

Bear Specialist Group

What's Up in the Pyrenees? Disappearance of the Last Native Bear, and the Situation in 2011

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The last photo of the last native Pyrenean bear, from Aragon, Spain, Feb. 5, 2010

The brown bear population in the Pyrenees has never entirely disappeared, but has been reinforced through the translocation of 8 bears from Slovenia in 1996, 1997, and 2006. Since our prior update of the situation (see *IBN* Nov. 2009, p. 8-10), the French Ministry of Ecology announced the release of a female Slovenian bear to augment the western core of the population. This initiative, planned to occur in Spring 2011, was eventually cancelled. In this part of the Pyrenees, only 2 males now remain.

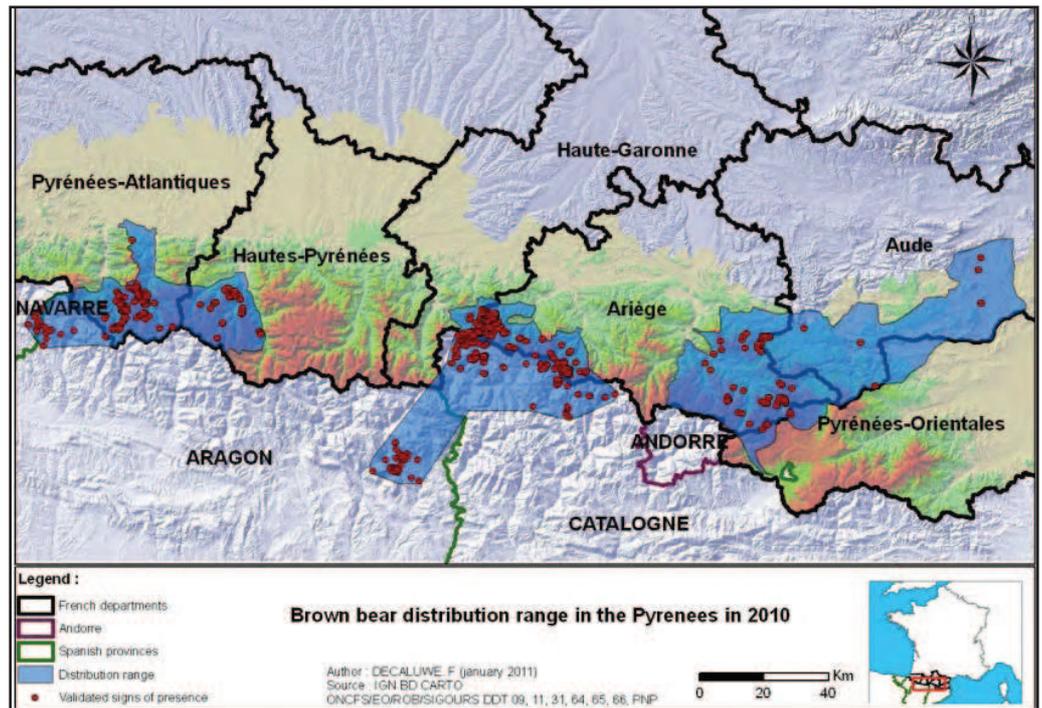
The End of the Pyrenean Stock

The central core of the brown bear population is considered to have disappeared from the Pyrenees in the early 1990s. In 1995, there were only 5–6 individuals left of the native Pyrenean stock, all located in the western core, slightly less than 100 km

from the central area. This western core seemed headed for extinction, however, since within the framework of the French-Spanish monitoring system, only 1 adult female had been detected.

In the Central Pyrenees, local initiatives have led to the release of several bears. This small population has since recovered solely from Slovenian animals. Currently composed of about 16 individuals, including 6 adult females, this is the only part of the range where reproduction has been detected. A single individual, a young male, emigrated toward the western core during 2000.

In 2004 the western core experienced its greatest losses: an old adult male (29 years old) was found dead and the last native female was killed by a hunter after having given birth to a hybrid Slovenian/Pyrenean male cub. This hybrid along with only 3 or 4 other males remained in the French-Spanish area of about 1,000 km². Beginning in 2008, photographs of an animal without hair on its rump have been taken on both the French and Spanish sides. Regularly observed in Spain and monitored using camera traps, eventual genetic analysis showed it to be the last native bear of the Pyrenees. The last photograph of this animal dates back to February 2010; given the absence of any more recent photos or genetic evidence, it is presumed to have died. With its loss, the Pyrenean strain is now considered to have totally disappeared. Only the male hybrid bear born in 2004 carries any native Pyrenean genes.



Brown bear distribution in the Pyrenees, 2010, showing 3 core areas and validated point locations (scats, hair, sightings, photos). The only bear with some native Pyrenean genes (a hybrid) lives in the west, but female bears (all Slovenian stock) live only in the central area.

The Initiative of the French Government

The French Secretary of State for ecology announced during the Summer of 2010 that from now on, all bears whose death was human-caused will be replaced. In Summer 2010, public consultations were launched with a view to replacing the female bear Francka (who had been run over by a car in 2007) with a female released on the western core. Despite fierce opposition from animal farmers, the consultation received a favourable opinion from the general public and from the National Committee for Nature Protection. Contacts were made with Slovenian counterparts for setting up of the operation. However, the Ministry of Ecology backed off of the project in early June 2011, explaining that French livestock breeders were adversely affected by a drought, and increasing the number of bears could overwhelm them.

The female nearest to the western core is about 80 km away, making it unlikely that she would move there. The 2 males still present in the west are aged 7 and 14 years and it is reasonable to assume that without human involvement, the species is doomed to disappear in the near future from this historical core area of the Pyrenees.

Population Status in 2010-2011

In 2010, the minimum size of the bear population in the entire Pyrenees was estimated at 19 individuals. Currently, only the central core can contribute to the growth of this population. Indeed, 2 litters of 2 cubs were spotted during 2010. This good news was tempered, however, by the discovery of a cub carcass in July 2011. This population is in a precarious state, where the slightest of events affecting a few individual females could have a serious impact on the population's demography. The replacement of the female bear Francka is a growing priority.

As we pointed out in 2009, the effort *already made* to promote the acceptance of the species in the Pyrenean mountains should be continued and thereby facilitate political decision-making. Currently, and since the end of 2009, no bear conservation plan exists in France, although there is a National Strategy for Bear Conservation in Spain. 🐻