

Brown Bear a Symbol of Past and Present

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Abstract. The brown bear subject has been characterized lately by an increased level of research complexity. Inside current article the brown bear will benefit from a broader assessment of its modern history and representation, showing that it can be understood as a symbol over time. The historical representation will be related to the evaluation of the existing literature, offering a multitude of mythological and folklore meanings, starting from King Ragnar to the Bear Dance, proving the animal was present in the daily life of people from different parts of the world. Through the details displayed, the meanings of bear will be understood, showing the value of this symbol in history. This is similar to the presence of the constellation *Ursa Major* (Great Bear) among the other stars in the sky.

Contemporarily it will be seen that the perception has changed today and what was previously deified is now stigmatized and brutalized. According to a survey conducted in Covasna and Braşov counties, 52% of the respondents expressed fear of bears, with 19% saying that they feel terrorized by them. As a result, people from Romania and from other countries use both non-lethal and lethal measures to solve possible conflicts with bears. In the Central Region of Romania, 220 preventive actions were taken from 2021 to 2022 to keep bears away from human settlements. Between 2017 and 2022, 4.405 phone calls were made to the 112 National Emergency Service reporting the presence of bears, while 154 bears were found dead for unknown reasons.

Keywords: brown bear, mythology, *Ursus arctos*, Bear Dance, conflicts.

Introduction

While investigating the subject, has been noticed that there is a rich portfolio of meanings associated with it. As a result, has been decided to approach in an extensive way the mythology and folk senses associated with the bear, but also to anchor the study to the reality.

In addition, the motivation was given by a previous study carried out by the authors in autumn of 2021, in which a first high level assessment of the brown bear population was made, going from the European to the Romanian context.

Inspiration for this writing also relates to the various unforeseen encounters with this species on the national roads, inside cities, or on household waste platforms, lived by the authors of the article or by other persons met during the research. Gradually has been understood the fact

that the bear population increased in recent years, and the symbolism of the brown bear has changed from the past, a direct observation that complemented official reports.

The bear has been a symbol since ancient times and was frequently revered through various rituals. Presently, human survival and conservation instincts, excessive care from animal lovers, or even inexperience, made the species to be often portrayed in a negative light. Despite being a supreme wild being with all the elements to stand out and be coveted, bears are often the subject of discussions that do not necessarily favor the species but instead harm their survival and well-being.

The current paper aims to show what bears have symbolized in the past and what they represent today. Based on the factors observed in the field, the idea of performing a comprehensive analysis that would put together various elements appeared. This direction has been seen as a possible solution to reduce the level of complexity of the subject, focusing research on three objectives:

1. Recognizing the meanings of the bear in the past;
2. Identification of the connotations in the present days;
3. Evaluation of the interrelation between humans and bears in different countries, including Romania.

As a result, the paper begins with an analysis of existing literature in various cultures, to highlight the references associated with the bear symbol in the past. Authors have tried to find similarities between different cultures, although there are differences in language and geographical area. Furthermore, the chapter dedicated to results and discussions contains quantitative examination and situations that bring new meanings to the bear.

Literature review

The meaning of the bear in ancient times in various countries

According to an article published by Joshua J. Mark (2018), "mythology (from the Greek *mythos* for the story of the people and *logos* for word or speech, so the spoken story of a people) is the study and interpretation of often sacred tales or fables of a culture known as myths or the collection of such stories, which deal with various aspects of the human condition". By summarizing the definition provided, it can be assumed that mythology is the sum of the various existing myths.

The definition given by the writer cited above has been seen as a practical allegory, useful to represent the complexity of the factors encountered in research and as a requirement to provide theoretical and practical results.

The same writer brings up a very interesting view regarding bears. He states that the Vikings raised them as pets, being near the houses of warriors, similar to cats and dogs (Mark, 2019). Remaining in the perimeter of Viking legend, it is said that King Ragnar had to defeat the two guards of his future wife, Lagertha, a bear and a dog, both protecting her house (Groeneveld, 2018).

