



Preventing the extinction of the Dinaric-SE  
Alpine lynx population through reinforcement  
and long-term conservation



## **Our experience in working with stakeholders through Local consultative groups**

LIFE Lynx final consultation report

Manca Velkavrh, Irena Kavčič, Ira Topličanec, Aleksandra Majić Skrbinšek

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## The introduction

Dear reader!

With this report we wish **to give you an insight into our experiences** and engagements with local communities, **hopefully inspiring you with further ideas** for your own efforts. Although we trust you would read this report even if the pages were less colourful, we have opted for a more relaxed tone to ensure readability, especially amidst the demands of your other work tasks.

## The background summary

The lynx became extinct in the Dinaric Mountains of Slovenia and Croatia at the beginning of the 20th century. It was hunters who decided to bring it back. Six lynx from the Carpathian Mountains were released near Kočevje, Slovenia, **in 1973. The reintroduction was successful** - their descendants populated the Dinarics from Bosnia in the south to the Alps in the north. Unfortunately, their numbers **began to decline again** in the 90's. Through the EU funded Interreg programme, a transnational project DinaRis allowed researchers to **identify inbreeding as the main reason for the population decline**. Finally, the project **LIFE Lynx was the last chance to save the population** from another extinction, by bringing new lynx individuals to the Slovenian and Croatian Dinarics and creating a new stepping stone population in the South - eastern Alps. However, it is the people who decide about the fate of the lynx population - through hunting, managing conflicts with livestock, spatial planning and living in fear or acceptance. This is where communication plays a key role in lynx conservation - along with translocations.

## Our views and ideas of Local consultative groups

The lynx were translocated from Romania and Slovakia to Slovenia and Croatia. Thus, it was **important to identify key stakeholders and build support within local communities** with special focus on the latter countries. Local inhabitants are the ones who live in areas with lynx presence - and hopefully the lynx distribution will increase with time, so the need for their acceptance during the project was even more crucial.

The aim of communication was to break myths about the species, give information about its behaviour when it comes to livestock and people (compared to the wolf or the bear), and about the importance of translocations for rescuing the population.

Since one way communication doesn't bring best results, we wanted to find **a frame to exchange information** with local communities; build trust between different interest groups, **include them in decision making through participation in project activities** and give access to other aspects of the project. The **"local consultative groups" (LCGs) approach** offered us good foundations for building such a collaboration matrix.

*LCGs weren't the only part of project communication. Cooperation with schools, hunters, tourist providers and artists was part of other project actions, but these are not the focus of this report. All mentioned stakeholders were also members of local consultative groups.*

## Where to organise LCGs?

The project team decided to focus on communities of place (local inhabitants where the lynx is or was going to be present after translocations) but communicate also with the communities of interest (inhabitants of bigger towns and cities). These two communities differ when it comes to the values (human and livestock safety vs. carnivore protection and nature conservation) - which is an important factor when collaborating.

Since we focused on communities of place, the locations of lynx releases strongly influenced the areas of LCGs. In Slovenia a **soft release approach** was used; meaning there were enclosures built for the lynx to get acclimatised to the new environment. **Finding locations for enclosures and building them was already a big start of the communication with the hunters** - who played an active role at the LCG meetings (presenting their part, work). In Croatia the hard release approach was used, releasing the lynx directly into the new environment. The locations of releases were still carefully picked and national parks' institutions played an important role when releasing the lynx (one LCG group was established for them too).

The project area was split into the **Dinaric part** (of Slovenia and Croatia) and the **Alpine part**. It's estimated 20 lynx were still present before project translocations in Slovenia; the descendants from the last reintroduction in 1973 within Dinarides, while the species has been barely present in the Alpine part in the last 10 years. The translocations found place in the Dinarides first, meaning that also LCGs needed to be established there simultaneously. The Alpine groups were established a bit later, when the stepping stone population was formed through lynx translocations in Pokljuka and Jelovica.

