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Public debates around the reinforcing of the brown bear population in the Pyrenean mountains

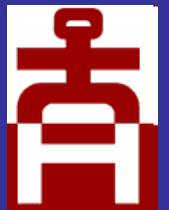


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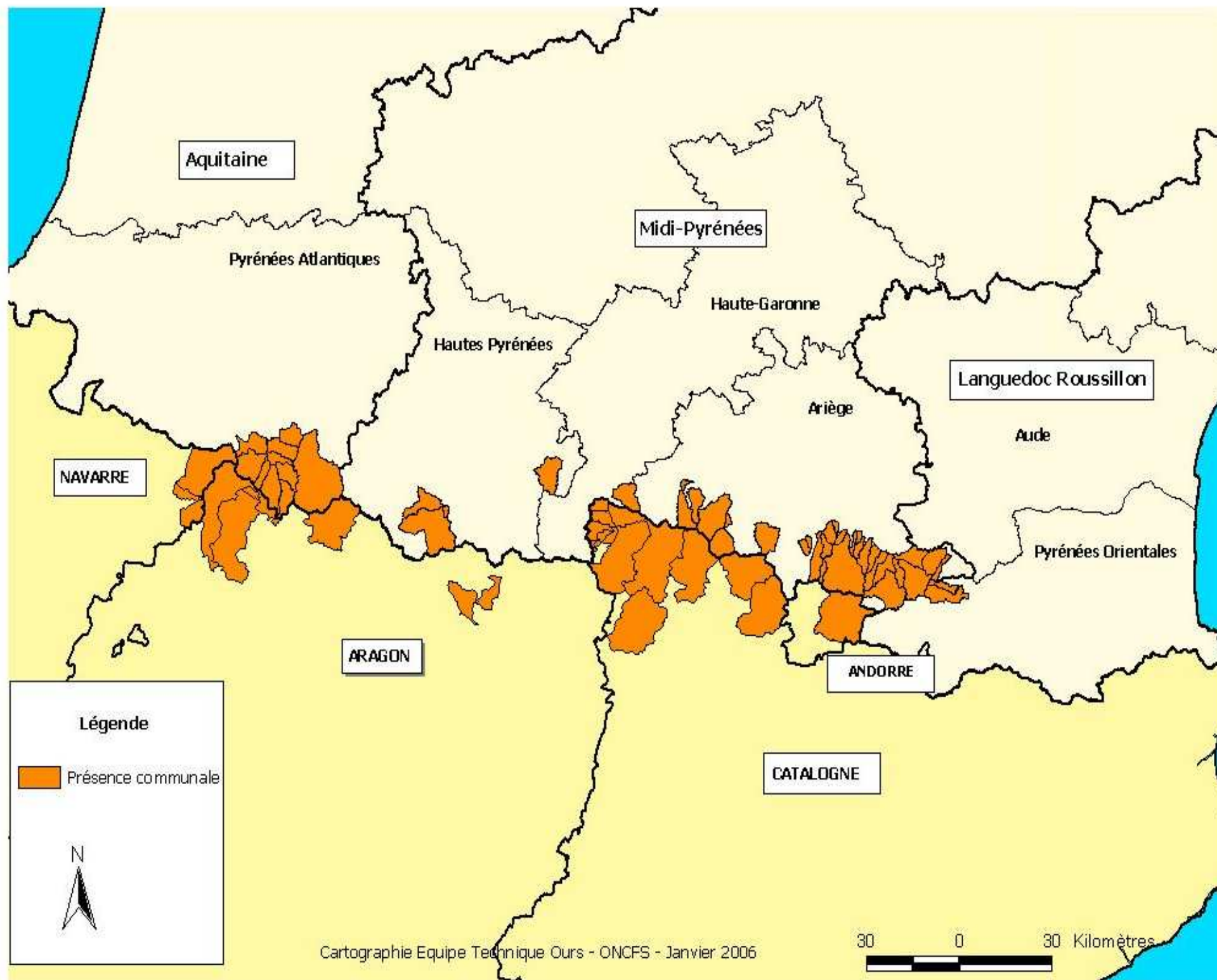
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History