The bear was also the inspiration for the appointment of several gods in the old Celtic Pantheon. Consulting an article written by Mark Cartwright (2021), names such as Andarta, Artaius, Artio, Matunus were identified, having as seed the Celtic term for the animal bear.

Another famous bear-related myth appears in the Greek environment and is related to the *Ursa Major* (Great Bear) and the *Ursa Minor* (Small Bear). Citing an article written by Antonello (2013), here is described the case of Callisto, accompanying the goddess Artemis and the mother of Arcas, the son of Zeus. According to legend, she was transformed into a bear and later into a constellation of stars (*Ursa Major*) and her son, Arcas, into another one (*Ursa Minor*).

Greek mythology provides another well-known example, the goddess of hunting, wildlife and the moon, Artemis. Some indications are delivered in an interesting book chapter published by the Museum Tusculanum Press - University of Copenhagen. These include the one related to the performance of a ritual in which Athenian girls are masked as bears. Another relevant case is the name of several locations in Anatolia, which could be related to the Latin term of the brown bear, *Ursus arctos* (Ballesteros Pastor, 2009).

Legend of bears is also found on land inhabited by ancient Indian tribes in North America. It came to the attention of the authors the chapter written by Herman Bender (2018) in a dedicated book, where a rich collection of myths and traditions about bears can be seen, many of them related to the moon and stars, facts doubled by images and photos, which can be consulted by specialists in the field. Another interesting example refers to the Bear Dance tradition of the Ute Indian Tribe, associating the animal with protection, healing and connection with nature, a ritual passed down from generation to generation (McBeth, 2015). The Andean people also believed in the healing power of bear fat and gallbladder for pain relief, impotence, hair growth, and eye diseases (Bryan et al., 2008).

The Haida Legend of Bear Mother, originating from North America, was described by Paul Shepard (1993) in his book "The Biological Bases of Bear Mythology and Ceremonialism" and later by James and Matsoureff (2008). The story is about a woman who, while picking berries, cursed the bears and was forced to marry the nephew of a chief bear. She later gave birth to two cubs that had both human and animal traits.

The legend highlights the punishment given to the woman for not respecting and honoring the spirit of bears. It also emphasizes the connection between man and bear, as we share similar features with them, as Shepard (1993) pointed out. The Inuit people also noted the resemblance of features and believed that there was a close relationship between the spirits of the two beings (Bryan et al., 2008).

Bryan et al. (2008) captured a series of myths and legends from different parts of the world in their book. One old Chinese belief was that bears fed on iron and copper, metals associated with peace. Malaysians made talismans from bear claws, believing they were loaded with bear courage. Andean people made amulets of claws and bear teeth, which served as protection.

In general, direct encounters with bears happened when hunting them. Rituals were performed to reconcile and honor the hunted bear, as well as to give thanks for its sacrifice. The people of Alaska, for example, held ceremonies after completing the chase, where they honored the hunted bears with songs and gifts, or by returning the bones of the animals to the lands from which they were harvested to release the spirits (Bryan et al., 2008).

The meaning of bear in ancient times in Romania

Carrying out an evaluation of the myths and traditions related to Romanian folklore, was seen that the portfolio of behaviors and legends is prosperous and shows many similarities with the cases presented for the other cultures.

The story of the high-faced god priest Zamolxis in ancient Dacia will be cited as a starting point, whose name could be translated as "the one that wears the bear skin" (Sandu, 2021). At a rapid assessment, the way the high priest is described by his name may resemble the shaman figure of the Indians, who covered their bodies with clothes made of hunted animal fur. The same author, Sandu (2021), mentions the tradition of Bear Dance, made towards the end of the year, by groups of people, wearing masks to celebrate various aspects of life. Undoubtedly, a parallel can be drawn with the same tradition present at the Ute Indian Tribe.

