops and feed on garbage containers (they mention that bears seem to be fond of baby diapers). Some of them think this is human's fault, but they don't think or trust that bear-proof containers will do any difference. One thinks that this would be a good way to stop habituation of future generations of bears, others agree. One hunter points out that bear is very smart and knows perfectly well when to come to the settlements to feed or when there are available other food sources. Mainly hunters seem suspicious about the measures to prevent habituation of bears (such as bear-proof containers). Also mention of younger bear coming near hunters' cottage where they also have picnics, even waiting for food (habituation to humans).

SLO2: Bears feeding on garbage containers, they think this is reason why bears come to the settlements (conclusion made by comparison with human behaviour in the past). They point out that bears and other animals are coming near the settlements because the forest and shrubs are spreading to the houses. One of them even tells (personal experience) how people throw carcasses to the shrubs near the road and settlement, which then attract bears to human vicinity. They agree that human behaviour is driving bears near the settlements. They also point out the absence of bear feeding sites with carrion. In their opinion this they are a good

way to keep the bears in the woods.

SLO3: No mention about bears feeding on garbage containers. He mentions mainly damages in agriculture.

HRV1: Mention that bears come to the garbage containers in the village. Clearly point out that people are responsible for this. Also they think that the cause of the problem is that they discard lamb skins to the containers and not to the forest as they did in the past. They point out that these containers need to be fixed as well as their own behaviour which misleads the bears into behaving badly.

HRV2: No mention about bears feeding on garbage containers.

Damages in agriculture / hunting

SLO1: Mention of damaged silage bales, destroying of fruit trees, beehives, disappearance of sheep (they believe that wolf is mainly responsible for this problem) and eating field crops, especially maize, carrot and red beet. They point out that the best (if not only) solution would be reestablishment of carrion sites for feeding bears as that would provide enough nutrition to the bears in the forest, thus they would not approach villages in search of food. Belief that people would like bears more if there would be fewer conflicts. But they point out that people should be more educated about bears and people behaviour in areas where bears are abundant.

SLO2: Silage bales are being damaged all the time; otherwise they point out that they don't have many conflicts with bears. The municipality employee is in close contact with several sheep breeders, who say that they don't have real issues with bears. Mention of damaged fruit trees. They know that living in the countryside has its characteristics and they accept animals in their surroundings. Notion that fewer conflicts would positively affect people's opinion about bears.

SLO3: The interviewee mentions destroyed beehives, attacks on cows, foals and sheep. He points out that the real problem are "*problematic*" bears who seem to be killing "*for fun*", who kill 6-7 sheep in one night. Also the carrion sites would decrease the killings of the sheep. He points out that fencing the meadows in the Alps is practically impossible. He also thinks that protecting his flock of sheep would be immoral as bears would then attack his neighbour's sheep and the problem would not be solved. He thinks if there would be fewer conflicts, people would tolerate bears more.

HRV1: Participants mention bears coming to vegetable gardens - interestingly no notion that humans are in any way responsible; also they mention that it is not possible to change this behaviour. They compare bears to children that are stealing neighbour's fruits. They think hunters should give compensations (as they did before). They also have sheep but no damages (they mention bears being chased away by livestock-guarding dogs). Notion that each person is responsible for their own goods (i.e. fencing vegetable garden); notion that it is "*unfair to profit by making bears look bad*".

HRV2: The main problem they see is that the government is not paying compensations for damages caused by bears but hunters have to do it. Another issue that all of the participating hunters mention is damages that bears cause to hunting of other game species (eat and destroy feed prepared for wild boar, scare wild boar when wild boar hunt is happening). One person mentioned damages in agriculture (carrots and honey bees). Another person mentioned damages to sheep farming. As solution they mention that the government should pay compensations for bear damages, including feeding stations for wild boar. Also they mention

that concession fees (for hunting) should be lower in areas where there are large carnivores. Notion that people don't really care if they "sell" the corn to the bear or to the others, so if they get compensation, they "would be happy". Notion that bears belong here.

