

CAPTIVE BEAR ACTION PLAN FOR GEORGIA



NACRES – Centre for Biodiversity Conservation and Research

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Alertis

Fund for
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Preamble

Capturing bears, mostly cubs, from the wild and keeping them in captivity illegally is a widespread form of illegal hunting in Georgia. It inflicts a severe damage to the wild population of this species, which is on the National Red List as critically endangered. Also the practice of keeping wild-caught bears in private ownership is absolutely unlawful. The majority of captive bears are kept in extremely poor conditions. The animals lack necessary living space, shade, shelter, proper care and food, and sometimes even water; they are not protected from cruel treatment, nor are members of the public protected against this potentially dangerous predator. All this is incompatible with a humane society.

Solving the problem of illegal captivity of bears is an urgent need. Apart from conservation and animal welfare concerns, caged bears lined up along the major highways damage Georgia's international reputation.

The goal of this action plan is to eradicate illegal live capturing of bears in Georgia as well as to ensure adequate living conditions for those already in captivity.

The problem of captive bears is not only an animal welfare issue, but it has serious implications for the maintenance of the wild bear population. Hence it is a conservation problem as well. Therefore this action plan tries to maintain a good balance between the welfare and conservation viewpoints and to prevent any possible conflicts of interests. The plan proposes such approaches that are acceptable both in terms of animal rights protection and conservation of the wild bear population. Due to its complexity all stakeholders including governmental and non-governmental agencies, research and education organisations as well as interested individuals and members of the general public are strongly encouraged to participate in the implementation of this action plan.

This action plan will be implemented over the span of 6 years, after which time it may be necessary to upgrade it. It should be viewed as one of the important steps toward the conservation and sustainable management of the brown bear population in Georgia. As such it may become integrated in a future national brown bear management plan.

The plan has been based on the results and is one of the outputs of the project, Captive Bears in Georgia implemented with the financial as well as technical support of Alertis - Fund for bear and nature conservation, Holland. International experience as well as NACRES' experience and information gathered from previous studies and activities related to the captive bear problem were also fully incorporated.

1. Background

Since the early 1990s the illegal capturing and keeping of brown bears in cages or as pets is becoming a common occurrence in Georgia. Today one can see captive bears at roadside restaurants and petrol stations. In most cases the initial motivation for keeping a bear is to attract more visitors. In addition, bears are also kept as pets in private homes. Most of the captive bears have to live under harsh conditions that are truly deplorable and inhumane. Most are locked up in cages that fail to meet even minimum requirements. The cages are typically small, dirty and lack any shade at all. Most often the bears are not receiving proper care or food. Bears are not even being supplied with drinking water and there are also quality problems. Their diet is often extremely poor and comprises restaurant leftovers, mostly consisting of bread products and cooked food scraps. Some of them have to live under a constant noise of busy roads and the threat of being teased by crowds. In addition to those kept in permanent cages, street photographers are exploiting illegally captured bear cubs as a draw to attract customers (although luckily such photo gimmicks are not a common occurrence in Georgia). Most captive bears show acute signs of stress and neurosis (red eyes, unrest, repetitive movements and various stereotypic behaviours). There have been several instances observed of bears being subjected to torture, harassment and cruel treatment. Most holders lack any knowledge as to how to take care of their captive bears. Owners do not observe even the most basic safety rules and visitors are often exposed to potential threats.

The total number of bears kept in illegal captivity tend to vary from year to year. For example many of the captive bears recorded by NACRES during 1995-2000 have now been confirmed to be dead, killed or moved elsewhere. As a result of the most recent survey conducted under the project Captive Bears in Georgia up to 25 captive bears were registered. It is however suspected that some additional number of captive bears mostly kept in private homes *still* remain unaccounted for. The total adult captive bear numbers can be estimated between 30-40 individuals throughout the country (excluding those in Abkhazia or Tskhinvali region). However new captive cubs tend to appear in the spring. Many of them remain in private homes until they grow to a certain age, after which time most owners try to get rid of them. they give their bear away for the animal to likely join “the club of captive bears”, simply release it back into the wild or sometimes just shoot it (especially if the bear shows any sign of aggression toward people).

Among the 25 captive bears recorded and entered in a special data base, 14 are males and 11 are females. The average age of the bears is 3,5 years. Most of the bears (8 individuals) are 4,5 years old; the youngest bear recorded was less than one year old and the oldest individual was 9 years of age. Four bears are in private ownership, 13 are owned by restaurants, 4 are owned by various companies, 1 is at a petrol station and another 3 were in the unofficial Rustavi zoo¹. None of the owners of a captive bear(s) has any official papers or permit for keeping a bear (including the so called “Rustavi zoo”) and none of the bears has any I.D. or special record.