In Romanian there is a name related to the Day of the Bear, Martin, and on this day Saint Martin is called to protect animals (Sandu, 2021), resulting from here the safeguard attribute and also the nickname of the bear "*Moș Martin*" (in English *Old Martin*). In addition to February the 2nd, the author mentions August the 1st, Bear Saturday, Autumn and Winter Martins as feast periods for this species.

The Day of the Bear, celebrated every year on February the 2nd, is called Stretenie and was described to the authors by the elders from the Romanian countryside. The same information was confirmed by consulting the works of Romanian writers (Sandu, 2021). According to traditions existing on this day, the bear announces the arrival of spring, based on its behavior influenced by weather conditions, having a similar meaning to Groundhog Day:

- if the sky is clear and the sun is present, the bear wakes up from its long winter sleep, may be frightened by its shadow on the snow and returns to sleep in the den, resulting in the delay of spring;
- in contrast, if the sky is dark, with clouds, the bear awakened from hibernation, goes outside the den, thus announcing the early arrival of spring.

The Bear Dance is presented in a broad manner by Berdan Lucia (2002), having as a case study the tradition from Dărmănești, Bacău County, and again we can see details present in the tradition of the Ute Indian Tribe. Mrs. Berdan goes even further in describing the example and associates root elements in the domain of Artemis, the goddess of the hunt, and Zamolxis, the priest-god.

In Romania, the fur and skull of hunted bears were considered trophies because they had economic value. The largest and most attractive ones were honored by exhibiting them in museums. In another book, Ion Ghinoiu (2003) dedicates several pages to the symbolism of the bear, mentioning its power of protection and healing, its ability to announce the change of season, and the use of bear masks in dance rituals. Belief in the healing power was also found among sick people, who used bear fat after chemotherapy or to treat joint or muscle pain.

The portfolio of behaviors and legends related to Romanian folklore is rich and diverse. Before concluding the literature review for the Romanian environment, the authors would like to cite a recent study by Ionucu Pop (2022), who compiled the list of cases for the construction of the term "mythological bear". This is an interesting synthesis for the evolution of the term bear, adding more examples to those already provided.

Summarizing the various works indicated in this chapter, the following list of meanings can be identified for different cultures as represented in Table 1. It should be understood that this is not the complete list of meanings, but rather provides a representation based on the works consulted by the authors, with potential for further expansion.

In most of the considered cultures the bear represented a pet, divinity, protection or healing, all of which show a significant and positive relationship, but also a close bond between human and bear.

Closing of this chapter, Joshua J. Mark (2018) is again quoted, stating that "at their most basic level, myths comfort by giving a sense of order and meaning to what can sometimes seem like a chaotic world". The idea that myths by their nature and content can support in clarifying misunderstanding, towards outlining some data structures can be perceived as an interesting point of view.

Table 1. Historical bear meaning in different cultures

Meaning	Viking Legends	Celtic Legends	Greek Mythology	North American Indian Tradition	Asian Legends	Andean Traditions	Romanian Folklore
Home Pet	x			x	x		
Divinity		x	x			x	x
Star Constellation			x	x			x
Geographical naming			x				
Protector	x			x	x	x	x
Dance Ritual			x	x		x	x
Mystic			x	x			x
Courage					x	x	
Healing power				x		x	x

Source: Authors' own representation based on reviewed literature.

Methodology

Given the complexity of the subject, various elements present in the study of authors have been put together, in order to answer the various research questions.

It can be indicated that innovation within society has allowed the migration of myths to information, and this path has been followed even within the structure of this research work. This statement is translated in the title of this study, in the organization of data sources to support the main ideas, and in the historical flow of meanings associated with the bear symbol.

For the study of literature, several books and research papers belonging to foreign and national writers were accessed. The content was rendered in tabular form to identify similarities, characteristic of the comparative analysis. This framework has been used to assess the meanings of the past.

