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BROWN BEAR IN THE CANTABRIAN MOUNTAINS (NW SPAIN). THE PARTIAL RECOVERY OF ONE OF THE MOST ENDANGERED EUROPEAN BEAR POPULATIONS

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During the twentieth century, brown bears in the Cantabrian Mountains (NW Spain) have been decreasing until the mid-90s. Bears split in two apparently isolated subpopulations, the western (WS) and the eastern subpopulations (ES). Since 1989, the unique number of females with cubs-of-the-year (FCOY) has been monitored yearly as a proxy of the population size. In the biennium 1993-1994, only 7 and 1 FCOY were detected in the WS and the ES, respectively. At that time, the trend changed and the population started to recover. In the biennium 2011-2012, 50 and 8 FCOY were detected in both subpopulations. From 1994 to 2012, the FCOY average rates of increase were 10.6% and 6.3% in the WS and ES, respectively. During this process, the bears have reoccupied just a small part of the range previous to 1994. The increase of bear numbers in both subpopulations has consisted mainly in an increase of the densities in the areas where bears survived after 1994. The distance between the closest breeding females from WS and ES (currently, 100 km) has hardly decreased, but the presence of wandering males between both subpopulations has increased, and a successful crossing event between a western male and an eastern female was first detected in 2008. The crucial factor for the population recovery has been the reduction of the illegal human caused mortality that was causing the bear decline. This has been the result of the awareness campaigns that have been ongoing from the late 80s. Conservation actions have included the law enforcement, the habitat protection of the bear range by regional and national parks and the Natura 2000 network, the coordination of the monitoring and the conservation plans of different administrations, and the integration of hunters and other local sectors in conservation programs. For the next years, we suggest to improve the ecological and social conditions to consolidate the recovery of the ES and the areas recently re-colonized by mature females, and to promote the connection between both subpopulations.



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