

The wolf in Switzerland

Pro Natura conservation strategy for the coexistence with a large carnivore

About the referee: Sara Wehrli was born and grew up in Davos in the Grisons. In 2006 she graduated from the University of Basel with a master's degree in geography and conservation biology. She has professional experience in the fields of land use planning, international cooperation and animal welfare. From 2010-2017 she was the responsible wildlife expert with Swiss Animal Protection SAP. Since July 2017 she has been working as a conservation professional with Pro Natura where she is responsible for the NPO's hunting and large carnivore policy. In 2014 she obtained the hunting licence in the canton of Grisons. In her free time, she likes to go bird-watching.

About Pro Natura: Founded in 1909 with the aim of creating the first National Park in Switzerland, Pro Natura today is Switzerland's largest and most influential environmental protection organization. Representing over 133'000 members and 27'000 regular donors, and owning more than 650 protected areas throughout the country, Pro Natura understands herself as an advocate and opinion leader for the conservation of nature. As a member of Friends of the Earth International she supports like-minded partner organizations abroad, with a focus on Eastern Europe. Pro Natura is the driving force behind the new National Park project in the Locarnese, Ticino.

Introduction

The return of the wolf (Canis lupus) as a conservation challenge

Wolf protection is like a « litmus test » for nature conservancy. Wolves are not only big predators that by their very nature are prone to conflict with human land use interests (farming, hunting), but they are also handicapped mythologically. Only few other animals polarize as much as wolves do. People either love or hate wolves, and many fear them. Whenever people discuss about wolves, implicit messages are sent: We do not only talk about the management of a wildlife species, but also about social conflicts (urban vs. rural, progressive vs. conservative, ecocentric vs. anthropocentric). What is more, being intelligent and adaptive animals, wolves seldom behave „impeccably“ (much to wolf advocates’ regret)! This makes protecting the wolf and defending its right to exist in a man-made landscape very challenging.

However, if we as a society succeed in protecting the wolf, then all the other challenges in conservation should be manageable as well. We cannot demand that poor countries of the global South protect tigers and elephants (that can really threaten human lives) and at the same time fail ourselves in conserving the wolf, a comparably innocuous wild animal.

What it means to protect wolves in Switzerland

Advocating the natural return of *Canis lupus* to Switzerland means dealing with many challenges and predicaments and being active in an emotionally heated public debate. First of all, coexisting with a large predatory animal such as the wolf means dealing with tangible problems such as protection of livestock (mainly sheep, goats), adjusted game management, handling of wolves that « misbehave ». There are many fundamental questions going along with these management decisions : How expensive will it be to protect all sheep and goats against wolves? Do we as a society want to spend that money? Shall we « sacrifice » traditional sheep husbandry and the livelihoods involved and promote the return of the wolf? Shall the wolf stay a protected species, or should it be huntable like any other game? How can hunting as a traditional and ecologically motivated activity be justified when wolves intervene as competitors? What is « normal wolf behaviour » and which wolf behaviour is problematic and a reason for killing the animal?

Secondly, there are ethical questions to be answered: Why did our ancestors exterminate the wolf – and are their reasons still valid and accepted today? How many sheep have to die before a single wolf may be culled? What is so bad about the loss of traditional livelihoods and the rewilding of the Alps? Who are the majorities that decide in our democracy about the fate of wolves and sheep, and who is actually concerned personally? Where does the money that is spent for herd protection come from, and what can taxpayers expect from livestock owners in exchange?

The wolf – global and European context

The wolf as a species is not threatened. The global wolf population is estimated to number around 100'000 individuals with most animals living in Russia, Mongolia, China, Canada and the United States. However, in many parts of its original habitat the actual wolf presence has become patchy, and for most populations no reliable data exist. It may therefore well be that the actual worldwide population is much smaller than thought! In many countries wolves are still considered a pest and hunted relentlessly. Moreover, wolves exist in many differentiated subspecies. Some of these subspecies, such as the Indian wolf, the Tibet wolf or the Canadian Timberwolf are so specific that zoologists discuss whether they are actually proper canine species. If this were the case, some of these unique populations would have to be considered critically endangered! In Europe we find two subspecies of the wolf: the eponymous Grey wolf (*Canis lupus lupus*) and the Italian wolf (*Canis lupus italicus*) that is somewhat smaller and genetically very distinct (and is the sub-species that currently colonizes Switzerland). The Grey wolf metapopulation is split into more or less isolated subpopulations. Wolf density is comparably high in Southeast Europe and in Spain and somewhat lower in Northern Europe. The Italian wolf is split into two subpopulations as well, the Alps and Italian peninsula, that are only weakly linked by migrant animals. The Alps are an important potential genetic „melting pot“ for *Canis lupus*, because they might allow for the genetically rather uniform Italian wolves (bottleneck population) to outbreed with Eurasian Grey wolf. Every country has to contribute its share in wolf protection – irrespective of the total global or European population size! For the wolf to play its important ecological role in Switzerland, wolves actually present in Switzerland matter, and not the wolves living in Romania or Russia.

