

Grizzly Times Podcast
Interview with Gabriel Paun
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Louisa Willcox: I am delighted to speak today with my dear friend and fellow champion of the bear, Gabi Paun, a Romanian environmental and animal welfare activist, with decades of experience in Europe, Africa and Australia. Gabi has a degree in ecology and served as an organizer for Greenpeace before founding the Romanian group, Agent Green that works to protect Romania's – and Europe's – natural wonders, including brown bears, the same species as our grizzly bear.

Romania shares a border with Ukraine and has opened its arms to refugees fleeing Putin's terrible war. This border region is defined by the Carpathian Mountains that are home to bears, wolves, lynx and much more. These mountains are the heart of the wild that remains in Europe, with more virgin forest than the rest of Europe altogether. Gabi calls these "primeval forests," the lifeblood of this world class ecosystem.

This landscape is the focus of Gabi's most recent inspired vision: to create, when the war is over, an International Peace Park on the border between Ukraine and Romania to not only protect habitat for wildlife and maintain the region's unique cultures and fascinating traditions, but also to symbolize hope for the future.

But before we get to that, a little more on Gabi and, of course, bears. Gabi has enjoyed enormous successes: stopping the spread of genetically modified crops in Romania, exposing illegal logging in the country's forests, and investigating and exposing the cruelty of the live animal export industry. In 2016 Gabi won the prestigious European environmental award, EuroNatur, which was also awarded to Nelson Mandela and Mikhail Gorbachev.

Given the richness of the Carpathian Mountains, it is no surprise that this range is home to the largest population of brown bears in Europe – roughly 7,000 bears. This compares to a total of only 2,000 or so grizzlies in the contiguous U.S. Notably, Romania's and Ukraine's bears have lived cheek by jowl with humans for thousands of years, with a human population as dense as what you find in Appalachia – a fact that should put to shame those in the Northern Rockies who claim we have an intolerable number of grizzly bears.

During recent months, Gabi and his Agent Green team has been transporting and providing for mothers and children fleeing Ukraine. But Gabi has also been addressing some of the environmental aspects of this terrible war. Which is what he wants to talk about today.

So welcome, Gabi -- it's so good to see you!

Gabi Paun: Same here, Louisa. I want to thank you so much for this very warm welcome and very detailed introduction. I really thank you for having me, for your audience -- I'm very happy to address them.

L: Thank you so much and thanks for taking the time -- I know you're really up to your eyeballs. So let's just start with: how are you and your team holding up in the shadow of this war? And what's it like to be near ground zero caring for families fleeing Ukraine?

G: Well, I still remember how the news struck us all on the 24th of February. It's been now two months. And that memory is very vivid in my team's minds and hearts. We suddenly felt unsafe. We felt that we were entering a period of uncertainty, and we felt the blow of that war being just over the fence -- Ukraine being our direct neighbor north and northeast of Romania.

And my team felt that they would like to do something to help. Normally, we're an environmental organization, so we'd normally do just nature work. But since it was the personal will of my team members to help, I encouraged that.

And first of all, we went to the borders where the refugees were crossing -- there are two main points where they are coming from Ukraine -- and we made an assessment of where we could actually help. And we decided that it would be this niche of women and their children, who needed transportation, a warm meal, a hug, and a new home -- or at least transit through Romania to their final destinations. And we have been doing that for a while.

And then began doing that very well. So we stepped in and then we stepped out because the authorities have been waking up. It was funny, again, that the nongovernmental organizations were more organized than the state itself and --

L: That's not a surprise...

G: Yeah -- it was mostly NGOs helping, organizing the efforts. And now things are running smoother -- and there is now a fair amount of presence and help at the border.

I've been there myself as well, in the second phase -- so working also with animal rights organizations to try to save not just people, but animals. So we've been working with animals -- I'd say where there is an urgent need. Unfortunately, there are plenty of wild animals being held in not just in zoos but in private ownership. And imagine what happens when people leave, and the animals are abandoned.

So we've been pioneering a little bit to do extraction of a lion from Zaporizhzhya, which is the area with the biggest nuclear power plant in Europe that was under siege for a while. We were able to take him out.