Both the attitudes toward their bear(s) and the underlying motivation for keeping one vary greatly from owner to owner and largely between roadside restaurants and petrol station people on the one hand and private individuals keeping a bear as pet on the other. As expected these latter owners tend to be more caring and attached to their wild pets. The reason why they keep a bear is not a commercial profit. Most of the pet bears have been raised by their patrons from a very early age and

¹ These three bears faced an imminent threat of liquidation and have now been transported to the Bear Forest at Rhenen, Holland by the Alertis and NACRES joint rescue initiative in spring, 2007.

it is not surprising that they would not want to part with them. Many of the restaurant and petrol station people admit that they wanted to have a bear because they thought it would attract more customers. Some of them are even convinced their business really increased since they had a bear, while others are not so sure. Nevertheless all of them express the willingness to further keep a bear; But none of them would oppose their confiscation by the authorities.

Most owners say they had been given their bears free of charge. Some argue that they actually adopted the bear that was homeless and would otherwise had to face liquidation. Therefore they think they have the right to demand some compensation. At least one owner had actually bought her bear; she said she paid an equivalent of USD 100 for a bear cub in Rustavi.

The level of knowledge of captive bear care and diet is extremely low among the owners. Although most of them admits this and are willing to learn more and readily accept advise.

The sites of origin (capture) of the existing captive bears include both western and eastern Georgia. But most of the bears were captured in mountainous areas of western Georgia namely Imereti (Baghdati, Chiatura, Sachkhere Districts, the forests of Sairme), Svaneti, Racha, Guria (Chokhatauri District), Achara (Khulo District). One bear has been brought from outside of the country – it was originally captured in North Ossetia, Russian Federation.

Some of the captive bears are in more or less normal physical condition. But many display strong stereotypic behaviours and evident signs of neurosis. One of the bears, a 16-month-old male, has suffered probably multiple cruel treatment in which he lost all his teeth. Another one has signs of mange. Yet another one is blind with one eye. A bear cub found in Racha (west Georgia) was suffering serious malnutrition (he was extremely small for his age and very skinny too).

The cages are typically very small. They are of simple metal design often lacking any shelter or even a roof (hence no shade or protection against rain or snow). Many of the cages despite being very small are relatively well maintained and clean. While some are extremely small and dirty (e.g. one huge adult bear is locked up in a 1.5X1.5X1.5m dirty cage at a restaurant near village Rene).

The situation is relatively better with regard to the feeding and diet of the captive bears. None of the permanently based captive bears show any signs of general malnutrition and most seem well fed. The bear at roadside restaurants are fed on restaurant leftovers. Those kept at various company offices receive better food and care in general because these companies have special funds allocated for bear food and care. As for the “pet” bears (those kept at private homes) are naturally best fed and cared for. While there is no quantity related problem, the diet of a captive bear is typically rather poor mainly consisting of bread. This is at least partly related to the ignorance of the owners² but also to financial aspects. However financial considerations are not really applicable where the captive animal is not adequately supplied with clean water. In certain cases the cages altogether lack a water tank. Very often coca-cola and other soft drinks as well as beer are given to the bears to amuse spectators.

Safety issues are often completely ignored. Neither the captive bear nor the public is protected adequately. One can actually reach out and touch the captive animal (there has been cases of people getting hurt or badly injured). Captive bears especially those owned by restaurants are on the other hand exposed to cruel treatment and harassment.

² Most owners readily accepted advise and written recommendations on captive bear diet from the NACRES team.

Current legislation does provide a legal basis for the confiscation of illegally kept bears. Moreover the brown bear is on the national red list and any unauthorised killing or capturing of a brown bear (e.g. except for scientific purposes or when it is necessary to remove a problem individual) is punishable. Nevertheless the law can not be enforced because no animal shelter is available within the country for subsequent placement of confiscated individuals. Thus any confiscated bear would have to be destroyed. Most of the NGO community strongly oppose the idea of confiscation and subsequent liquidation of the captive bears. The government is also reluctant to engage in such an action. Certain conservation groups on the other hand argue that in the best interest of the wild bear population it is best to confiscate the existing captive bears and penalize the owners. They believe it would at least discourage further capturing of wild bears even if all confiscated bears will have to be euthanized. On the other hand many of the current captive bear owners argue that they had actually adopted the bears they now possess and rescuing them from inevitable liquidation. Since they think they feed and care for their bear as much as they can, they would never agree on its liquidation but would gladly give it up if there were a nice place to put it.

This action plan is an attempt to find a compromise between the animal rights considerations, conservation interests and current owners.

2. Goals and objectives

The general goal is to resolve the problem of captive bears in Georgia.

