

Meet the Rarest Bear in the World

Salviamo l'Orso Pescara

Photograph courtesy of Francesco Culicelli

Central Italy is the last den of the Marsican Bear. AISPA is supporting our partners from Salviamo l'Orso as they work for its survival.

Unknown to most outside of Italy, the Marsican Brown Bear is on the brink of extinction and it is listed as Critically Endangered on the Red List of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

This subspecies of European brown bear has lived in the isolation of the Apennine Mountains of Central Italy for over 500 years. These magical bears are smaller, friendlier and whilst omnivorous, maintain a mainly vegetarian diet. Although they once used to populate the Apennines of Central Italy the loss of habitat, poaching and human interference by means of livestock contagion have decimated the population. Within the last four decades 93 bears have died and more recently car accidents have further decreased their number, to the point that the latest genetic census has traced fewer than 50 individuals remaining in the 200 square mile territory of the Abruzzo, Lazio and Molise National Parks. But we must never give up -

many scientists and conservationists agree that if we act now there is still a chance to bring these beautiful bears back from the verge of extinction. This is why AISPA in co-operation with the Italian wildlife organisation "Salviamo l'Orso" (Save the Bear), is fighting against time to raise awareness and to ensure the survival of the species, which exemplifies the bio-diversity of the European continent.

Within the last few years AISPA has been working alongside Salviamo l'Orso and its passionate conservation volunteers on a range of different projects. The main aim has been to prevent human-bear conflicts and on implementing stray and working dog inoculation programmes, in order to avoid the spread of life threatening diseases to the bears. Like many scientists and conservationists, we believe that in this virtually unknown, yet stunning region of Italy, there are the right environmental conditions to ensure the survival of this unique wildlife symbol of the Central Apennines.

In 2016 thanks to AISPA's support for the project 'A passage for the Bear', Salviamo

l'Orso was able to track the bear's presence within the National Parks, produce a best-practice manual for building a "Bear smart community" in areas of fresh and imminent recolonisation and build a local, lasting capacity to co-exist with bears. With a group of dedicated volunteers, including students from Plymouth University, the organisation was able to monitor a vast peripheral area of the Marsican home range between the Abruzzo, Lazio and Molise National Park (ALMNP), the Majella National Park (MNP) and the Sirente Velino Regional Park (SVRP) which has a key importance to enforce conservations policies. Passive monitoring was carried out by 10 trail cameras, while the volunteers' activities included but were not limited to: "Road-kill monitoring" to identify wildlife passages and bear crossings; cleaning of lay-bys and dumping areas to reduce also the risk of vehicle-wildlife

collision by removing food leftovers which could attract bears; regular supervision of the Gole del Sagittario Nature Reserve, identifying criticalities such as dumping areas, broken signals, reporting of unlawful vehicle access.

This ambitious project, enabled by AISPA and driven by the volunteers' passion and commitment involved three regions and several local communities. The results exceeded expectations set out in the project's proposal and this undoubtedly makes Salviamo l'Orso and AISPA more optimistic about the future of the Marsican Bear and more determined than ever to gather the resources necessary for this project to achieve its goals.

With your financial support, we believe we can ensure that the rarest of bears survives in the National Parks of central Italy.