It was hard to define which area should be covered by which group and how big an area one group should cover - there are many valleys in the Dinarics and coming from one place to another may take quite some time even without considering travelling by public transportation means. Our aim was to establish LCG in close proximity to lynx release sites. Finally, we established **four groups in Slovenian Dinaric area**: LCG Pivško, LCG Loški Potok, LCG Kočevsko and LCG Cerknica, the latter actually being the council of the project LIFE Stržen, combining team members from both projects and representatives of the local community. **In Croatia two groups** were established **concerning the geographical characteristics** of the area: LCG Lika

and LCG Gorski Kotar; while **another one** was established **for public institutions** working in nature conservation (the project area in Croatia covered many National Parks so the staff collaboration was crucial). Later, **two new groups** were established in **Slovenian Alps**, mostly functioning as one group, since the translocations happened only in Gorenjska region, and the lynx had not been present in north Primorska for a longer time. We established those groups online (read more under Chapter “Keeping in contact and establishing new groups in time of Covid epidemic”).



Picture 1: Local consultative groups (Slovenian and Croatian border is marked in pink).

## Planning the process

We have already allocated some project funds for the meetings in the project planning phase. We predicted costs like catering, renting premises for a room or a hall, technical assistance, cleaning of the place after the event, etc.

Before we started establishing LCGs, we **first identified key stakeholder groups and messages we wanted to deliver** - we did this **within the project team** first. Both (key stakeholder groups and messages) were included in the project communication plan. Then we contacted identified individuals and organisations and carried out **scoping interviews** with them to identify specifics of the local environment.

We wanted to know:

- which other stakeholders should be included from a local area,
- are there already some mechanisms, organisations, we might join to with our work (as the mentioned LIFE Stržen project council),
- Which communication channels are most used locally,
- what values and interests do local stakeholders have,
- who influences the local opinion more,
- who is more interested in project topics,
- etc.

This way we also reduced the risk of excluding important stakeholders at the first LCG meetings. For scoping interviews we've contacted local municipalities, hunting clubs, foresters, tourist providers, etc. We talked about the "rules of the groups" (anybody can join), how to spread invitations and agreed to prepare the latter for the first LCG meetings in local magazines.

In order to gather local inhabitants to join first LCG meetings we organised some events, such as film nights (with a documentary produced within the LIFE lynx project "[Path of the lynx](#)") or a lecture about lynx ecology and project background. We also published popular articles in local magazines that served as a message to join project's LCG's. Invitations were also sent per email to the municipalities, local tourist organisations, environmental NGOs, hiking societies, journalists, Hunting clubs, schools, breeders' associations, etc.

In Slovenia, regular meetings were accompanied by special annual dinners from the third year of the project onward. These events provided opportunities for different LCGs' members to meet and share their experience of participating in project activities. Project team members shared the most important outcomes from the project activities, but the programme part of these events was shorter, since the socialising part over dinner was as equally important. The aim of these events was to thank the members for their collaboration with the project.

## Materials for engaging

In order for the communication to be effective, we first needed to identify key messages that we wanted to deliver. We also needed to adapt those to the key stakeholders and other interest groups. We gathered this information within **the Communication manual**, which was made for the internal use of the project team members. Key messages can be found under the Annex 2.

We gathered the FAQ - or the questions LCG members may ask us most often and prepared a brochure [Q&A \(questions and answers\)](#) for them.

Within the project we prepared **many other promotional and educational materials**; postcards with pictures of translocated lynx and key messages, a brochure about the Eurasian lynx, bookmarks with translocated lynx for school children, a brochure against poaching for policemen, etc. Through these we were able to spread messages when personal communication couldn't take place, or we could enhance it through them.

## The first LCG meetings

The choice of the location for meetings and annual dinners was crucial, as well as giving the welcoming words to the mayors, heads of the Hunting clubs, etc. We wanted to let the participants know the goal of LCG meetings is their collaboration with the project - which was crucial for the project to really make an impact locally.