The above goal will be achieved through the following three main objectives:

- To improve control on illegal capturing of live bears in the wild
- To eliminate illegal keeping of bears by companies as well as by individuals
- To provide adequate living conditions to the captive bears

3. Approach and Methodology

In order to make it more practical and to ensure its successful implementation the plan will be carried out in two phases. *Phase 1* is fully dedicated to the immediate remediation of the situation and involves such activities as improving government control on illegal bear hunting and capturing, improving existing legislation, registration of existing captive bears, setting up a special bear sanctuary in the country for placing confiscated bears, legalizing captive bears in certain cases, initiation of a reintroduction program for bear cubs, and extensive educational and awareness-raising activities.

Phase 1 will be conducted over the span of 3 years. It is expected that upon its completion the situation will be radically improved – there will be almost no illegal captive bears as most of them will have been placed in an official bear sanctuary or remain with their owners but with significantly improved living conditions and on strict terms. Thus all necessary background will be created for the next phase whose sole purpose will be to sustain the achieved progress and prevent any subsequent deterioration. Therefore such activities as control of illegal bear hunting and live cub capturing, educational activities as well as the reintroduction programme (if successful) will have to

be continued over Phase 2 as well. Even with strictest and most effective governmental control there will still be cases of capturing of new bears in the wild. It will be necessary to confiscate those bears even if no place is immediately available (otherwise the situation may go back to the initial status). Should there be no placement available within the country or elsewhere the animal will have to be humanely liquidated (euthanized).

The duration of *Phase 2* of this action plan will also be 3 years making the overall span of the plan 6 years, after which time it will most probably need an update.

4. Description of Activities

Phase one

4.1. Improve governmental control on illegal live capturing and captivity of bears

All of the captive bears in Georgia have originally been captured as young cubs in the wild in various parts of the country. Therefore it is of outmost importance to strictly control poaching of live cubs in the interest of the conservation of the wild bear population as well to prevent emergence of new captive animals.

The control of illegal capturing on protected areas is carried out by the respective administration and it is the responsibility of the Environmental Inspectorate to control illegal use of any natural resource throughout the country. There has been much improvement in the capacities and effectiveness of both administrations of many protected areas and the Environmental Inspectorate. Poaching control is expected to increase even further due to the improving overall effectiveness of these agencies. However, the Environmental Inspectorate is also entitled to act against unlawful captivity of wild animals including bears, to impose fines on the illegal owner, and, where necessary, to confiscate the animal. This agency needs to establish cooperation with the national veterinary service and/or specialised animal rights groups with relevant skills and capacities to execute the actual act of confiscation (such organisations must possess all necessary equipment for handling a captive animal i.e. immobilisation equipment and drugs, transport crates, etc. and everything needed for euthanasia where necessary). It may be necessary to increase the capacity of the relevant state institutions (National Veterinary Service) through targeted trainings and provision of special equipment.

4.2. Improve the existing legislation to provide for more effective rapid measures against illegal bear captivity

The authorities have been unable to take radical actions against illegal bear captivity namely to confiscate illegally kept animals due to nonexistent shelter for homeless wild animals. However there is also a need of more explicit and straightforward legislation to provide a legal basis for the confiscation of illegally kept brown bears; all procedures must be clearly outlined including the roles of different agencies. This must be incorporated into the existing law on Wild Fauna Protection as a special amendment as well as set out in a special sub-law. In addition legislation must explicitly provide for legal possession of a brown bear by private companies or individuals that are capable of meeting predefined terms and conditions.

4.3. Create an official national registry of captive bears

During the last survey 25 captive bears were recorded throughout the country. The real number of adult captive bears could be somewhat higher than is an estimated 30-40 individuals³. All recorded bears have been closely inspected and details for each of them have been entered into a special data base. It is now important to discriminate between the bears currently kept in captivity i.e. captured before the enactment of this action plan and those captured and put in captivity after that time i.e. from the date the plan will be launched. This will be achieved by chipping all the existing captive bears. These chipped bears will be confiscated from their owners and taken to a bear sanctuary (see 4.3) but the owners will not be subjected to the penalty or other sanctions. However all other new bear owners that choose to capture or put a bear in captivity will be treated as prescribed in the legislation i.e. penalised while the animal will be still confiscated.

4.4. Legalization of marked (chipped) captive bears

The owners of marked (chipped) captive bears willing to retain their bears and are ready to improve their living conditions will be given the right to keep their bears. They will have to seek a special official permit that will define terms and conditions and the liability of the owner to provide for all necessary conditions including a reasonably large and well-equipped enclosure, healthy diet and veterinary care, as well as safety for both the bear and the public. Such permit will not be subject to transferring onto another person to discourage selling of the bear. Further monitoring of legalized bears will be conducted by the authorities.

Legalization of at least some of the current captive bears will reduce the overall burden to the bear shelter and prevent its overcrowding (see 4.5).

