



Conservationist Emrah Çoban retrieves a bear tracking collar found by Emircan, left, in a field. Stephen Starr for The National

## Turkey's bear boulevard: how a wildlife corridor may save their hides

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In the pitch black of night Emrah Çoban shines a torch into the forest but sees only coniferous trees and a winding stream. He forces his labouring SUV up an incline and across a set of train tracks. Next to him is his wife and fellow conservationist Aysegül Karaahmetoglu.

Then, two sets of tiny lights reflect back: the eyes of a brown bear and her cub. As they run from the sound of the car's engine, other dark shapes move, too. Three, four, seven, then eight bears, all within a few dozen metres of each other in a scene more reminiscent of the Alaskan wilderness than the eastern Turkish highlands close to Sarikamis.

Around the bears, 12 in all, a pack of semi-feral dogs bark incessantly. The bear cubs are unsure which way to turn. With no way out, another, a massive adult, decides simply to curl up and lie down.

Then, a pair of powerful wild boar appear – ignoring the seemingly mortal danger of hungry bears, humans and dogs – digging ferociously at the ground.

The reason they've gathered here? To feast on the stinking landfill that lies underneath.

The spread of humans into the wilds of Anatolia mean large animals around the town of Sarikamis see the local landfill as their primary source of food.

Every day, rubbish trucks serve up fresh deliveries of discarded food, irresistible ready-made servings for animals. The dump, however, is next to a railway line and road, and several bears and wolves have been killed by passing trains and cars.

Locals, too, have campaigned for higher hunting quotas as brown bears, attracted by human activity, increasingly descend down from the surrounding mountains. Conservationists say this is forcing the bears into a conflict with people they can only ever lose.

So, to separate humans and fauna, the KuzeyDoga conservation society and Turkey's ministry for forestry are establishing a 160-kilometre-long corridor and reforestation zone to allow bears, wolves and other large animals unhindered travel to the Georgian border where they can again mix freely with neighbouring populations.

Aside from keeping the bears away from people, it is hoped the corridor will help diversify animal populations by facilitating breeding. So far, two brown bears have been tracked using the route, with one travelling more than 100km north.

Çoban is the science coordinator for KuzeyDoga and Karaahmetoglu is an animal rehabilitation veterinarian at Kafkas University in Kars. They hope the corridor will save endangered brown bears, Caucasian lynx and 15 packs of grey wolves.

The pair prepare for a trip to the summit of Sarikamis Allahuekber Mountains National Park to pick up signals from wolves collared with tracking devices, but heavy fog forces them to bail out.

On the way down the mountain, a call comes in from a farmer in a nearby village. A belt-type object has been found in the fields.

We reach Hamamli village where Çoban asks the local imam to put out a call over the mosque's loudspeaker asking for the object to be brought in. Five minutes later, Emircan, a boy no more than 10 years old, drags a bear collar behind him.

"Where did you get this? This is a very important find; thank you," says Çoban.

In a part of the world where for many the battle for survival against the raw elements and animals such as bears is etched in the mind, there are challenges in protecting large carnivores. Because some bears have become used to the sight and smell of humans around the landfill, they have lost their sense of fear, sometimes with disastrous consequences. In 2011, a 300-kilogram bear was shot and killed.

"Some guys come out to the dump to drink and watch the bears; they see the bears feeding as a kind of entertainment," said Karaahmetoglu.

Data from tagged bears also suggests some have become lazy and may not use the corridor.

But conservationists say it is better the bears are raiding the dump, 5km from Sarikamis town, than trundling through peoples' homes looking for food.

What is also encouraging is the government's new-found interest in preserving the wilds of Turkey. "By providing wider access to the forest for prey species in the region, it will be reduced to human-predator conflict," minister for forestry and water affairs, Veysel Eroglu, said of the corridor plan. The government is to sow 38.5 million wild fruit seedlings in the next three years to serve as food for the animals in the 28,500-hectare corridor.

Whether the bears of Sarikamis can be weaned off their trash addiction remains to be seen. But the corridor is a crucial step in replenishing the wilderness.

*Stephen Starr is a freelance journalist based in Turkey.*