When preparing for the first LCG meetings, we bared in mind planned project activities and identified local needs and opportunities (recognised during the meetings in the areas before establishing LCGs). For organising first meetings, we were already collaborating with some local organisations (e.g. local hunting clubs, municipalities). When presenting project activities, we presented topics we considered important for each area. First presentations were already carried out in collaboration with organisations, mentioned in this paragraph. The presentation part was followed by work in smaller groups.

### We recognised the next topics as important:

- **Cooperation with schools**

Which topics would be interesting for local schools, how the school informs local inhabitants about school activities, organisations cooperating with schools, organisations cooperating with schools in Croatia (across the border) and how

...

- **Tourism linked activities**

Which benefits could their local community have from the large carnivore linked tourism, suggestions and second thoughts about it, organisations and individuals interested in such activities

- **Lynx and livestock breeding**

Their experiences with lynx and opinions, suggestions, thoughts on improved damage prevention methods

- **How should the LCGs operate?**

Their view of cooperation through LCGs and optimal channels for communicating, how often should we meet, who should we also invite and should this be an open group, suggested places for meeting

- **Local media (discussed in Croatia)**

We discussed and recognised the topic of local media and other sources for transmitting project information and results such as the local radio and local newspapers. The inclusion of journalists working for local media in the regional LCGs proved to be the key to sharing correct and important information about the LIFE Lynx project throughout the project implementation.

Through work in groups, **we learned more about the local social environment of each LCG. All groups wanted to stay open (anybody could join at any time), with meeting once to twice a year, while receiving project news by email more regularly (once, twice a month or less).**

**Emails** enabled us to keep in contact. They contained project milestones reached and gave insight into current and future efforts to save the lynx population. Those were especially important before the release of a lynx. In Croatia LCG members were especially regularly informed about the status of a captured lynx and plans for the release. This way they felt included in the whole process and claimed the lynx as "theirs" even before the translocation. In Slovenia the chance for communicating about the translocated lynx before its release was prolonged by the time the lynx spent within enclosure. During the quarantine carefully regulated visits were organised, letting LCG members and other included stakeholders to actually see a lynx through the gaps of the enclosure.

## Choosing topics for the meetings

During the first meetings with each LCG group, we presented the aim and project activities, but also gathered attitudes and information from the local community to enable strategic planning of future meeting topics. The LCGs were also a place for local communities to present their work; activities of some local organisations were somehow linked to the lynx topics. For example, a teacher presented the process of naming one translocated lynx by their pupils, a hunter presented their Natural history centre, a ranger from the Triglav National Park presented their role in the project, etc. We organised some field visits and showed the enclosures (sometimes with the lynx inside) to the members. (With field visits it was important to organise smaller groups and the transportation was the easiest when the participants were able to come by their own cars.)

We asked LCG members about their interests at later meetings too, trying to present what they would want to know more about (most frequent answers: lynx telemetry stories, population size, “interesting facts”, lynx habitat conservation, what comes after the project). We tried to cover these topics in the following meetings. The monitoring and lynx stories that came out of it were the most wanted topics. Lynx capturing in the Carpathians was also presented.

Areas with lynx' presence are also areas with wolf and bear presence. There are more conflicts between people and the wolf in the Dinaric mountains and SE Alps than with the lynx. We have therefore strictly separated the two species in our communication and emphasised from the very first meetings that the lynx is the topic of discussion, as we now have the opportunity to influence the protection and management of the species and to develop a strategy for the future of the Dinaric population. This way we hindered the conflicts of the wolf to influence the discussion about the lynx.

## Keeping in contact and establishing new groups in time of Covid epidemic

The groups in Dinarics were established on both sides of the border and had started well by the time the Covid epidemics hit us. But the groups in the Alps weren't established yet. If we wanted to come in contact with local communities in the Alps before lynx translocations in that part of Slovenia, we needed to meet online.