4.5. Establishment of a special shelter for confiscated/orphan bears

A special shelter for confiscated captive and orphan bears will be set up in Georgia. It needs to be carefully planned taking into consideration positive and negative lessons learnt from international experience, and its operation and financial sustainability must be guaranteed for many years ahead. The shelter will first accept the marked (chipped) bears confiscated from their current owners (see 4.3). Thus it needs to be able to accept at least 40 captive bears. The shelter must provide best possible conditions (i.e. semi-natural) for the captive bears as well as good veterinary service, healthy diet, and guaranteed safety for its inhabitants as well as the public and nearby local communities.

It is important that the shelter begins operation in parallel to activity 4.1; otherwise it will be unable to accommodate more of new captive bears without risk of overcrowding. Ideally the shelter should also have an educational as well as scientific roles.

4.6 Bear cub rehabilitation and reintroduction programme

At least some of the bear cubs captured or found may be successfully rehabilitated and released back into wild. Research needs to be conducted and international experience taken into consideration for

³ Largely due to family owned bears or pet bears that are extremely difficult to find.

preparing young bears for life in the wild. In this respect the main criterion is that the release of young individuals does not involve high risks for the animal itself, for the environment or for humans. A special program for rehabilitation and reintroduction of captive/orphan bear cubs will be established independently or preferably on the bear shelter (see 4.3.). Released individuals will have to be closely monitored.

This program is considered as the best alternative to the need of liquidation as specified in *Phase 2* of this action plan.

4.7. Education and awareness activities

It is unlikely to completely eliminate the problem of captive bears with increased control alone. Public educational and awareness activities are important to prevent poaching and live capturing of brown bears. Special emphasis must be placed on the moral aspects of keeping a bear in a cage as well as on the implications for the wild bear population. Increased negative attitudes among the general public will make the owners of a restaurant/petrol station realise that having a caged bear means less rather than more customers.

Educational activities will employ all possible means of bringing the message to the society including press and TV, street banners, printed materials, etc.

Phase 2

After successful completion of the Phase 1 activities all the marked captive bears will have been placed in the bear shelter. But even under most effective law-enforcement there will still be new cases of illegal bear capturing. Any such case will be treated as any poacher is treated according to the law - the bear will be confiscated and either of the following procedures will apply:

- a) as the first and most favourable option the animal will be placed in the local shelter or elsewhere if there is space
- b) the animal will be incorporated into the rehabilitation and reintroduction programme in case of young cub that qualifies for that programme
- c) should either of the above be impossible the animal will have to be humanely liquidated (euthanized).

Activities: 4.1; 4.6 and 4.7 of *Phase 1* will continue throughout *Phase 2* as well.

5. Funding of the action plan

Many of the activities of this action plan especially those related to the control of poaching, confiscation of illegally captured bears, etc will be financed by the government as part of the policy developing and law enforcement activities of the relevant state institutions. The largest proportion of overall funding for this plan is however expected to be attracted from international donors. Joint contribution of the government, the donor community as well as NGOs is seen as the most preferable scenario in respect of most of the activities including bear shelter contraction and subsequent operation, legislation and policy development, education and awareness activities, bear cub rehabilitation and reintroduction programme.

6. Framework matrix of activities

#	Activity	Implementation period Year (I-VI)	Key players	Indicator
4.1.	Improve governmental control on illegal live capturing and captivity of bears	I-VI	Ministry of Environment; Environmental Inspectorate.	There is a marked trend of decline in poaching rate and number of new captive bears coming from the wild
4.2.	Improve the existing legislation to provide for more effective and rapid measures against illegal bear captivity	I	Ministry of Environment; NGOs	Amendments have been introduced to the legislation allowing (i) private companies or individuals to possess a brown bear legally should they satisfy predefined terms and conditions and (ii) the Environmental Inspectorate to adequately and effectively react to any case of illegal bear captivity.
4.3.	Create an official national registry of captive bears	I-III	Ministry of Environment; NGOs	All captive bears recorded by the 3 rd year of this action plan have been chipped and registered with the national registry of captive bears.
4.4.	Legalization of marked (chipped) captive bears	II-III	Ministry of Environment;	Depending on their willingness and capability, some captive bear owners are allowed to possess their bears with predefined terms and conditions and have been issued relevant permits.
4.5.	Establishment of a special shelter for confiscated/orphan bears	I-III	Ministry of Environment; NGOs, International organisations	A fully equipped and functional bear shelter (sanctuary) has been set up capable of accommodating at least 40 bears.
4.6	Bear cub rehabilitation and reintroduction program	I-VI	NGOs, International organisations	A bear rehabilitation & reintroduction programme developed; Bear rehabilitation & reintroduction scheme tested as a pilot activity.
4.7.	Education and awareness activities	I-VI	Ministry of Environment; NGOs, International organisations	-