Danger for human safety

SLO1: Main belief is that people are going to the forest too often/there are too many people. They point out Slivnica hill, where people are hiking on several (8) trails - they think that there are too many trails, animals don't have peace, they can't hide from humans, therefore number of encounters between bears and humans is more likely to be higher. They also point out people walking dogs in the woods should know not to let free their dogs, dog owners know and respect that (greater danger for humans to encounter bears). They propose less paths on the Slivnica hill, dogs should be kept on the leash. They also think that in the woods there should be fewer people with motor sleds, motorbikes and that cyclists should use forest roads only. As a solution they propose leaflets with information on how to behave in the forest and how to react when it comes to bear encounter.

SLO2: They know some people in their area who are afraid of going to the woods because of the bears. They point out that the number of people, who are coming into the woods for leisure and fun is increasing, which disturbs animals and can lead to encounters with bears. Hunter says that there is "always present fear, which is close to panic and panic leads to problems". They think use of forests should be regulated. One person points out that people are afraid of bears because they don't know how to behave. They point out education about human behaviour in bear dominated landscape, as first and the most important solution (kindergartens, elementary schools, boards for tourists in Slovene and foreign languages, leaflets).

SLO3: He mentions cases about bears attacking people (tourists). There are also present encounters between bear and humans - on the road, near the campfire, which scares people. He believes that these are all "problem bears" and that those should be removed by culling. He believes that if the bears would be collared (GPS), they would know which of them are problematic and therefore they would kill them. With this solution, he thinks, the people would feel safer. He suggests that GPS collars are also a way of controlling bear behaviour.

HRV1: One person mentions as a side-statement that there are also "accidents" with bears (meaning attacks). They point out an "abstract" problem. In their opinion there is too much fear of bear, especially among those "that have never seen a bear" (city folks). Visitors are asking them what to do if they see a bear. One person thinks a notice board with info on how to behave when you encounter a bear should be set up in areas where visitors come (mountaineers).

HRV2: No mention of danger for human safety. They do mention however, that people are afraid of bears since they come to the villages.

Support/appreciation and roles in bear management

SLO1: They clearly express a distrust of government - because of bad previous experiences with the ministry concerning bear management plans, lack of funds for guarding the livestock and because of general political picture in the country. Breeder suggests that breeders on the area with bears should get extra funding for guarding the livestock. One also points out that expenses for compensations are even bigger than would be the funding to prevent conflicts in agriculture. Everybody thinks that solely country/ government/ ministry is responsible for

managing bears - some of them even say: "*those who protected the bears should take responsibilities*". They think that opinion of local inhabitants should be taken into account more than it is currently, especially hunters' knowledge and opinions, also breeders' and beekeepers'. They point out that people, who live with bears, who really know what means living in the area with bears, should participate in bear management ("*not the city folks from skyscrapers*").

SLO2: A distrust of government was expressed - they trust scientists who propose solutions to the ministry, but they think that the ministry fails. They propose rangers (hunters) who would have authorities to fine people, if necessary (forest use). The government, the ministry should take responsibility of bear management. The mistrust of government is much pronounced. They believe that local inhabitants should be part of team for bear management, but they should have a representative, who isn't a politician, but someone who knows the situation in the area (an expert).

SLO3: He points out the slowness of bureaucracy. Belief in removal of problematic bears, which now takes very long time (few months). Great mistrust of government. The country or government should take responsibility of the bears. He believes that local inhabitants should be a part of the management team, their words should be heard. He believes if the situation will continue to be like it is, poaching of bears is the next reasonable step.

HRV1: One person points out that in their village people live in "*harmony with wilderness*" (bear as a symbol of wilderness). But there is a lack of appreciation from the government's side. Now since there is a national park here, the locals even have to pay entrance fees to the park. Government should provide some kind of reward for the people that are still living here ("*and not in Zagreb*") and take care of them. Government should delegate someone from the village to participate in bear management (taking care for the garbage containers). Local people cannot make decisions (it is hunters' job) but can participate if there are big problems (but here we don't have big problems). Opinion that for managing bears the hunters have everything necessary (they are present in bear habitats, they feed bears and they like taking care of bears, they have guns and can scare bears if they come to the village). All of the participants mention hunters as the key group for managing bears.