**Online meetings have their advantages** - participants need less time to attend (since the travel time is spared) and they need to give less input (staying at home can be more comfortable than meeting other people). But online meetings didn't really enable us to weave connections and do networking with and along locals. Online meetings for Dinaric groups were less visited than the previous meetings carried out in person, but the reasons behind it could be different (too many online events and too much work on computers at that time, less interesting topics after the first wave of enthusiasm about the lynx, etc.). **The establishment of the Alpine groups was a bit hindered by the lockdown and the lack of possibility to meet in person.** Meetings continued to be online for these two groups until two special annual dinners in

the last two years of the project. We believe because of it the cooperation with local inhabitants which wasn't part of other actions (cooperation with hunters, schools, and artists) wasn't as productive as we wished for it to be.

We believe online meetings can be efficient and proper for some occasions, but **it's the feeling of a group and community that brings people together** and gives them a sense of being a part of a network. For this meeting in person is crucial.

## Local ideas implemented - LCG ideas

As mentioned before, some project means for realisation of the meetings was predicted. A part of these funds was meant for the LCG members to receive the reimbursement for their travel expenses to the meetings' locations.

At the first meetings the idea came up that instead of giving a small amount to the participants, something else could be done. We followed that and organised a process to gather purposeful ideas. The members, which were involved in the ideas that got carried out, had an important role in the realisation of these activities.

At the following meetings, **LCG members suggested different ideas** on what they could do in their own neighbourhood related to the lynx. As expected, there were more good ideas than there were funds available. Therefore, we made a review of all the ideas proposed, and at the next meetings **members voted for the ones they preferred.**

**We were lucky to be able to offer these funds to the local communities.** This was finally a chance to give them something in return for giving their time and energy into the project. At the same time the project enabled us enough flexibility with the financial means, the use of which is usually very carefully planned. We took care that the expenditure of the funds was very intentional.

We implemented **the ideas that received the most votes:**

- **Additional field days for schools**

They were carried out by the society Dinaricum in collaboration with the Biotechnical Faculty (a project partner University of Ljubljana). Dinaricum has been part of the large carnivore projects for many years now.

- **Three information-boards about the lynx for three primary schools**

Within some other project action, we installed 13 information boards in all involved countries. The schools wished to have similar boards in their vicinity.

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- **The "Let's Play with Lynx! " collection of activities for children (SI)**

We prepared a PDF with board games that anyone can easily prepare themselves, as well as ideas for activities in the forest and in the gym. The activities were prepared by a teacher and a member of LCGs. The project enabled the design of the PDF and the help with preparing and editing of the content.



- **Replicas of real skulls of lynx, wolf, and bear**

We remember better what we do by ourselves, taking something in our hands compared to studying something only presented to us from the pictures. The skull replicas enable the comparison of the ecology, similarities, and differences of these three species of large carnivores - to be carried out by the pupils themselves. During the project workshops they closely looked at the real skulls and tried to compare them. By giving the schools these replicas, this can be done after the project as well. The replicas were given to schools that were part of the Young Lynx Guardians programme, closely collaborating with us for at least three years during the project.

- **Workshop for ČŠOD (Outdoor learning centre) staff**

ČŠOD centres in Slovenia offer activities for school children and for children during school holidays. Their programmes offer knowledge of different fields (not solely biology) and sport activities. By sharing knowledge about the lynx with them, the chance of knowledge distribution improved a lot. We also presented project materials that can be useful to them for working with children and young people (also on rainy days).

- **Participation of active LCG members at the final project conference**

The project conference was organised in the last year of the project in Zadar, Croatia. The project covered transport and accommodation costs to some of the active LCG members (mostly teachers and hunters), supporting them to improve their knowledge and network with other participants.

- **A sound information-board for the Loški Potok Hunting Club's Natural History Centre**

A Hunting Club from Loški Potok was collaborating with the project team a lot - they were also the ones who offered the place to the first enclosure for the translocated lynx' soft release. Through another project they established a "Natural history centre". Their idea was to prepare a sound information board with sound recordings of 20 species of animals that can be found in their forest, contributing photos by themselves too.

