

Your ref: Brown bear plan  
Our ref:  
Place: Trondheim  
Date: 22.12.2017

## **Review of Latvian “Action Plan for Brown Bear *Ursus arctos* Conservation Plan 2018 to 2022 “**

— This review is based on my attendance at a workshop in Latvia in early 2017 and my reading of an English translation of the draft of the new action plan, as well as email discussions with some of the authors. I have been following large carnivore management issues in the Baltic region and was involved in some research activities during the early 2000's. In addition, I have been involved in the Large Carnivore Initiative for Europe since the late 1990's.

In general I find the plan to be well written, well thought out and sensible. It provides a very good background of the status and ecology of the species in Latvia. In contrast to both wolves and lynx, the conservation status of bears in Latvia is unfavourable. This is not due to any problems with bear habitat in Latvia, or to any failure on the part of Latvian authorities in taking steps to promote their conservation. Rather it reflects intrinsic properties of bear biology. Bears breed slower than wolves and lynx, and most importantly, female bears are very slow to disperse. Therefore the recolonization of Latvia by bears from neighbouring Estonia, Russia and Belarus is going to take time, probably many decades. This understanding is implicit in the plan, but could probably have been made more explicit to help explain to decision makers and the public why it will inevitably be a slow process.

As a result of the biological properties of bear recolonisation, bear conservation in Latvia will consist of steps to facilitate this slow, natural colonisation. These mainly consist of issues to maintain forest connectivity (rather than details of forest management) and managing public opinion and stakeholder capacity to respond to the needed changes in agriculture and bee-keeping. The plan covers all these points very well. In addition, the plan covers very many of the essential administrative and procedural details that make up a modern large carnivore management system. I view the level of detail as being excellent. The focus on public opinion, interacting with stakeholders and the proactive manner to address the conflicts that will occur in the future is commendable.

There are just two areas where I think a few points could be made more explicit.

Firstly, the plan is very good in placing the Latvian situation into a Baltic and European context, and underlines the needs to focus on a transboundary population. This is very important. However, the plan could be more explicit about to what extent Latvia plans to contribute to achieving Favourable Conservation Status (in terms of numbers of bears and their potential distribution) on this population level.

If it is simply too early in the recolonization process to address these issues because of insufficient knowledge and experience, then this should be explicitly stated as a reason.

Secondly, while the plan discusses the general status of bears in Latvia and identifies the need for monitoring, I would suggest that more effort is needed to construct a really good baseline study of the present situation as it is very much unclear how many bears, and if you have any female bears at all, in the country. This can be readily addressed using DNA analysis of faeces collected during summer and autumn, and can be readily done in cooperation with hunters, foresters and other stakeholders. I would suggest that such a survey be given the highest possible priority.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'John Linnell', with a stylized flourish at the end.

John Linnell, Senior researcher, Norwegian Institute for Nature Research