- Brown bear is a traditional animal in the Pyrénées mountains, as well in France as in Spain.
- Continuous decrease of the population : 200 in 1900, 30 in 1970, 10 in 1990
- 1996-1997, a first experimental importation of 3 Slovenian bears
- 2004, accidental killing of the last female of Pyrenean origin by a hunter
- 2005, French government decides a programme of reinforcing the population by importing 5 bears every year during 3 years



Consultation about the accompanied measures of reinforcing brown bear population

- Appointment of the Mission Agrobiosciences (MAA) by the Ministry of Environment for conceiving and conducting a part of the consultation
- Choice of an original form of debate: « *Exchanges circles forums* », gathering people from various origins (according to the principle of the « *hybrid forums* »)
- Recruitment of the participants by a public opinion poll agency through phoning, in respect to criteria defined by MAA

Table 1 – Participants to the forums

Place	St-Gaudens–Aspet	Lavelanet	Tarbes-Ossun	All
Total	56	59	55	170
Men	34	32	31	97
Women	22	27	24	73
Farmers and agricultural workers	5	6	7	18
Artisans, retailers	6	4	2	12
Staff, intellectual professions	3	6	6	15
Intermediary professions	10	12	13	35
Non agricultural workers	7	4	4	15
Employees	6	8	6	20
Retired	13	12	11	36
Others, without employment	2	7	4	13
Unknown category	4	0	2	6

Organisation of the forums

- Participants are distributed around **tables** (circles) of **8 to 10** in the same room, each of them being accompanied by a conversation **conductor** and a note **recorder**
- Conversation during **2 hours**; then common **restitution** during only **3 minutes** by each circle;
- **General discussion** between participants; **final comment** by a witness (scientist in pastures ecology, journalist, sociologist)
- All the expressions are **recorded**;
written notes from the circles available for synthesis and analysis
- Convivial buffet



General remarks

- Strong interest of the participants for the formulae they discover and the ambiance of the circles,
- But scepticism regarding the possibilities to be heard by the ministry:
« *It is only an alibi! The decision is already taken!* »

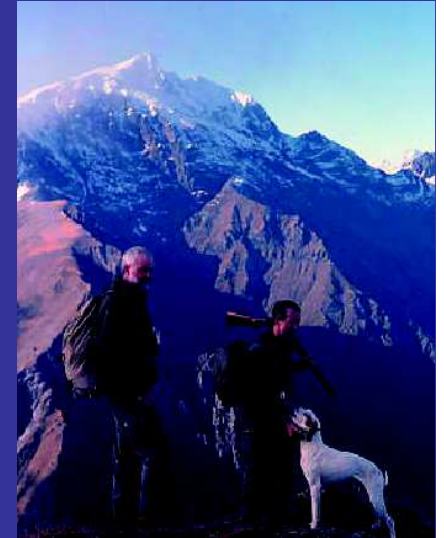
General remarks

- Bear is an impressive and dangerous animal; it was fight by the population of the valleys for numerous years
- People who have taken the decision are not native of the valleys: they cannot know the reality
- The cost of the reinforcing of the bear population could be better used for improving the condition of the inhabitants (for instance correction of deficit in public services)
- Finally, people, even favourable to bear, are critical, considering the proposed measures too sectorial, not in a perspective of global conception of the mountain environment and the mountain society

Comments by the various actors

- The hunters – one of them was responsible of the killing of the last bear female of Pyrenean origin – explain that they **could be perfect experts of the follow-up** of the bears
- For the forest managers, there are obvious **solutions for preserving the tranquility** of the bears...

And even, specific actions are possible in favour of bear, in **creating perimeters** with fruit trees, lands of bilberries, special areas for eventually feeding them with carcasses, and even bee hives dedicated only to bear!



The sheep farmers: the most crucial point



- They majoritary reject the principle of the reinforcing the bear presence and they also contest the efficiency of the proposed measures.
- Other participants hearing their explanations and their arguments are generally agreed to say that the farmers have to have priority in the accompanying measures.
- Farmers feel themselves as being denied in their technical and production competences.

They say that they are more menaced than the bear. They explain they play a positive role in the mountain environment : their disappearing could have more negative consequences on the pastures and the landscape of the valleys than the absence of the bear.