HRV2: They repeatedly mention that the lack of support and clear rules by the government is the main problem in bear management. Government should pay for compensation (and not hunters as it is now). Local people should be involved mainly through education. One person thinks that there should be more dialogue with the local public (to explain that hunters don't want to shoot all the bears). They also mention that local people often expect them (hunters) to do something about bears (e.g. shoot more of them to resolve conflicts) and they don't understand that hunters are not responsible for making such decisions. Hunters suggest dialogue and questionnaires with local people.

The most important problems of bear management

SLO1: One of them believes that the biggest problem in bear management is mistrust among all participants. One of them suggests that there should be a limit of bears and that every year the culling quota should be the same to avoid "*negotiations*" and decrease the possibility of different interests to influence the decision.

SLO2: Bad management - ministry isn't doing things as it should. The mistrust of government is stressed again.

SLO3: He thinks that number of bears in core areas is too high, which results in bear migration (to the Alps). Whole bear management should be restarted - the way it is now isn't good.

HRV1: Participants explain that the population size is unknown and speculate about it in relation to the culling quota. "Privatization" of hunting rights was mentioned several times in this regard - "*public treasure is being managed by private interests*". They dislike the fact that the "*best*" bears are being culled and not only the "*sick or wounded*" (trophy hunting).

HRV2: Institutional arrangements of bear management - hunters are responsible for damage compensations but are not part of the decision-making process (e.g. to take out a problem bear). As a result compensations are not paid in most cases. Also farmers are not familiar with these arrangements. Local inhabitants are afraid of bears as they often enter villages.

Perception about population size

SLO1: In general they think that the number of bears is too high - they use correlation with traffic accidents and encounters with humans. Hunters trust "their own" estimations, but they point out that others don't. They are not familiar with other estimations of the population size (e.g. via non-invasive genetics).

SLO2: They agree that the number of bears is increasing, but for some of them there are not enough bears, because they want to "*see them more often*". Hunter explains that this area is the periphery zone of bears in Slovenia. One of the hunters says "*until they don't come to the settlements, there can be lots of them*"

SLO3: The number is acceptable if they aren't problematic. Bears are staying in this "*transitional area*", which he sees as a problem. Bears are supposed just to migrate to Austria or Italy and not stay here.

HRV1: One person believes hunters and their estimations; others doubt that stating that hunters overestimate the number of bears, so that they can hunt more

HRV2: Hunters trust their own experiences and they believe that there are more bears than what official estimates are. They also believe that it is impossible to correctly estimate population size.

Hunting (of bears)

SLO1: Hunting is acceptable and even necessary, to control the bear population size. They think that some groups of people are trying to prevent hunting of bears (and other animals), but they don't know the reality about living with bears.

SLO2: Some of them think hunting is acceptable to control the population, they trust experts' opinions. One believes that there is no need for regular quotas if the bears are in the woods and if there aren't too many. They approve killings of problematic bears, even though they know that people are responsible. They believe that people, who are strongly against all hunting of bears, don't know the reality, because they don't live in bear inhabited areas.

SLO3: In general, he isn't fond of killing animals, but he thinks it is necessary to maintain the population. He believes that some groups of people are against killings and the problem occurs, when government takes into account (mainly) their opinion. He believes all "*problem bears*" should be culled.

HRV1: On this matter the participants express their trust to the competence of local hunting

organizations. Mention foreign (Italian) hunters as “*arrogant and wanting to shoot all wildlife*”. No one questions hunting of bears - they see hunting of bears as the only way to “control the numbers”, they mention management plan as the base document. One person states he does not really like hunting in general. Preference of removing problematic bears instead of selling “trophy bears” (they mention that those who profit financially are the ones most in support of bear hunting). One person mentions “natural selection” as a better solution to hunting (“there cannot be too many bears in nature”).