In order to have more perspectives on the evolution of the situation, observation sessions were also carried out in the natural habitat of the brown bear in Romania and a visit to the controlled environment from the Libearty Sanctuary in Zărnești was done. One of the authors participated in several actions to remove and relocate bears found near human settlements. Portion of the results obtained were highlighted with the help of photos taken by the authors.

The research was conducted to gather information on the current interactions between bears and inhabitants of various countries, like Austria, Croatia, Italy, Slovenia and Sweden. Data for the first four countries was collected from the Annual Reports of the "Population level management and conservation of brown bears in Northern Dinaric Mountains and the Alps" project. Information for Sweden was obtained from the Wildlife Damage Center's website.

The quantitative analysis emphasis was on assessing the number of driven away, relocated and killed bears in Romania, and of the 112 emergency calls by which the presence of bears was notified. In order to assess the results quantitatively, official national sources were considered. The data used in this study was collected from reports issued by the National Agency for Environmental Protection. These reports are part of the "National Register of Accidental Captures and Killings of All Bird Species, as well as Strictly Protected Species listed in Annexes No. 4A and 4B", and the "National Register of Driving Away, Tranquilizations and Relocations/Removals by Euthanasia or Shooting of Bear Specimens - According to O.U.G. No. 81/2021".

The Special Telecommunications Service was asked for public interest information about the number of calls received to the 112 emergency services from people reporting encountering a brown bear in the Central Region of Romania.

Data has been interpreted based on the graphical representations that were made in the Microsoft Excel program.

Results and discussions

The meaning of the bear in present-days based on actual events

While meeting a bear was often considered a spiritual experience in the past, such encounters have become currently a reality that occurs naturally, without any therapeutic benefits. These events can happen unexpectedly in locations like gardens, hotels, or even inside homes. In fact, some encounters with bears can be quite surprising, and the traditional stories about bears, such as the Romanian tale "*The Bear Tricked by the Fox*", no longer fully capture the reality of these meetings. To illustrate this point, we have provided a few examples in the following paragraphs.

Information gathered by one author from urban residents suggests that bears' territory has expanded and includes areas closer to human habitats. As an example, there is the account of a tenant in an apartment complex in Braşov Municipality who was unpleasantly surprised to find a mother bear and her three cubs in a walnut tree just outside his window in the fall of 2021. Also, a homeowner in the same area encountered the bear cubs right in front of the gate of his house. Finally, a native from Brasov narrated an experience where a bear crossed paths with him while leaving his home and heading to his car.

No physical harm was inflicted on the people involved in these events, but they experienced fear. However, a man traveling to carry out agricultural activities near the village of Stupinii Prejmerului in Braşov County in September 2020 was attacked by a bear while in the corn crop. Unfortunately, the owner of the crop died due to the attack.

In early March 2023, a person was severely attacked by a female bear near his home in Harghita County. The attack caused him serious injuries. At the incident scene, there were also three bear cubs, recently born.

Although encounters between humans and bears may resemble scenes from fairy tales, such experiences are far from fictional and only represent a fraction of actual occurrences. In fact, from 2020 to 2022, such encounters have become increasingly common and have resulted in serious injuries and even human fatalities.

Response of people encountering brown bears

It has been observed that human-bear encounters or bear sightings near people settlements were rare in the past. This is supported by the data presented in Figure 1, which shows the number of calls received by the Special Telecommunications Service from 2010 to 2022. The calls were made to report a bear attack on a person or the presence of a brown bear in areas where human life or safety could be at risk. The calls information was divided in two periods: 2010-2016, when hunting of bears was allowed, and 2017-2022, when it was banned.

