

STUDY AREA DESCRIPTION

# COUSERANS

ARIÈGE, FRANCE



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**Funded by  
the European Union**

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Located in the heart of the Pyrenees, the department of Ariège borders the Spanish frontier. Its high peaks, rising to nearly 3,000 metres in some places, form landscapes shaped by intertwined natural and human dynamics (Figure 1). The Couserans massif, in particular, as a part of the Pyrenees Regional Natural Park in Ariège, is a cradle of Pyrenean pastoralism. This is evident in the practice of transhumance, the seasonal movement of sheep and cattle herds between fixed summer and winter pastures, which, despite several transformations, has continued to shape the landscape for centuries. At the same time, the massif hosts a large part of the French brown bear population, following population reinforcement efforts after the species had been almost absent for several decades.



**Figure 1.** Mont Valier, culminating at an altitude of 2,839 m, is one of the most emblematic peaks of the Couserans. On its eastern face lies the Arcouzan glacier, one of the last in the Pyrenees (Photo Credit: Alice Ouvrier).

## 2 OVERVIEW

- ▶ **Municipalities:** Saint-Lary, Augirein, Antras, Sentein, Bonac-Irazein, Arrien-en-Bethmale, Bethmale, Alos, Sentenac-d'Oust, Seix, Couflens, Ustou, Aulus-les-Bains and, Le Port.
- ▶ **Geographical size:** The Couserans covers an area of 1,639 km<sup>2</sup>, of which around 400 km<sup>2</sup> is made up of mountain municipalities (Banatic, 2025).
- ▶ **Human population:** The Couserans is home to 30,880 inhabitants, including around 2,000 in the mountain municipalities (Banatic, 2025).
- ▶ **Number of livestock farmers (approx.):** 473 farms practice transhumance in Ariège, about half of them in the Couserans (DRAAF Occitanie, 2020).

- ▶ **Livestock farming systems:** Extensive livestock farming, mainly of sheep and beef cattle, is strongly represented by communal herds, which are formed by gathering animals from multiple farmers for seasonal transhumance (Figure 2).
- ▶ **Wild large carnivore species:** The only French population of brown bears (*Ursus arctos*) is present in the area. This population is shared with Spain.
- ▶ **Bear population:** More than one hundred bears are present in the Pyrenees Mountain range (Réseau Ours brun, 2025). In 2022, 40 different bears were detected in Couserans (Réseau Ours brun, 2024).



**Figure 2.** Mountainous landscape of one of the approximately twenty summer pastures in the Couserans (Photo Credit: Alice Ouvrier).

### 3 SOCIOECONOMIC CONTEXT

- ▶ The Couserans is part of the Regional Natural Park of the Ariège Pyrenees, which was established in 2009 (Parc naturel régional des Pyrénées Ariégeoises, n.d.). Its mountainous landscape, characterised by its unique fauna and flora, its iconic peaks such as Mont Valier, and its rich history, attract numerous visitors. The area is also crossed by the Grande Randonnée 10, a long-distance hiking trail that spans the entire Pyrenean chain.
- ▶ With a human population density of around 19 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup> (Banatic, 2025), the region is now far less populated than in the past, following a pronounced rural exodus and strong deindustrialisation throughout the 20th century. The population is ageing, and the local labour

market is limited. This drives younger generations to migrate towards urban centres, such as Toulouse, which lies less than 100 kilometres from the Couserans.

- ▶ Nevertheless, several traditions persist, such as transhumance and the associated pastoral practices. Local livestock breeds have been preserved, reflecting the long-standing of agro-pastoral heritage.
- ▶ The Couserans is internationally recognised as the birthplace of the so-called “bear leaders” (*montreurs d’ours*). At a time when demographic pressure led to famine and poverty across the region, some inhabitants captured bears and trained them to perform in travelling shows, first in neighbouring villages, then throughout France, and eventually across the world (Figure 3). This continued until the First World War. Bear hunting itself ceased in 1962, marking a turning point in human–bear relations in the Pyrenees.



