

# Statement of the LIFE DINALP BEAR Project Team in Response to the Establishment of Technical Obstacles Along Slovenian-Croatian Border in November/December, 2015



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In the last month, technical obstacles (razor wire) were placed along the Slovenian side of the border with Croatia. Technical obstacles were placed due to the migrant crisis and as a safety precaution on the outer EU "Schengen border." While obstacles cause many side effects, the LIFE DINALP BEAR project team has prepared this statement to share our concerns about impacts to brown bears and other large mammals.

The LIFE DINALP BEAR project team is deeply concerned that the technical obstacle along the Slovenian-Croatian border will cause disruption of normal wildlife behaviour and may threaten the viability of populations of large carnivores, including brown bear. Moreover, they will jeopardize the goals of the project which is largely financed by the EU Commission and the Republic of Slovenia (responsible Ministry for Environment and Spatial Planning). We ask the state organs in charge in Slovenia to reconsider further development of technical obstacles along the border between Slovenia and Croatia, or at least develop mitigation measures which will diminish the direct threat to wildlife.

## Habitat Fragmentation as a Threat to Wildlife

Barriers that hinder wildlife movements cause habitat fragmentation. This is one of the major threats for conservation of large terrestrial mammals worldwide. In Europe, such threats affect several large wildlife species that require large and connected habitat for their long-term survival. For successful conservation of brown bears and other large mammals it is crucial to preserve large suitable habitat patches which can support viable populations. Moreover, the Habitats Directive (Council Directive 92/43/EEC) adopted in Europe in 1992, prescribes that the habitat quality of endangered species, like bears, and should not decline (Article 6 (2-4)). Besides this, also European large carnivore management strategies (e.g. Population-level guidelines, European Bear Action Plan) all strive towards improving connectivity among and within populations

## Goals of the LIFE DINALP BEAR Project Considering Brown Bear Habitat Connectivity



The LIFE DINALP BEAR project recognizes that loss of habitat connectivity is one of the main threats to the conservation of brown bear populations in the Northern Dinarides and Alps. The migration of bears and undisturbed gene flow are crucial for long-term survival of the species in this area. An important project goal is to improve brown bear habitat connectivity in the project area. With the purpose of ensuring long-term connectivity of the habitat, we implement activities such as educational seminars for spatial planners in Slovenia, Croatia, Austria and Italy. Permeability of fenced highway is an important part of the connectivity issue. We are also preparing a handbook about the integration of bear habitat connectivity and suitability into spatial planning in order to prevent future habitat fragmentation.

## The Recent Threat Along the Slovenian-Croatian Border

The Dinaric Mountains stretching from Slovenia through Croatia and further south to Greece, are among the best preserved large carnivore habitats in Europe. Many wildlife species inhabit this area and regularly travel large distances especially bears, wolves, lynx, red deer and wild boars. GPS data and genetic analyses have confirmed that all species listed above have moved regularly across the Slovenian-Croatian border. During the last few months, due to the migrant crisis, artificial barriers (technical obstacles) were placed along the Slovenian-Croatian border. These technical obstacles are designed to prevent human crossings but also stop and/or harm large wildlife species.

The current technical obstacles along the SLO-CRO border literally cut high quality core bear habitat into two parts. This significantly impacts the migration and movement patterns and population connectivity not just for bears, but also for other wildlife. The effects of such a barrier can be compared to a fenced highway without any wildlife crossings over it. It is known that such obstacles can cause direct mortality, disrupt normal wildlife behaviour, obstruct or even disable the migration of vulnerable species and lower genetic diversity. Because of the effects which they (will) have on the Dinaric-Alpine brown bear population, technical obstacles present a direct threat to brown bear population. Moreover, they jeopardize the goals of the LIFE DINALP BEAR project and goals of brown bear management defined by the European Commission.

LIFE DINALP BEAR project team