## Our reflections on successes and challenges



- Invitations to the first meetings were distributed across different channels to accommodate different interest groups
- Participants provided valuable insights to the project team regarding their views on collaboration, including meeting frequency, preferred topics, and communication channels.
- A report was compiled detailing the integration of participants' prepositions into the project or the reasons for their exclusion, specifically focusing on the Dinaric region in Slovenia.
- Members' views were actively considered in project activities across various actions such as collaboration with schools, hunters, artists and tourist providers, and general communication efforts.
- Local ideas were successfully implemented using funds allocated for LCGs, enabling realisation of activities and materials desired by the members.
- First-hand information was obtained regarding the most important channels for distributing information.
- We anticipated differences in attitudes towards the different species of large carnivores in Dinarides and SE Alps<sup>1</sup>. Differentiation between lynx and wolf in addressing conflicts with humans was crucial, with discussions on wolf-related topics not significantly impacting lynx-focused conversations.



- Challenges arose in determining appropriate group sizes and coverage areas for the LCGs, particularly due to the presence of numerous small settlements in lynx presence areas, resulting in longer travel times for some participants, probably impacting their decisions regarding participation.
- The first meetings generated a lot of interest due to the novelty of the project, but sustaining participation proved challenging later. It was necessary to direct a great amount of effort to maintain appeal through relevant topics and engaging discussions.
- Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns significantly influenced the collaboration, with main differences observed between Dinaric and Alpine LCGs in Slovenia, the latter being established remotely and mostly operating online.

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<sup>1</sup> Trajçe at all. 2019: All carnivores are not equal in the rural people's view. Should we develop conservation plans for functional guilds or individual species in the face of conflicts? *Global Ecology and Conservation* 19 (2019) e00677

- LCG members represented a very diverse audience unlike hunters or teachers, with whom we shared common project activities such as setting camera traps or educating pupils about lynx. Shared activities greatly facilitate communication, which was partly lacking with LCGs. Implementing LCG ideas (from the reimbursement fund) gave us another option for collaboration on exact activities and topics.

## How to continue?

The project enabled us to devote ourselves to the communication with the local community by securing funds for a continuous engagement. Thus, **when the project ends, it will be hard to maintain the same level of dedication**. Also, other project activities (lynx monitoring, collaboration with schools, etc.) cannot carry on with the same efforts, which results in having less capacities for communication. Unfortunately, there's no magic wand, but there are some ways which can help.

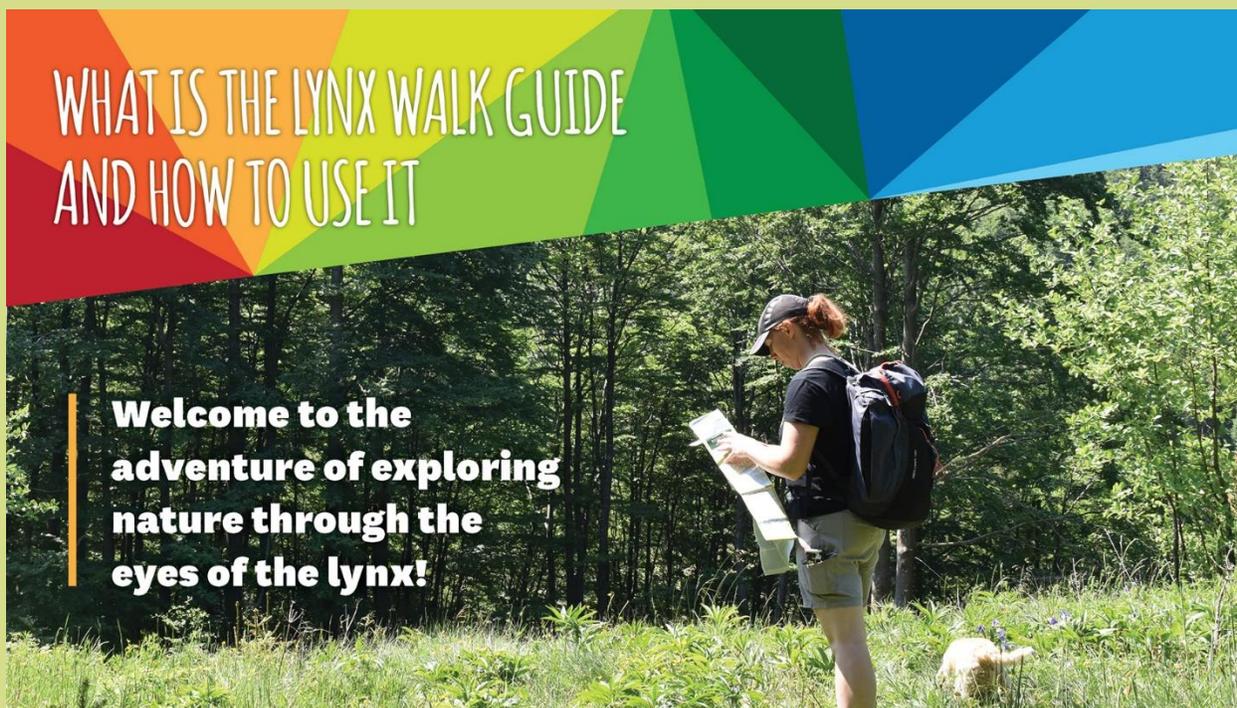
To maintain the network established during the project we will try to keep the similar format of communication within other projects. We started another emailing list for local inhabitants before the end of the project, which is not linked to any exact project, but to a working group (in our case to the Animal ecology group at Biotechnical faculty, University of Ljubljana). Some members decided to receive news from other projects as well, some haven't. Just at the end of the project we've sent a reminder to join us on other topics as well.

