



Bear observation tour organizer Miha Mlakar poses for a photo in one of his bear watching hide in the forest above the small village of Markovec, some 50 km south of Ljubljana. — AFP photos



A bear explores the forest above the small village of Markovec.



A bear watching hide in the forest above the small village of Markovec, Slovenia.



A bear explores the forest above the small village of Markovec, Slovenia.



A bear-safe and bear-friendly waste and compost containers in the small village of Banja Loka, Slovenia.



Sheep graze on a meadow behind the electric shepherd fence close to the small village of Markovec, Slovenia.

Slovenians strive to live in peace with bears

When he used to go hunting, Miha Mlakar would dream of killing a bear. But today the 33-year-old from Slovenia makes his living watching the animals, peacefully, in their natural forest environment. The turnaround to shooting bears with a camera, not a rifle, puts Mlakar, who runs bear observation tours, in step with wider efforts in the small Alpine nation to promote the coexistence of humans and bears. Once on the verge of extinction, Slovenia's brown bear population is booming, with the number roaming the sprawling forests having doubled in the last decade to around 1,000.

As a result, encounters with bears have increased—not that it seems to unduly worry everyone. “If you run into a bear, you have to step back... (But) there is no danger. The bear also prefers to move away,” Ljubo Popovic, a 67-year-old pensioner who lives in the village of Banja Loka in the southern Kocevje region, told AFP. Lying an hour to the west, near Markovec village, Mlakar has built 20 hides in a remote patch of forest reachable only by off-road vehicle and takes visitors, including foreign tourists, to observe the bears. “I cannot imagine this forest without bears. Bears make the forest wild and pristine, natural, like it was a few hundred or thousand years ago... I feel a connection with bears,” he tells AFP.

Managing bears

Slovenian bears are even sought after abroad. Between 1996 and 2006, eight Slovenian bears were released in the French Pyrenees, and France currently has a population of about 40 bears, whose presence divides opinion in regions where they live. In Slovenia, more than 60 percent of respondents in a 2016 survey carried out in areas where bears live said they were in favor of the bears' presence, even if many also said they would like to see the numbers regulated. “We have an average of one to three cases of physical contact between bears and humans per year,” Rok Cerne, of the Slovenia Forest Service in charge of wildlife, told AFP.

“Fortunately, we haven't registered any serious incident over the last years,” he added, stressing they were “very active in preventive measures”. Removing food sources that could attract bears has been one such step. In villages close to bear habitats, local authorities have replaced regular plastic waste and compost bins, which can be easily opened or flipped by

the animals, with containers protected by heavy metal cages. Meanwhile, damage to cattle from bear forays has remained stable, at up to 200,000 euros (\$231,500) a year, despite the bear population increasing, Cerne said.

Farmers are entitled to an 80-percent subsidy for using electric fences to protect flocks and the loss of cattle due to bears is compensated. If a bear becomes a habitual visitor to a village, special intervention groups step in to kill or relocate the animal with the help of local hunters. Regular culling also keeps the population under control to ensure long-term cohabitation, Cerne said. This year, authorities have proposed culling 200 bears, twice as many as last year.

Meanwhile, some 940 forays by bears into populated areas were registered last year, including attacks on sheep flocks and entry into gardens; so far this year, the figure is 120. But environmental campaigners fear that “hunting will be the main instrument to keep bear populations under control”, when other measures could work, said Livia Cimpoeru, of the WWF

plan published last month that recommends hunting to keep numbers at optimum levels. Use of reinforced bins, as well as a proposal for building work to be limited in regions where bears live, are also included in the government plan. Since the beginning of last year, 31 people, mostly shepherds, have been attacked, one of them fatally.



Sheep graze on a meadow close to the small village of Loski Potok, Slovenia.

