

Dear Minister
Ing. Mgr. Tomáš Taraba
Ministerstvo životného prostredia SR
Námestie Ľudovíta Štúra 1
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1.5.2025

An appeal for the review of management policies related to the regulated hunting of brown bear in Slovakia

Dear Minister,

We, the undersigned scientists, zoologists, and experts in the field of large carnivore ecology, conservation and management, express our deep concern regarding the Slovak government's recent decision to authorize the widespread hunting of brown bears (*Ursus arctos*), with a quota of 350 individuals for 2025. We believe that this decision is not scientifically contrasted, based on emotions, and contradicts current scientific understanding of the population status and dynamics of this species in Slovakia. Given the cross-border context, we believe this decision could have a significant impact on the long-term sustainability of the population of neighboring countries.

The government's response follows a tragic incident—a fatal bear attack on a human. Unfortunately, this incident occurred despite the fact that 93 bears were hunted last year as part of the declared elimination of conflicts with bears, and a further 51 were killed by other means. Experts have previously warned that broad-scale hunting is not a viable and effective solution to resolving human-bear conflicts, particularly in relation to attacks on people. Despite these warnings, no alternative, scientifically supported measures have been proposed to address the root causes of such conflicts. This approach raised serious concerns among international experts and organisations as early as 2024, which was expressed in a letter addressed to the Minister of the Environment and the European Commission [1]. As the frequency of attacks is rather density independent, the management should focus on prevention of occurrence of food-conditioned and human-habituated individuals, as well as education of the public. Moreover, the management of human food waste and garbage should be urgently and seriously taken and adapted to avoid access and habituation of bears, a behaviour that is transferred to offspring, which means that it can potentially create more problem individuals in the short and long term.

According to the latest genetic study, which includes an estimate of the bear population size, the current population of brown bears in Slovakia is approximately 1,056 individuals, and effective population size, the measure of population viability, is only 266 individuals [2]. The culling of 350 bears would thus represent nearly 30% of the population (with associated poaching probably even more), posing a significant risk to its stability, genetic diversity, and long-term viability. Furthermore, the population already faces other major threats, such as traffic-related mortality and poaching. A conservative estimate suggests that approximately 500 individuals may be lost annually. Such pressures are already compromising the species' survival and the functionality of the population, as the effective population size (reproductive individuals) is currently estimated to be only 266 individuals [2]. Therefore, further population reduction through hunting could have unpredictable and potentially devastating consequences.

We are also concerned by the continued reliance on outdated and unverified hunting estimates—such as the figure of around 3,400 individuals—which have not been supported by scientific methods. This inaccurate data could lead to misleading conclusions and thus to misguided management decisions with negative repercussions for the bear population.

We do not view indiscriminate bear culling as an effective solution to these issues. More effective strategies include targeted interventions focused on problem individuals (from aversive conditioning to removal from population according to established protocols), the consistent application of preventive measures, better waste management practices and systematically informing and educating people on how to avoid and behave in bear encounters. However, preventive measures and information campaigns are still not systematically implemented in Slovakia.

A similar decision regarding intensive bear hunting was made in Romania in 2024 following a fatal bear attack. The scientific community criticized this action, emphasizing that it did not address the underlying causes of human-bear conflicts and could exacerbate the situation. Experts in the field of brown bear biology and conservation are therefore calling for a shift in approach in Romania as well [3].

We respectfully urge you to reconsider the decision to authorize mass unselective hunting and to initiate a professional dialogue involving scientists and conservationists. We advocate for interventions to be based exclusively on scientifically sound data, continuous population monitoring, targeted actions addressing specific risk situations and information campaigns. Moreover, injured bears are particularly dangerous, and we strongly recommend that all interventions, particularly removal of targeted individuals, should be conducted by a trained and professional team and all necessary actions related to the removal of individuals from the population should be properly documented, and clear, transparent communication with the public must be ensured.

Additionally, we recommend that the Slovak government amend existing legislation to enhance damage prevention measures, including support for livestock breeders, beekeepers and farmers and proper waste management. Such steps could help mitigate conflicts and promote long-term coexistence between humans and large carnivores.

List of signatories of the appeal:

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[1] LCIE & IBA, 2024: Subject: Bear management in the Slovak Republic. Letter to Slovakia from Large Carnivore Initiative for Europe (LCIE) and Association for Bear Research and Management (IBA). https://lciepub.nina.no/pdf/638674659704635364_LCIE-IBA_letter_bear_management_Slovakia_15nov_signed.pdf

[2] Tkáčová et al., 2022: Odhad velikosti populace medvěda hnědého (*Ursus arctos*) na Slovensku analýzou DNA. Závěrečná zpráva k projektu: Zisťovanie početnosti veľkých šeliem a zisťovanie stupňa hybridizácie vlka dravého na základe analýz DNA. Referenční číslo: ŠOP SR/1159/2017. Available at: https://www.sopsr.sk/news/file/00%20%C5%A0T%C3%9ADIA%20FINAL%20-%20Velikost_populace_medved_Slovensko2.pdf

[3] Pop M. I., Iosif R., Promberger-Fürpass B., Chiriac S., Keresztesi Á., Rozyłowicz L. & Popescu V. D., 2025: Romanian brown bear management regresses. Science, 387(6741): 1361. <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.adv0410>