

- Maienfeld Declaration –

Wolf Policy as a Problem for Nature Conservation



As conservationists and ecologists from Austria, Germany and Switzerland, we are alarmed. The spread of wolves is leading to increasing conflicts with many other national as well as international nature conservation objectives. However, these conflicting objectives are apparently still recognised too little and are often played down.

Europe's extensively farmed cultural landscapes with their meadows and pastures are home to an enormous wealth of landscapes and species and are a global speciality. In mountainous areas and on slopes, a very high level of biodiversity is still present today. Cultivation of these areas is extremely labour-intensive and not very productive. Therefore they are endangered for economic reasons alone. At the same time, reliable herd protection is completely impossible here.

From a nature conservation perspective, the abandonment of such landscapes is out of the question. In order to preserve species-rich, pasture-dominated landscapes, regionally differentiated active wolf management is needed quickly. This will also benefit the wolf species, which will only be accepted in the long term if conflicts are resolved.

Threatened hotspots of biodiversity

Extensive pasture and meadow landscapes are hotspots of biodiversity in Europe. The cultural landscapes of the Alps with their diverse alpine pastures and structurally rich slopes are of outstanding importance. These landscapes are the result of many centuries of agricultural utilisation and are therefore a living cultural asset. Without grazing and meadow mowing, dense forest would dominate almost everywhere and many animal and plant species would not occur.

Traditional cultural landscapes have been in decline for a long time. In order not to lose any more areas and to regain areas that have already been lost, great efforts are being made through European and national funding. Together with farmers, nature conservation has been able to achieve notable successes. An immense amount of work spanning over thirty years is now at risk.

Wolves in the cultural landscape

The first packs settled in German-speaking countries around twenty years ago. The number of wolves is increasing rapidly. Furthermore, they are increasingly learning to overcome herd protection measures. It is precisely those land use systems that are most valuable for nature conservation that are at risk. What is at stake:

- Protected areas and landscapes that have evolved over centuries
- Unique and extremely diverse meadow and pasture systems
- Occurrences of rare and endangered animal and plant species

According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), wolves have no longer been considered endangered in Europe since 2007, but are still strictly protected under the Bern Convention. Extensively utilised open land is home to plant and animal species that have the same high protection status as the wolf but, unlike the wolf, are in decline and endangered. However, their habitats cannot be preserved with a permanent wolf presence.

The limits of herd protection

There is no tradition of passive herd protection measures in the cultural history of Central Europe. On the contrary, predators and especially wolves have always been fiercely persecuted. Children and old people were often employed as shepherds. They had the task of keeping the grazing cattle in the right place. Permanent wolf defence was not one of their tasks. The much-vaunted "peaceful co-existence" of wolves and grazing livestock never existed. The much-quoted saying that "we have to learn to live with wolves again" is therefore nonsensical and misleading.

Today, wolf-proof fences are recommended as a panacea for maintaining pasture farming despite the presence of wolves. All domestic and farm animals would have to be protected, always and everywhere; not only sheep and goats, but also horses and cattle. However, fences are never sufficiently wolf-proof without simultaneous hunting, even under favourable conditions. In the mountains, they are only technically feasible in exceptional cases. Apart from that, entire landscapes would have to be covered with electric wolf fences. Wild animals dying from strangulation and electrocution and blocked hiking trails would be unavoidable side effects.

Even if livestock protection fences were to work as a sole measure, they would simply be far too expensive. Based on experience and projections, the initial investment for complete livestock protection in Germany, Austria and Switzerland would swallow up several hundred million euros and thus exceed the nature conservation budgets of these countries, not including the annual follow-up costs for maintenance.

Every herd of cattle, no matter how small, would have to be guarded by a pack of livestock guarding dogs. There has never been anything like this in Central Europe before. In the areas guarded by livestock guarding dogs, all wild animals, including ground-nesting birds, would be threatened. In touristic areas, the use of guard dogs ready to fight is a major safety risk.

Wolf population

Central European wolf populations are interconnected and are part of a large Eurasian population that extends as far as Russia. Wolves are extremely adaptable and have a high dispersal potential; they make no specific demands on their habitat. They can settle practically anywhere where there is enough food. A comprehensive colonisation is not necessary for reasons of species conservation. There is no doubt that the criteria for the so-called favourable conservation status are met at population level and the wolf population is viable in the long term.

Spatially differentiated wolf management

Europe urgently needs spatially differentiated wolf management that is adapted to the respective overall ecological and social environment. The basis for this should be technically sound, transparently derived ecological spatial planning.

1) Protected grazing areas

Wolves are not tolerated where herd protection cannot be implemented for technical reasons and where there are important nature conservation arguments against the presence of wolves. A buffer zone keeps migrating wolves away.

2) Active wolf management

Permanent wolf management is necessary outside the protected grazing areas:

- **Population regulation**

The wolf population is managed in such a way that it can survive in the long term, but is also compatible with nature conservation and society. Population sizes, regional densities and pack sizes are regulated in such a way that gene exchange within the Eurasian population is guaranteed.

- **Red line**

Opportune behaviour is defined, deviations are reacted to immediately by removal. Wolves should be as shy of humans as possible, not jump livestock protection fences and avoid settlements, livestock guarding dogs and large livestock.

- **Promotion of livestock protection measures**

If livestock protection measures are made a prerequisite for removals, all costs, materials and labour, including maintenance and renewal, must be covered by the state.

Declaration

The undersigned persons with expertise in nature conservation, ecology and land culture are addressing the public and the decision-makers in politics and administration in their countries and in Europe:

With a continuation of the current wolf policy, which is based on an outdated state of affairs and a lack of overall consideration, Europe is in the process of destroying its globally unique grassland cultural landscapes that have evolved over centuries.

The European system of protected areas will suffer great damage if grazing traditions and as a result other extensive forms of management such as mountain meadow mowing are lost.

Unless wolf policy is adapted, the increasing endangerment of strictly protected species is inevitable and Europe will be guilty of large-scale degradation of threatened habitats.

From a holistic perspective and especially from a nature conservation point of view, we consider an immediate lowering of the protection status for the wolf in the Bern Convention and the Habitats Directive to be urgently required.

Maienfeld, March 26, 2024¹

¹ This declaration was presented to the public in Maienfeld (Switzerland) on 26 th March, 2024. Maienfeld has an extraordinarily high level of biodiversity, which only exists thanks to agricultural use and grazing. Among other things, there are extensive wooded pastures with 400-year-old oaks, numerous extensively utilised meadows and pastures, as well as a number of well-maintained, species-rich alpine pastures. Without agriculture and grazing, this wealth could not survive.

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² March 27, 2024