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Lessons from Białowieża Forest on the history of protection and the world's first reintroduction of a large carnivore

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Understanding how the relationships between large carnivores and humans have evolved and have been managed through centuries can provide relevant insights for wildlife conservation. The management history of many large carnivores has followed a similar pattern, from game reserved for nobility, to persecuted pests, to conservation targets. We reconstructed the history of brown bear (*Ursus arctos*) management in Białowieża Forest (Poland and Belarus) based on a detailed survey of historical literature and Russian archives. From the end of the Middle Ages to the end of 18th century, the brown bear was considered *animalia superiora* (i.e., game exclusively reserved for nobility and protected by law). Bears, also a source of public entertainment, were not regarded as a threat. Effective measures to prevent damages to traditional forest beekeeping were already in practice. In the beginning of 19th century, new game-management approaches allowed most forest officials to hunt bears, which became the primary target of hunters due to their valuable pelt. This, together with an effective anticarnivore policy enhanced by bounties, led to bear extirpation in 1879. Different approaches to scientific game management appeared (planned extermination of predators and hunting levels that would maintain stable populations), as did the first initiatives to protect bears from cruel treatment in captivity. Bear reintroduction in Białowieża Forest began in 1937 and represented the world's first reintroduction of a large carnivore motivated by conservation goals. The outbreak of World War II spoiled what might have been a successful project; reproduction in the wild was documented for 8 years and bear presence for 13. Soft release of cubs born in captivity inside the forest but freely roaming with minimal human contact proved successful. Release of captive human-habituated bears, feeding of these bears, and a lack of involvement of local communities were weaknesses of the project. Large carnivores are key components of ecosystem-function restoration, and site-specific histories provide important lessons in how to preserve them for the future.

#PDF available hier:

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