It was wonderful joint work among various groups and individuals -- with no proper equipment or experience in doing such things. And the mission was successful. A lion named Simba and a female wolf called Akiva – we brought them safely into quarantine in Romania.

And from there, the lion will finally go -- at the end of May or so -- to South Africa in a place where there is no canned hunting. You can be assured that Simba will live the rest of his life with his paws touching green grass and enjoying sunshine. And the wolf will stay in Romania because there is a place in central Romania called “Liberty Center.” It’s basically a fenced natural habitat where the wolf will be living the rest of her life in freedom.

And right now, I’m working on a larger operation in Odessa, which is expected to be taken by the Russians very, very soon -- any moment. Ten more lions must be extracted from there – it’s unbelievable.

L: Wow —

G: Yeah. That is really, really difficult. And my heart beats with -- I mean I coordinate things pretty much -- but my heart beats with those having the courage to be there.

I was in Ukraine for a few days, and I had seen the things with my very own eyes -- and it was more than enough for me. My feelings are not yet settled with what I have been seeing and experiencing. And I think it might take a while until this will be settled.

Anyway, altogether it was a big shock to jump from pandemic to war. It gives me mixed feelings -- and I imagine it might be the same for every inhabitant of our planet to go from pandemic to war, which is affecting us all. I mean this war happens on Ukrainian soil, but the whole world is involved and affected.

L: Absolutely --

G: We can see that at the gas station, we can see it in the supermarket in the price of the food which is rising. We can feel it in our bones, entering this period of uncertainty and insecurity. And we have no idea how long this will last.

So we were frozen as a team for a couple of days -- and then we decided to help. And then we decided that the best thing we can do is bring normality in this world of chaos and keep doing our work.

So, we’re back at work continuing our advocacy at all levels. We’re protesting, we’re lobbying in Romania, we’re having trials against perpetrators of nature, and we are escalating efforts with the European Commission --which is a sort of government of

Europe -- when Romania is misbehaving and breaking the nature laws of Europe. We are doing all of that.

L: Well thank you, my friend, for working to save these animals, for getting involved, and for not looking away. And if anybody had doubt about the interconnectedness of us all, both the pandemic and this war have shattered that doubt. I mean whether you live in Montana or the far reaches of Africa, we are all connected in a very profound way. And I think if we can't learn that lesson now, we will never get through this.

But Gabi to your vision, I was so excited when I read about this inspired idea of a Peace Park. So maybe you can share with us a little bit about it. What inspired you? And what do you hope to accomplish with this Park?

G: Actually, I was in southern Spain when the idea came -- so far away from the war, far away from Romania and Ukraine. It's actually where the start of the war found me. I was investigating live export -- you mentioned in the introduction that I work on that as well -- live export of farmed animals, cattle and sheep. It's an incredible, horrible industry which operates at a global level, basically transporting live animals onto floating ships to South America, the Middle East or North Africa -- from Europe to those destinations, or from Australian to those destinations. It's absolutely unnecessary cruelty.

And I was with a Spanish and a French TV crew in Cartagena, southern Spain, filming the loading of these animals -- French and Spanish animals -- onto vessels for destinations in North Africa and the Middle East.

And at some point, we finished the work, and I was resting before going back to my homeland, Romania, and to Ukraine to start helping people and animals there. And before falling asleep, a vision in the form of a dream that came to me. And it was simply this idea and vision of a new National Park -- and it came from nowhere somehow. I was just waking from that dream before falling into a deep sleep with this idea -- because I mean I was buried in sadness and depression.

I'm a non-violent person. I don't like guns. I don't like spending money on armies and war ships. I think we can spend that money for better things. But the world is as it is. And in all this sadness this opportunity came in my mind -- and I thought at least we can do that. So, I had enough time while traveling to Romania to make the necessary phone calls to create the premises for this National Park.

It came to my ears before that such parks exist -- or are on their way to exist -- in some places in the world. For example, I knew that USA and Canada have two peace parks, which is wonderful -- it's a form of consolidation of the relationships between two neighboring countries. And it's a wonderful, positive thing to do.

And you know, Romania and Ukraine, we were just neighbors -- nothing else before the war. But this war created the premises for more than that -- a friendship has been born. We had the chance to see Ukrainians, and Ukrainians had a chance to see the kindness of the Romanian people which mobilized in a way which I have never seen before, welcoming families and people who have we've never seen before into our homes -- for undetermined time, offering them shelter and food and comfort. So a great friendship has been born.