Romania's ‘Van Damme’ bear
Slovenia's approach could inspire neighboring Romania, home to about 6,000 bears or 60 percent of Europe's estimated bear population, where tourists to villages in the Carpathian Mountains often post pictures online of bears waiting to be hand-fed. Bears rummaging through waste containers on the outskirts of cities, such as Brasov in central Romania, have become a common sight. And on a central motorway construction site, workmen have christened a regularly spotted sturdy male bear Van Damme after the Hollywood star.

Beyond tourists' anecdotes however, Romania has seen a “growing number of attacks” by bears, highlighted in a conser-

vation plan published last month that recommends hunting to keep numbers at optimum levels. Use of reinforced bins, as well as a proposal for building work to be limited in regions where bears live, are also included in the government plan. Since the beginning of last year, 31 people, mostly shepherds, have been attacked, one of them fatally.

Learning simple rules, such as how to avoid startling bears and not feeding them, as well as efficient management like accurate counting to ascertain trends, is crucial for reducing conflicts with humans, said Mareike Brix, of German-based EuroNatur foundation. “There is a risk, and there can be problems... But it's also great (to have bears). Wild nature has become so rare in Europe,” she tells AFP. — AFP

Who built Stonehenge? Cremation ashes yield clues

Despite a century of scientific scrutiny, the 5000-year old Neolithic monument in southern England known as Stonehenge has yielded few secrets about the people buried amidst its ring of towering rocks. Most of their remains were cremated, leaving only ashes, a few bone fragments, and an archaeological dead-end. But a eureka moment discovery by Christophe Snoeck, a University of Oxford graduate student at the time, revealed that many probably came from as far afield as Wales in western Britain, source of the bluestone used to carve Stonehenge's mysterious and entrancing monuments.

Some of these pre-historic wayfarers—who may have helped transport the massive stones—were cremated before their ashes were laid to rest, Snoeck and colleagues reported in a study published Thursday in Scientific Reports. Others may have died on the job, or settled near Stonehenge to finish their days.

What Snoeck discovered in the lab is that strontium, a heavy element found in bone, resists the high temperatures of a

funeral pyre, which can top 1000 degrees Celsius (1832 degrees Fahrenheit). Indeed, extreme heat seals the element's unique signature, isolating it—even over thousands of years—from contamination by surrounding soil. For scientists trying to tease out data from human remains burnt to a crisp, this opened up a gold mine. Cremation destroys all organic matter, including DNA.

“But all the inorganic matter survives, and there is a huge amount of information contained in the inorganic fraction of human remains,” Snoeck explained. By measuring traces of strontium, he told AFP, “it is possible to evaluate the origin of the food we eat, especially the plants.”

From the forests of Wales

Plants absorb strontium from the soil, and that strontium is then incorporated into our bones, reflecting the place where the plants grew. The researchers examined skull bone fragments from 25 people buried during an early phase of Stonehenge's history, around 3000 BC. Ten of them, they determined, had spent at least the last 10 years of their lives in a different region.

Archeologists already knew that Stonehenge bluestone came from Wales, so when the strontium profile of these ten outsiders matched what is known of the region's flora, it seemed reasonable to

assume they did as well.

The scientists were also able to tell whether the wood used in funeral pyres was from the Wessex area around Stonehenge, or from trees typical of the forests in Wales.



This file photo shows a general view of the prehistoric monument of Stonehenge, a world heritage site, near Amesbury in South West England. — AFP

This enabled them to conclude that some of the people buried at the site had probably been cremated in western Britain before their ashes were transported. Archeologists who excavated the site in the early 1920s—before reburial of the remains—reported that cremated matter had been deposited in organic containers such as leather bags, apparently brought from a distant place for interment. Much remains unknown about the pre-historic humans who erected Stonehenge, including the beliefs and rituals that animated their culture.

But the new findings “suggest that people from the Preseli Mountains in West Wales not only supplied the bluestones used to build the stone circle, but moved with the stones and were buried there too,” concluded John Pouncett, a co-author of the study and Spatial Technology Officer at Oxford's School of Archaeology. All told, there are between 150 and 240 cremation burials at Stonehenge, according to a recent study in the journal *Antiquity*. — AFP