Concerning other activities which are part of communication, such as setting notice boards or a thematic trail, can be already done together with local organisations during the project - with the goal for them to continue using them and taking care of them after the project. Examples of such activities from a LIFE Lynx project:

- We set a [Lynx trail](#) near Kočevje together with the local tourist organisation (Public Institute for Tourism and Culture Kočevje), which can benefit from it while the local municipality is ready to support them financially if the trail gets damaged.
- A [Lynx Walk](#) can be set in almost any forest, but the suggested path leads from Slovenia to Croatia which was developed in cooperation with the National park Risnjak in Croatia who will continue to promote it through the [digitally available guide](#).

Together with the cyclist society [GravGrav](#) a cycling path was also created within the Lynx Walk, starting at the [Large carnivore DINA centre](#), which offers additional information for cyclists. Lynx Walk will continue to live on through NGravGrav and DINA centre.

- Materials for teachers ([manual for school classes on lynx topics](#) (IT version available [here](#)), [e-lessons](#), [collection of board games](#) - useful also for the school curriculum (SI)) were introduced during the seminars, improving the chances for them to be used after the project ended.
- Local tourist guides were educated to spread lynx topics in their work and environment.
- Through the art workshops different artworks were made, introducing lynx topics whenever being presented and shown.
- The Hunters club in Loški Potok will keep presenting lynx topics through the soundboard they got and within other activities at their Natural history centre.
- To continue with lynx monitoring, strategic documents were created during the project for the Slovenian Ministry of Natural Resources and Spatial Planning to finance it every 2 years.



Picture 2: A start of the PDF guide for the Lynx Walk.

## Checklist or our recommendations

Here are recommendations from our experience within the LIFE Lynx project.

- You will need some finances to organise such meetings. You may not need much, but costs like these might appear: catering, renting premises for a room or a hall, technical assistance, cleaning of the place after the event, maybe also paying an external professional for a lecture or reimbursing travel costs to the participants.
- A stakeholder analysis will give you a better insight about who to invite and how. After the analysis within the team (key stakeholder groups and key messages to deliver), scoping interviews are a way of getting to know the local specifics and to reduce the risk of not inviting some crucial local stakeholder to the first meetings.
- When defining the size of each group (or how big an area one group will cover), it's important to keep in mind the time that potential participants will need to come to events.
- The place for meeting can change or stay the same. Participants can suggest places by themselves. They might already use some places for other occasions.
- Before setting a date of a meeting, ask local authorities if they can attend and if the suggested date suits them. If not, let them propose another term.
- There might be interesting individuals or organisations, which might be willing to present their work at the meeting. This way a project team and other local inhabitants get to know more about what is happening in their surroundings.
- When choosing topics for the next meeting check what is new in the area locally and what project activities were or are going to be carried out. You might give participants a questionnaire about what they would like to know more about or ask them personally/in smaller groups.
- Local consultative group meetings must be able to adapt to ideas coming from the participants. It is important to acknowledge diversity of values within the group, with no right or wrong perspectives.