And I think that spreading kindness -- it's the key. And why not apply that also for the nature that unites the two countries? We have in the northwest of Romania forests that have been heavily damaged by illegal logging on the Romanian side, but to the northeast of Romania the forest remains in a very good state of conservation. The local people took better care of those forests in Ukraine than in Romania.

So I used this travel time from Spain to Romania to call a couple of good scientists from universities in Romania, who are actually at the border with Ukraine, at the University of Suceava. It is a county and capital city in northeast Romania bordering with Ukraine with a crossing point -- and wonderful nature. There is a wonderful valley called also Suceava, and the springs of Suceava, surrounded by wonderful mountains, undeveloped communities -- no infrastructure for tourism, no source of income -- but somehow, they manage to live in harmony with nature, both sides in Romania and Ukraine, without hurting nature too much.

And it's funny -- the Ukrainian and Romanian language have nothing in common. Ukraine has a Slavic language, Romania has a Latin language. But believe it or not, if a Ukrainian and Romanian from that area meet in the forest, they would be able to understand each other, because there's a certain dialect in the area for both sides which would make them understand each other.

They've been coexisting for centuries -- and it's really wonderful. So, we share nature, we share culture in this very local area. And a teacher of geography from University of Suceava was more than excited about this project. His nickname is Hans -- so together with Hans, we went when the snow was not melted yet in those forests to do the first scientific assessment of the forest stands in that area.

And it's absolutely magical. It is a soft wood/ hard wood forest, with very nice rivers, plenty of moisture, not really affected by climate change yet. And it's wonderful. So the first stepping stones have been crossed.

In the second stage I contacted the County President of Suceava County -- we've known each other for 15 years since he was Minister of Agriculture and Forests when I was doing a GMO campaign. He managed my campaign against GMOs, so he remembered me. Because of that campaign he said: "Oh Gabi, here you are again -- what do you want this time?" I said: "I come in peace -- of course I come in peace, there is plenty of war

around, so we have to make a National Peace Park.” And I felt his heart was singing and that was wonderful. So, he likes the idea.

And when you have scientific support and local political support, then the next step is that the University will contact their counterparts in Ukraine. The first city on the other side has a university. The city is Chernivtsi (?), and there is very good nature department at that university. And that university will work together with us to make the necessary scientific study as a foundation for the National Park. And this president of the county council in Romania will contact his counterpart on the other side to make it possible.

It’s, of course, politically extremely sensitive. We have to care of all those historical sensitivities so that they do not freak out that this is a bad intention from the Romanian side. You know that area used to be Romanian land before the Second World War, so we don’t want to give them the impression that we want our country back. No, it’s not about that. Ukraine is Ukraine, it’s a sovereign state. Romania is a sovereign state as well. So, borders have been designated at the end of the Second World War. Ukraine was born a bit later after the fall of Communism.

We just want to consolidate this friendship. But we have to handle it with very very much care. So the premises have been created -- there is a scientific basis, there is political will. We just need to make those steps as fast as possible. I believe that for the best recognition, the presidents of the two countries should speak about it and agree on it. And if President Zelensky and President Iohannis in Romania shake hands on that, when they have time and some air to breathe in these crazy times, I think we can move on with full speed.

L: Wow, it seems like you’ve really set the groundwork for this and have a lot of momentum even in this incredibly tough time -- so congratulations.

G: Thank you. You’ve got to be a doer. When you have a vision, a vision is nothing without action, so.

L: Yes!

G: And action needs to be taken either at the right time if there a reason to wait -- or start immediately, like is the case now. I got a vision, I had a good sleep, I traveled to Romania, I made the necessary calls, had the necessary meetings and trips and meetings, so things are moving. So I think we need to press gas right now.

L: “Press gas” -- that’s great. So Gabi, you also had the idea of establishing a Peace Route, one that it sounds like would be the longest in the world, crossing the whole Carpathian chain from the Czech Republic to Serbia, crossing Poland and Slovakia, Ukraine and Romania. And as you say this, the path would transcend political boundaries. So, Gabi -- why a Peace Route? And what would it be like to traverse it?