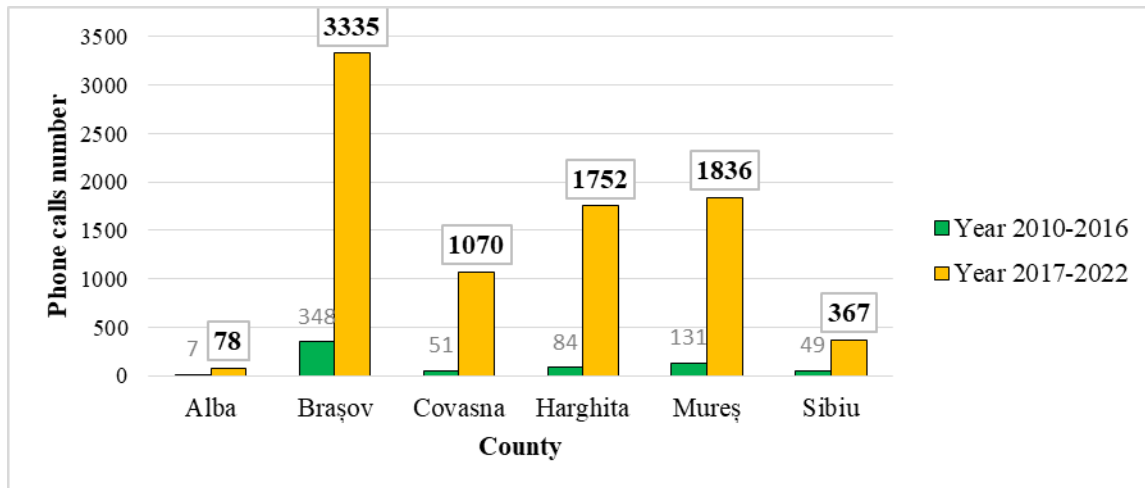


Figure 1. 112 Emergency phone calls situation on Center Region

Source: Special Telecommunications Service 112 database.

From 2010 to 2016, a total of 670 calls were registered to report the presence of brown bears. However, from 2017 to 2022, the number of calls increased significantly, and a total of 8.438 calls were registered with the 112 National Emergency Service. Most of these emergency appeals were made from Braşov County, followed by Mureş and Harghita.

A study conducted by Stăncioiu et al. (2019) in Braşov and Covasna counties revealed that many people desire to remove and eliminate bears. In the study, 400 people were interviewed, and 80% of them preferred capturing, relocating, or shooting the bears, while only 17% of them chose more peaceful measures. The study also shows that most people who want to drive away bears have had direct encounters with them or have suffered material damage due to bear-initiated attacks on livestock or crops. More specifically, 52% of the interviewees declared that such events cause them fear, and 19% stated that they cause terror. Only 1% of the interviewees confirmed their aversion to bears.

Can et al. (2014) conducted a study that also revealed the decreasing tolerance towards bears among American, Indian, Asian, and Andean people. The study showed that Indian people have the lowest tolerance rate towards bears (16%), while American people have the highest bear acceptance rate (5%).

Deified in the past, *Ursus arctos* is today driven away by any method, mistreated, or even killed, as it is a wild, powerful, and feared species.

Because bears have also caused a significant amount of damage to people's agricultural property, and hunting them is no longer allowed, various actions have been taken against them annually. These actions include establishing rehabilitation centers such as the Libearty Sanctuary in Zărneşti from Braşov County (Figure 2) and Bear Again from Harghita County. Figure 3 also provides evidence of the initiatives taken against bears.



Figure 2. Bear Sanctuary in Zărnești, Brașov County

Source: Author own phone gallery.