The sheep farmers: arguments about the inefficiency of the accompanying measures against bear attacks



- Economic help for appointing additional shepherds:
“They are not really professional and they need a job outside the summer time”
- Introduction of “patous” shepherd dogs in the flocks:
“They could be dangerous themselves and they need special training”
- Indemnities for animals victims of the bear : “There are also secondary effects of an attack to take into consideration: stress of all the flocks, abortions, genetic losses”.
- Economic valorisation of sheep production in the bear environment for tourism: the specific quality of their production doesn't need this type of label (for instance products of the “Bear Country”) and could induce confusion with official quality labels.

The sheep farmers : proposed solutions

- *“Do you want we change our activity in becoming feeders of the bears rather than sheep breeders?”*
- If it is needed to save the brown bear population for maintaining the biodiversity in the Pyrénées, the right solution should consist in closing them in parks and not to create parks... for the sheep.
- In any case, there is need for a special follow-up of the individual bears, with identification of their location through GPS, and also special watch of more dangerous animals.
- A minority of farmers joins an association gathering local communities favourable to bear and promoting their production towards tourists and consumers in respect to bear presence (ADET)

Four possible scenarios for the future

- *“Stop the bear”*

That means disappearance of the brown bear in the Pyrénées, at short or long term

- *“Security first”*

- *“Bear first, with valorisation by human activities”*

- *“Human first, with profits for bear”*

Scenario « *Security first* »

This Scenario stresses the fact that potentially bears are **dangerous animals** for the human - sheep farmers, shepherds, tourists - and also for the sheep and the bees, with negative consequences for sheep production which needs protection.

The cohabitation human bear being impossible in open territory, the reinforcing of the bear population is accompanied by **creating large parks for the bears**, as well as **protection systems** for the flocks, permanent **follow-up** of individual bears, controls and rules.

Scenario « *Bear first with valorisation by human activities* »

Focus on measures favourable to the bear life on **specific areas**.

The idea is that the wild animals **could stay in these territories** where they will find abundance and variety of food along the seasons: fruits, bees, carcasses.

The **choice of these territories** is funded on the knowledge of the behaviour and habits of the bears and of the factors which could incite them to limit their moving toward other parts of the mountain chain.

Consequently, in these regions of the Pyrénées, human activities could economically valorise the bear presence by **tourism, farm products, local handicraft**.

Scenario “*Human first with profits to bear*”

General agreement to the presence of the bear in considering that a living mountain, with active agriculture and animal production in respect to the environment, can provide a place to the bear.

Accent is put on the success of a social and global mobilisation of the people with government support to various aspects of the social and economic activities.

In this context, sheep farmers, as well as the hunters, play a function of mediator between human and bear, in so far they are those who have the closest permanent contact with the wild animals in the mountain area.

And what happens now?

- Is it possible the sheep farmers become active supports to bear as it is designed before in the Scenario “Human first with profits to bear”?
- In fact, the social climate is very passionate, and it is difficult to express a position or a judgement without being accused by one of the parties.
- The introduction of 5 Slovenian bears in 2006 was not followed by others in 2006 and 2007 as it was planned in the programme announced by the government in 2005.
- A contact group has just been created in Toulouse on the last July by the Minister of Ecology in order to meet the respective positions, but the representative of the farmers opposed to bear refused to participate at the first meeting.

Three hypotheses

- Firstly, the mountains where the bear is coming back were strongly transformed for one century by the evolution of agriculture and forest, of the demography, and also with deep modifications of other activities (ie. tourism): so it is **not sure that the bear could find its place by itself in this new environment** without help and supports.
- Secondly, the way consisting in creating **perimeters favourable to the bear life** could be a good way, but it needed to carry out **careful studies** on the behaviour of the present bears, in relation with their environment, before to new introductions which should be realised in the most suitable places.
- Thirdly, bear is obviously a disturbing factor in the management of the animal production. It acts similarly to the **introduction of an innovation** in a process system: the innovation can be rejected or accepted, but in this last choice it needs adaptation and training of the actors for success, and consequently it demands time for achieving the evolution.

Conclusions

- Finally, this conflicting situation could be seen as illustrating an emerging debate in our contemporary societies: do we need to save the planet or to save the humanity? and how to combine the both?
- Interest for the methodology used, with the occurrence of an “independent” operator (MAA), which could be efficient as mediating tool between the parties, as it was demonstrated about other subjects of society debates