## Annex 2: Key messages for three target groups

### HUNTERS

- Hunters are an important partner in the LIFE Lynx project and participate in almost all project activities.
- Hunters have an important role in lynx monitoring and overall conservation due to the rich field experience and good knowledge about lynx biology.
- Presence of lynx positively affects the entire ecosystem.
- Lynx is a tourist attraction. Their presence can potentially benefit hunting clubs.
- Poaching lynx and other wildlife is illegal, and it is not accepted in any case.
- Lynx killed by poaching is a great loss for the project and Dinaric and SE Alpine lynx population.

### LOCAL INHABITANTS

- Healthy lynx are not dangerous to people.
- Presence of lynx positively affects the entire ecosystem.
- Our lynx population is highly endangered and needs reinforcement.
- LCGs are an opportunity to participate in developing project activities that will be implemented in local communities.
- Their participation in the project LCGs is valuable for the local community and the project.
- Local inhabitants can participate in developing and implementing project activities targeting schools, tourism, or agriculture within their community.
- Lynx is a tourist attraction. Their presence can potentially benefit local tourism.

### LIVESTOCK OWNERS

- LCGs and workshops for management plans are an opportunity to impact the development and implementation of project activities in local communities.
- Lynx damages to livestock are compensated and help for protection is foreseen for livestock breeders.
- Presence of lynx positively affects the entire ecosystem.
- Lynx is a tourist attraction. Their presence can potentially benefit local tourism (bear friendly label).
- Lynx are highly endangered, therefore our lynx population needs reinforcement.

## Annex 2: Timeline of LCG events

|                                      |                                                                                                                   |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>01.07.2017</b>                    | Start of the project                                                                                              |
| <b>March - October 2018</b>          | Meetings with stakeholders and film events before establishing LCGs                                               |
| <b>December 2018 - February 2019</b> | First meetings with LCGs - Dinaric groups established in Slovenia                                                 |
| <b>March 2019</b>                    | First meeting in Croatia (Gorski Kotar)                                                                           |
| <b>January 2019 - February 2020</b>  | Project event in the Alpine region, promoting the project and gathering contacts for future LCGs                  |
| <b>May, June 2019</b>                | Second meetings with Slovenian Dinaric LCGs                                                                       |
| <b>December 2019</b>                 | First meeting for public institutions of Lika and North Dalmatia<br>First meeting for LCG Lika and North Dalmatia |
| <b>February 2020</b>                 | First special annual dinner (in Dinarics)                                                                         |
| <b>August 2020</b>                   | Other project events in Dinarics (film night - Lynx path)                                                         |
| <b>December 2020</b>                 | Third meetings with Slovenian Dinaric LCGs - ONLINE                                                               |
| <b>January 2021</b>                  | Establishment of Groups in the Alpine region - first meeting, ONLINE                                              |
| <b>November 2021</b>                 | Meetings with all groups - ONLINE (suggesting ideas for reimbursement fund)                                       |
| <b>March 2022</b>                    | Meetings with all groups - ONLINE (suggesting ideas for reimbursement fund)                                       |
| <b>May 2022</b>                      | Second meeting for LCG Gorski Kotar<br>Second special annual dinner (in Slovenian Dinarics)                       |
| <b>October 2022</b>                  | Third special annual dinner (in the Alpine region)                                                                |
| <b>November 2023 region)</b>         | Fourth and fifth special annual dinner (one in each region)                                                       |
| <b>February 2024</b>                 | Second meeting for LCG Lika and Northern Dalmatia                                                                 |