Extinction and return of the wolf

Wolves had almost entirely become extinct in Europe, including Switzerland, at least 200-300 years ago (depending on region). Widespread deforestation, disappearance of natural prey and relentless persecution were the causes for wolf extermination. Small populations survived in the Italian Appennine, in Spain and on the Balkans. Populations recovered slowly in the 20th century, after the implementation of regulations on hunting and forestry and legal protection of the wolf as a threatened species. In the nineties, first immigrants from the growing North-Italian alpine population appeared in Switzerland. Young males were the first to colonize the Swiss Alps, in spite of repeated illegal killings. Female wolves followed in the early years 2000, but the first reproduction in Switzerland took place in 2012 only. Since then, wolves have reproduced regularly in the country, and the population is growing steadily. A 2016 KORA report (*Nienhuis, Schnydrig et al. (2016): Wolf in the Alps: Recommendations for an internationally coordinated management*) draws the conclusion that Switzerland – considering its ecological potential and social wolf acceptance – should be able to maintain 17 wolf packs (or around 150-200 individual

wolves), thereby contributing to the existence of an alpine wolf population in a « favourable conservation status ».

Legal protection status of the wolf in Switzerland

Wolves are protected by the Bern convention Annex II and by federal law on hunting and protection of wild mammals and birds. They may not be hunted, but harmful individuals may nevertheless be killed. What is more, even regulation of the wolf population is legally possible if great damage or threat to humans is proven. In this latter case, the Confederation is responsible for giving permissions to shoot wolves, whereas the elimination of harmful individuals may be authorized on a cantonal level. The « Konzept Wolf Schweiz » is a guideline for cantons on how to put the law into practice and how to carry out wolf management (monitoring, livestock protection, compensation payments, pre-conditions for the shooting of wolves). The law is currently under revision, and in the future cantons will probably also be in charge of wolf regulation – a very questionable development from Pro Natura’s point of view, because the Confederation would thus delegate its sovereignty in conservation matters to the cantons and to local interest groups, which would make an internationally coordinated wolf management impossible !

Political situation

Currently, the national law for hunting is under revision. Strong anti-wolf pressure in recent years has led to many political concessions in wolf protection. According to the draft of the new law, regulation of the wolf will henceforward be a cantonal responsibility. From September till November, up to 50% of the cubs detected through monitoring may be shot. The preconditions for such regulations will be interpreted very loosely and even *potential* damage by wolves may be a reason for shooting them. Despite these far-reaching concessions, the anti-wolf lobby upholds political pressure. A national alliance has formed « for living-space without large predators ». Already, the Federal Council has given in to them and will ask the Berne Convention to downgrade the European protection status of the wolf (which would mean that hunting the wolf would become possible). Illegal wolf killings remain at high levels and offenders hardly have to fear detection. The latest „argument“ of the anti-wolf lobby is the potential presence of wolf-dog hybrids among the Swiss wolf population, which would make it advisable to have these (meaning: all) animals « removed ».

Pro Natura wolf policy

Pro Natura wolf policy is based on four pillars:

- Politics
- Communication
- Field work
- Content-focused work

Politically, we accept regulation of the wolf population once it is established, stable and reproducing regularly. Considering the fact that > 100 wolves may live in Switzerland from an ecological perspective and that our country should host around 17 wolf packs in order to fairly contribute to international wolf protection efforts, it is not justifiable to start « regulating » the species today – with only 30-40 wolves living in the country! Pro Natura emphasizes the positive influence of wolf on forest health, forms a coalition with forestry representatives (and is open to cooperation with other fair-minded and objective partners) in order to foster a positive wolf discussion.

We try to find pragmatic solutions and understand ourselves and our allies as the moderate and sensible party in an otherwise emotional and often aggressive debate.

Pro Natura supports practical work „in the field“. For example, we financially support livestock protection measures and appropriate accommodation of herdsmen on the alpine pastures. Also, Pro Natura offers excursions where participants can meet livestock guardian dogs and learn how to behave properly when meeting these animals on a hike.

Pro Natura maintains a regular dialogue with KORA (Carnivore ecology and wildlife management specialist group), the Federal office for environment BAFU, the cantonal administrations (Large predator working group) and with AGRIDEA (institute for agricultural consultation). We support studies, series of lectures and launch polls on a regular basis.

In 2012 Pro Natura, WWF Switzerland, JagdSchweiz (Swiss hunters' association) and the Swiss sheep breeders' association reached a « historic compromise »: They committed themselves to a factual and constructive wolf debate and agreed on the fundamental facts (wolf returns naturally, coexistence with wolf is possible, alpine pastures need to be cultivated, protection of livestock is key, future regulation of wolf population is feasible). Sadly, this common understanding is currently under strong pressure because of a polemic political debate that increasingly forces stakeholders to take sides.