G: I believe that a Peace Route is necessary. Eastern Europe has been the source of all world wars so far, and it was always the battlefield for world big powers. And coming together in a positive project like that, I think it would be a strong signal that Eastern Europe is united and not divided -- and not the source of war.

The Carpathian Mountain chain has been historically a border between east and west. And why not make that the thing that unites the east and the west? This is what I thought in my perhaps narrow mind. But I am open to new things -- and this would be a more like medium long-term project, but far from impossible.

As we speak, a German citizen -- he heard about this project, I don't know how -- contacted me. And he started to walk it already. And he offered to show us at the end where this could go geographically as a route -- because it doesn't exist yet.

He's making it happen. He started a month ago already and he plans to finish it by the end of July. He just called me yesterday to say that he entered Romania from the north. So he's been a very fast guy. And it is nice that an individual is walking the Peace Trail already -- it's a bit awkward but very heartwarming. It makes me want to be there. But I have to be busy here making it happen.

And the Carpathians are quite a long chain of mountains born at the same time as the Alps, the Himalayas, and the chain of mountains in western North America and Southern America. It's a couple thousand kilometers crossing many countries, some of them being part of European Union, some of them not. Some of them supporting a side of the war, some of them on the other side of the ongoing war.

So that's why I believe it's going to take a while. It would start in Czech Republic, it would cross Ukraine, Poland, Slovakia, Romania and in the end reach the Danube, and crossing to the other side of the Danube River in Serbia. So quite a long route -- challenging not only for us who will walk it, but also for those people in charge of these countries with all the sensitivities around it. I believe in this trail -- and it makes so much sense. And I believe that once peace is restored that world order will be settled for all of us to live in peace forever after this war.

There will be plenty of people around the world who would be willing to walk this trail. It's wonderful. It's going from a very harsh climate in the north to a very mild sub-Mediterranean climate in the south. So from the climatic point of view, it's very very dramatic -- also from the landscape point of view, and because of the forests and the rich biodiversity.

And it's going to be very challenging. You will have the chance to meet all kinds of species, from the brown bear, our common species -- I mean the grizzly is the same species as the brown bear we have here, they're just different subspecies. They just said

goodbye when the ice uniting Eurasia and North America melted. They just went different ways, and had a little bit of different evolution, but they're the same species. So people who come on this trail would be able to meet them in the wild.

I meet them regularly and I say: "Don't be afraid of them. They're more afraid of you than you are of afraid of them." It's so simple when I meet them.

By the way, recently I was in a very awkward, risky situation. A mother bear with three cubs were being chased by a male bear looking for a mate. It's mating season, and the mother was not ready to let her babies go, because they are only one years old. And the cubs should stay for 2-3 years with their mom to learn all the things they need to know before making their own life.

And the wind was blowing from the wrong direction, from her to me not from me to her -- so she couldn't smell me. And she was rapidly coming toward me. And I saw the big -- really big -- male chasing her. And all I had to do is to clap my hands -- an unnatural sound in the wild. And she did not hesitate to change direction, with the cubs following her -- and the big male continued after her. So if it's really a wild bear, which is not used to human presence, they avoid any confrontation and coming near a person. That's normal behavior.

Anyways, so you would be able to meet brown bears -- not so many in Ukraine because Ukraine is known to only have 200 brown bears, because they always had plenty of hunting. Romania is thought to have around 7,000 like you mentioned before -- but the precise number is not really known because a proper scientific study, including DNA samples, has not been done yet.

But with the Peace National Park and the Peace Trail, these two projects are very close to my heart. And I would not have proper rest until they're done.

L: Yes, well you are the most tenacious person I know! I see this vision happening with your heart and soul in it.

And your story about the bear, it's a nice segue into your work on brown bears and wolves and wildlife in Europe. When you were here in the U.S. a few years ago, we spent many nights talking about coexistence and how we can live in harmony with bears. Maybe you can give us a brief update about how your work is coming along.

G: Louisa, I've learned so much when I visited you and Yellowstone and the surrounding area and the communities, learning to coexist and to co-adapt with grizzlies. And things were going well for a year, after I visited you in September of 2018. And believe it or not, just one year after that, we got a governmental decision which was a sort of a national plan for action to ensure coexistence and coadaptation of humans and brown bears. And we were so happy because that plan was so comprehensive, including

education of communities, protection of communities with non-lethal measures, including basic electric fences to protect cows from bears.