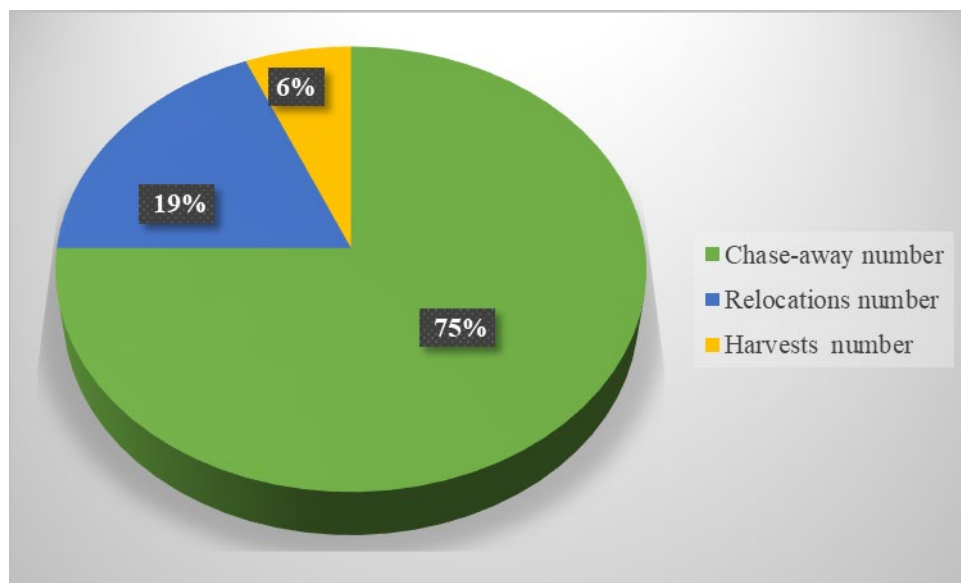


Figure 3. Number of bears driven away, relocated, or harvested during 2021-2022

Source: The National Agency for Environmental Protection.

It is obvious that the relationship between humans and bears has deteriorated over time. Humans have become increasingly intolerant towards bears and now resort to various methods to remove them from their surroundings. In the Center Region of Romania in 2021-2022, there were recorded a total of 220 actions taken against bears, out of which 75% involved chasing them away (n=165), 19% involved relocating them (n=41), and 6% (n=14) involved shooting bears for extraction, according to the National Agency for Environmental Protection (1).

These measures aim to guide bears back to their natural habitat, limit human-bear interactions, and reduce the damage caused by bears. Acoustic or light signals are used to remove bears found wandering in towns, near houses, grazing areas, or agricultural activities. Objects like

cans, plastic bottles, metal buckets, firecrackers or car horns, gunshots, people's voices, and hunting dogs can produce these signals. The light signals can be produced by special intervention vehicles, headlights, flashlights, or fires set up on the outskirts of towns specifically for this purpose.

The description above can be associated with an ancient ritual, but in reality, the situation is quite different. *Ursus arctos*, once revered as a deity, is now an unwanted species.

To prevent conflict between bears and humans, relocation (Figure 4) is often employed as a solution. This involves an intervention team capturing and tranquilizing the bears before moving them to their natural habitats in distant locations or, in some cases, rehabilitation centers.



Figure 4. Bear female with three cubs relocation action from Braşov Municipality

Source: Author own phone gallery.

Often, operations involve moving female bears with cubs to new, distant territories. However, male bears are not exempt from this process. Unfortunately, these actions do not always produce the expected results. Sometimes, the adults are killed by people from the bear's new location, leaving the cubs as orphans in the territories of other bears.

Precautionary and non-lethal measures taken by people in Romania or other countries such as North America, Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, Italy, or Sweden confirm this. These measures include fencing properties and goods with electric fences (Bellringer, 2017), shepherds and guard dogs to protect domestic animals (Wildlife Damage Centre of Sweden). But people do not always resort to non-lethal measures to deal with bears. Field data indicates that individuals also utilize less lethal methods, such as poisoning or baiting to attract bears to railways, as well as creating snares or traps to capture and kill them. It has also been observed that certain individuals take

illegal measures to protect themselves from bears. Those involved in bear management have also noticed this trend. Additionally, natural causes contribute to the decrease in the bear population. Figure 5 represents this data graphically, highlighting that human-bear interaction can negatively impact bears, not only humans, due to conflicts between the two.