HRV2: Hunters believe that hunting is necessary to control the population size. They emphasize that the main problem is the recent decrease of the price of bear trophy. They also mention that quotas might be too small. Hunters acknowledge that different people have different views regarding hunting. Notion that hunting is much more than shooting animals: “*...hunting to me is when I come to the high stand and watch roe deer grazing and take photos, ... when I observe a nice roe deer buck and imagine how even more beautiful it will be next year. When he is seven years old I hunt it or not, I might also find it in the scat of a wolf or a bear. I am trying to explain what is hunting...*”.

Poaching

SLO1: They don't know any local cases of poaching, only from the media (e.g. in Austria). They point out that expenses for illegal killings are too high, so hunters don't do that - if they wanted to have a bear as a trophy, the ballistics would find out what have they done. They also say that illegal killing of a bear is impossible, because the bear is too heavy for one person to carry and they would be seen in the village. Hunters agree that they don't shoot a bear just to kill it, but they want to have a trophy, to be admired by the community.

SLO2: They don't know any local cases of bear poaching. They think that hiding a carcass of a bear would be very hard and they don't believe anybody in their area does that.

SLO3: He doesn't know any cases of illegal killings and he doesn't approve it. But, he stresses out, it is the next possible step if bear management does not improve.

HRV1: They share ethical arguments in favour of poaching: with or without license it is the same for the bear. If you kill a bear to feed your family is not such a sin as if you kill it for trophy. There are 4 hunting clubs in the area and “*poaching is the 5th one*”. They don't know of any specific cases but all point out that it exists.

HRV2: Poaching “*is present, was always present and will be present*”. They say that poaching of bears is not so much present as poaching of game species for meat (deer, roe deer) due to the economic situation. They believe much more could be done to minimize poaching. They mention that poaching is controlled “*not in the forest, but on the roads*” and that police is not very active in this regard.

Tourism

SLO1: Participants estimate that there is interest for this kind of tourism. They point out several negative “sides”, if the bear-watching tourism would be readily available: “*could be dangerous for tourists, who would be responsible for possible accidents, bears could become self-evident*”. They think that people with this interest can find a way to observe and photograph bears even now and that it should not be additionally advertised or organized.

SLO2: Opinions about bear tourism are divided - tour guide supports the idea, hunters are against. They all agree that there is an interest. One points out that if the objective of the

project (and in general) is to prevent conflicts between humans and bears, there shouldn't be any tourists' activities which include observing wild bears - this is just a chance for conflicts.

SLO3: He points out that in his area bear tourism doesn't have any future. There are other branches of tourism which are much more important and bear tourism would even have negative impact (fear).

Interpretation

The results of the focus groups suggest that understanding of human-bear conflict varies considerably across the project area. For some participants knowing that bears are around already presents a conflict to some degree, while others tolerate even bears feeding in their vegetable gardens. As a result the questions targeted to explore human-bear conflict to be included in the questionnaire for the quantitative survey of public attitudes should probe for phenomena in a most neutral way possible. Terminology that carries a value-linked meaning should be avoided. For example, instead of using "bear damages to sheep" the questionnaire should offer "bear feeding on sheep". For the same reason, the sampling for the quantitative study should be stratified according to the political arrangements (country) and bear presence information (continuous presence, sporadic presence, no bears).

It seems that person's experiences with bears and their demographic background, especially if they belong to a specific interest group (e.g. hunters, farmers, tourism workers) also defines how they perceive bears and bear management, thus it will be important to carefully design a set of questions asking about the respondent's background.

Our results suggest that public, especially in the areas with continuous bear presence, is quite familiar with basic bear biology, so a set of questions targeting knowledge about bears with regards to the key communication messages of the project should be included.

Perceptions and opinions about the bear population size and questions addressing these topics are probably the best way of exploring the current tolerance limits among the residents of the project area.

Knowledge about ways of mitigating bear-caused damages generally seems quite limited, so only simple belief questions regarding this topic are to be included in the questionnaire.