Imagine in Romania: brown bear habitat neighbors directly with human settlements. And there are villagers who have farm animals -- chickens, pigs, cattle, sheep -- and they are literally an invitation to the brown bear to come for easy food like in a supermarket, where there's nothing stopping them. Therefore, we have so many conflicts.

And with this national plan, this was supposed to come to an end. But people living in the cities are trekking so much now into the wild and have no idea how to interact with the bear -- and we have so many dramas in both villages and in the habitat.

L: So similar --

G: And there is also this awkward trade involving people going where the bears are, where the mother bears are making their cubs, entering the nest to steal the cubs for traffic for whatever reason, nobody knows -- but it's a common practice. And there are plenty of people who have lost their lives in their attempt to take the cubs away for whatever reasons. We were not able to investigate why they are doing this, but it happens.

So sadly, the government plans are just on paper, and nothing happened. And then the minister changed. And for the last two years, we have had the worst minister Romania ever had. He's hand-in-hand with the hunters, and he turned the ministry -- from the ministry that is supposed to ensure coexistence and coadaptation and mitigate those conflicts -- into a ministry that is instigating persecution of the species. And doing nothing about that plan.

And we are in a situation which we never had in our history -- and that's really, really bad. I mean like the bear was not having enough challenges with climate change...

By the way, climate change is affecting Romania very, very hard. For the winter is no longer winter. We used to have snow -- same as in the Yellowstone area -- we used to have snow from October to April. Now it's barely coming. It's not permanent during the winter. It's mostly coming at the end of the winter, like now. And you can imagine what it means for the cycle of the life of the bear.

There was never a hibernation, but it was a very long winter sleep. Now you can see bears looking for food in January. You can see bears waking up with their cubs roaming in March, but then the snow comes back and in many cases mothers don't survive. Then the cubs come to human settlements -- they are only two years old -- looking for their place, looking for easy food. They get habituated -- and in the end, what happens? They're being shot.

And the authorities are still not trained nor equipped to chase away the bears from human settlements. Imagine or not, they're using the noisemakers they use at football stadiums to make noise to chase them away. They do not have those non-lethal guns with rubber bullets to chase them away. They're just chasing the bears away with noise. And it doesn't bother them.

Again, this is partly because of climate change issues – bears are coming out when there is no food, then winter is coming back and there is no food. And the bears are basically forced to go towards human settlements to look for alternative kinds of food.

And then all the hunting associations have started to feed the bears in the previous years in the forest, habituating them basically. We are totally against feeding the bears, because that's the first step to habituate them, to get them used to humans.

The commission, they've made it illegal, but they stopped enforcing it. It is like: seduce and abandon the bears. Bears are coming to the human settlements because they've been feeding them with maize, so they're looking for maize which is highly nutritious and full of fat. And now they are coming for maize at the edge of the villages.

Plus, there is so much destruction of the habitat -- so much that is illegal, or legal but unsustainable logging, where the habitat has been fragmented and destroyed. And now there is human persecution. So these three challenges -- climate change, habitat destruction and human persecution – are putting the species in danger pretty much. And regardless of whether we have 3,000, 7,000 or 10,000 brown bears, they're in danger. They're in danger because of all these three combined threats together.

L: A wicked, wicked combination. And yes -- we've had such a political backlash, here too, against bears in Montana, and in the states in the northern Rockies. I mean, it feels very similar to what you're facing. Yes, we made progress, but many of the plans are simply on paper and don't get implemented in the interest of resolving conflicts non-lethally. I mean we're even seeing these celebrity bears in Grand Teton Park -- six of them last summer were killed. And yes, there were people feeding them. And yes, all the same problems we share.

G: I believe the fight is permanent – but as long as we fight, we have a chance. If people like us let go, then the chance is gone. It's wasted. It's a problem which unites US and Romania actually. We have the very same problems -- and politics are politics. But I believe in the solutions that I have seen in some parts of the U.S. around Yellowstone, where we have been visiting. When NGOs work together with local communities in model projects for coadaptation and coexistence, then it works. I have seen farmers, what was the name -- Blackfoot?