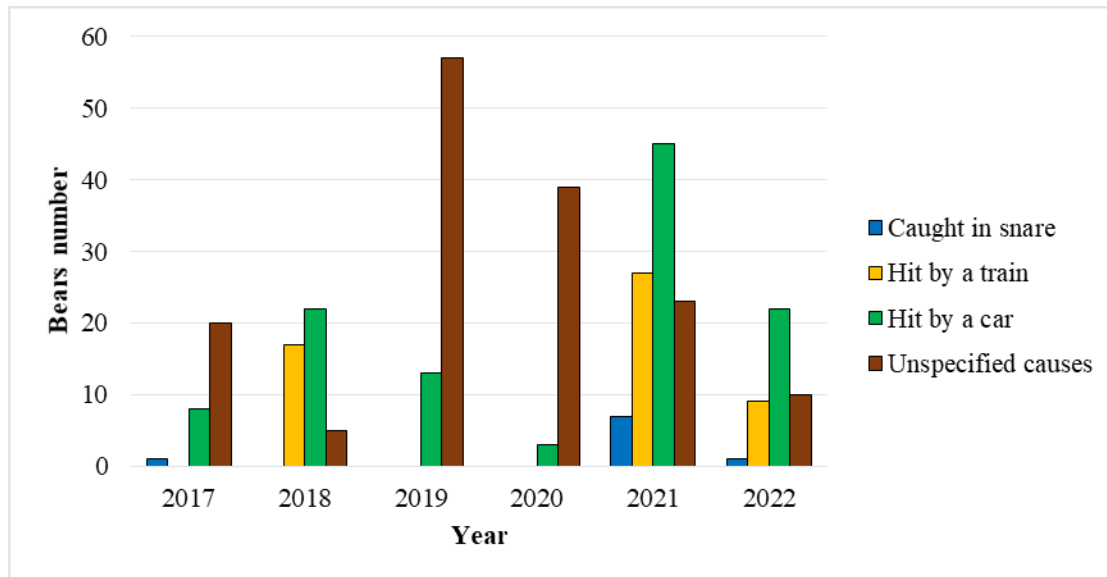


Figure 5. Brown bears mortality in Romania due to natural or anthropogenic causes

Source: The National Agency for Environmental Protection.

Between 2017 and 2022, a total of 329 bears have died in Romania due to non-hunting related causes. Out of these deaths, 154 were caused by unspecified reasons, 113 were due to being hit by a car, 53 were caused by being hit by a train, and nine bears died as a result of being caught in snares (National Agency for Environmental Protection 2). During this period, bears caught in snares were also released after being discovered in time.

It is possible that some of the deaths that occurred in 2019 and 2020 were a result of human activity, such as poisoning, as the cause of such deaths has not been specified.

Conclusion

Through this work, authors wanted to show what has been observed since the beginning of human history, namely the desire of people to understand the various phenomena surrounding them, to obtain details about the external environment, to find out the root causes, and to find ways to react appropriately to impacting elements.

In many cases, the understanding of events, such as the relationship with the bear, exceeded the available knowledge of ordinary individuals at that time, due to their complexity and had to be explained through beliefs or elements of mythology.

What has been observed in practice, although science has advanced, there are still situations based on concepts from the past, raising even more the need to understand their power of meaning over time. In other words, beliefs and mythology assign a leading position to the bear.

Encounters with bears were once seen as powerful and even desirable, the bear symbolizing strength, healing, protection, and respect. Nowadays, however, stories of such encounters seem like thrillers, and the brown bear is equated with fear, terror, damage, and even death. While some

people used to keep bears as pets, today they fear interacting with them. The shift in the bear's symbolism is also evident in the results of the study "Coexistence with Bears in Romania: A Local Community Perspective", which found that 80% of respondents believed bears should be removed from human settlements.

The direct interaction of persons with bears has a significant impact on their status and survival. What some consider protective measures can lead to conflicts and, in some cases, even the elimination of the entire species. This is no longer just an utopian scenario. The situation is complex, and it is not always clear who should take responsibility for the conflicts that arise.

Acknowledgements

The work is dedicated to Professor Martin, who passed away at an early age.

At the same time, we would like to thank the people who shared their bear experiences with us, as well as those who guided us in the field and helped with data collection.

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