**Figure 3:** A group of cattle on one of the mountain pastures (Photo Credit: Alice Ouvrier).

## 4 FARMING CONTEXT

In Couserans region, as in the Ariège department more generally, livestock farming is extensive and focused on meat production. Local breeds are favoured, including *Tarasconnaise* sheep, *Castillonnais* horses and sheep, *Gasconne des Pyrénées* cattle, and *Mérens* horses. Other breeds more common across France, such as *Charolais* cows and *Comtois* horses, are also widespread. Among the various breeds of livestock guarding dogs, the local *Pyrenean Mountain Dog (Patou)* breed is widely found.

Mountain transhumance is based on short-distance movements, often with herds ascending to summer pastures close to the valley. 96% of transhumant herders come from the department and the rest from the neighbouring department of Aude (DRAAF Occitanie, 2020).

Farms are often family-run and may focus on a single breed or mixed breeding. During the summer season, many herders gather their sheep or cattle to graze in high-altitude areas, following the seasonal vegetation cycles (Eychenne et Lazaro, 2014). Flocks typically consist of 700 - 2000 sheep guarded by hired shepherds, or around 50 cows/equids.

**Main Challenges:**

- ▶ Harsh mountain environment for both animals and humans.
- ▶ Coexistence between pastoralism and recreational activities in the mountains can be challenging.
- ▶ Limited fodder resources in the valley, which encourages transhumance, but it can be difficult for new herders to find suitable summer pastures.
- ▶ The grouping of herds increases health risks for animals and risk of conflict within pastoral groups.
- ▶ Severe epidemics such as bluetongue disease in 2024.
- ▶ Aging of the agricultural population and division between rural and urban areas.
- ▶ Heavy dependence of farms on the CAP.
- ▶ The return of bears after several decades of absence has completely disrupted pastoral practices (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** Shepherds, huts, nighttime enclosure and livestock guarding dogs are gradually returning to the mountains where they had sometimes disappeared at the same time as the bears (Photo Credit: Alice Ouvrier).

## 5 LOCAL CONFLICT ASSOCIATED WITH LARGE CARNIVORES

### Number of attacks:

In 2024, there were 369 attacks on livestock across the entire Pyrenees in which bear responsibility could not be ruled out (Réseau Ours brun, 2024). This figure has remained relatively stable since 2017, after having increased significantly since 2006.

- ▶ Whenever a farmer or shepherd finds a carcass of an animal that may have been killed by a bear, state agents conduct an expert assessment to confirm the cause of death. If the farmer has implemented at least two herd protection measures (such as guarding dogs, shepherd presence, fencing, etc.), they are entitled to financial compensation determined by a prefectural decree.
- ▶ Attacks mainly concern sheep, and more rarely, cattle, beehives and horses.
- ▶ Most attacks occur during the summer grazing season, when high-altitude pastures overlap with the bears' range, whilst bears are much less active in winter.
- ▶ Since sheep are predated in the mountains, the official figures may underestimate the actual number of attacks, as some carcasses are never found by farmers.
- ▶ Predation remains highly random and unpredictable at the herd level, making it extremely difficult for farmers to anticipate attacks and adapt their practices accordingly.
- ▶ Due to the particularly steep and rugged mountain terrain, bear attacks can trigger a stampede, causing part of the flock to fall and resulting in the loss of several dozen sheep at once.

### Social conflict:

The social conflict emerged as soon as the first brown bears from Slovenia were reintroduced in 1996 (Benhammou & Coquet, 2008). The conflict was marked by strong local opposition, with numerous demonstrations, press articles, posters in public spaces, graffiti, etc. (Figure 5). Resistance was expressed mainly by the pastoral community, but also by hunting and tourism stakeholders.

- ▶ Local populations denounce a lack of consultation and dialogue prior to the bear population reinforcement.
- ▶ The adaptation of pastoralism to the presence of bears entails an increased workload, considerable anxiety, and even transforms landscapes (construction of shelters, abandonment of summer pastures, fences, etc.).
- ▶ In the Pyrenees, several bears have died at the hands of humans, killed by firearms or poisoned.
- ▶ The social conflict is further exacerbated by the potential return of wolves to the area.



**Figure 5.** Sticker stuck on a farmer's car, parodying the Pays de l'Ours (*Bear country*) association which promoted the return of bears to the Pyrenees (Photo Credit: Alice Ouvrier).

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