L: Yeah, Blackfoot Challenge near Glacier Park –

G: It works. I've seen it working -- and it's not only that it's working for people and bears to coexist, but I have seen mountains united by valleys reopened for the bears to roam free. Because I think very few people know that the nature of habitat of the brown bear, the grizzly bear, it's not up in the mountains. These are refugees. They are happy to live down in the plains by the rivers, in the grasslands, in the bushes.

So what I have seen in the Blackfoot Challenge, it's really the way forward. I believe that the model should be replicated. Sometimes things happen, but they're learning by doing. It's working by being both proactive and reactive. When something happens, it's not a big drama. Or they learn from that drama to create a solution -- and it works. Whatever you have -- fruit trees, plants for feeding ourselves or farm animals, sheep, cattle, chickens -- they have found the solutions: waste management, roadkill. Everything has been handled with care. So, I believe that politics should look at those projects and replicate them.

L: Absolutely -- and there are more projects like that coming online all the time. Right on the border of Yellowstone, there's a group of ranchers that are also doing fabulous work. It's the exact same thing. They're figuring out where their problems are, they're dealing with them. It doesn't mean that all bears will live, but it's basically peace along the lines of the premise of this conversation. It's peace. Which is something -- peace and compassion and an open heart and to your sensibility, action. All of those things.

So Gabi, one last question: these are such challenging times that we're living in, so I'm curious as to what you're doing -- and maybe you and your team are doing -- to take care of yourself, physically and emotionally in this time of war and COVID.

G: First of all, when this started, while I was in Ukraine, I got hit by COVID. I managed to stay away of it for two years, and regardless if I was triple vaccinated, I got it when I was there in Ukraine. And I had to interrupt my trip -- and it's been a month since then. It's been very hard on me. I'm only like 20 percent recovered. It feels like it's going to be a very long recovery.

And my advice -- I see this virus as really unpredictable, and it can be very, very violent to our bodies. Some people simply go through it without even noticing it -- and some of us, regardless of our lifestyle, we may be hit very hard. I'm sporty, I'm eating organic, eat plant based, I'm careful with my sleep, I live a healthy life and still I was hit hard.

But perhaps one thing was not all right in my life. And that is the stress from the work. And that might be one factor which was very bad. And what me and my team are doing now is trying to handle our stress better -- trying to avoid taking all negative energy which comes not only from war, but all the challenges that come with our very confrontative work.

And we're promoting positive communication both in the outside world and inside the organization. And we have been switching completely now our organization to heart-based leadership. Heart-based leadership is something new for us. We're experimenting, but it looks like it makes our heart sing. And that's the most important thing that could happen -- because everybody's working now with joy.

We see all the effects from government not as negative things, but as opportunities and challenges to make things better. And yeah, somehow this helps. And heart-based leadership, it doesn't mean that we are getting soft. It means the opposite. We are getting stronger because we admit our weaknesses, we admit our vulnerability. And we are practicing saying: "I don't know, I don't pretend that to know everything." It's about helping each other, equal to equal.

Forget about hate -- it is really about working together to create a positive model, positive energy on the team. And this is being seen by the world outside, inspiring others to go in the same way. So that's how we are handling, basically, our head and emotions, and everything about what is happening in these times of very high uncertainty and risky situations.

Of course, there's a corner of mind that says: "What happens if this work escalates -- and so on?" But we can't live in fear. We can't live in fear. If we stop doing what we're doing, then we're like already dead. And there is nothing that makes you feel more alive than taking action for things that you believe in. And we believe in kindness, we believe in defending nature, people and animals.

L: Well, Gabi my heart is singing just talking to you -- this is so inspiring. You've had such a tall mountain to climb and yet you're still climbing -- and you're fearless.

It's so good to see you, my friend. I so hope you feel better. It is a long recovery. I got through COVID myself, it's a long recovery -- but we're in this together. We're connected and connected in so many things -- the love of bears, the love of nature, a love of this place that we get to take care of. So thank you, Gabi.

This is Louisa Willcox with Grizzly Times -- and I'm so happy to be here today with my friend Gabi Paun. Thank you.

G: Thank you Louisa -- and thank you for everyone who had the patience to listen to us until the very end. And a big hug, bear hug.