

A Plea for Ecosystems not to be abandoned by Herders

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Many of France's most emblematic landscapes—high mountain ranges, hills, patchworks of hedged meadows, and wetlands—have been shaped over the course of centuries through farming practices. Our urban societies increasingly appreciate the beauty and vitality of these areas. Ecosystems, however, can deteriorate rapidly if not maintained, notably by proper grazing activities. And now, pastoralists in many regions are suffering from wolves attacking their flocks of sheep and goats. What can be done? The gravity of the situation requires urgent action, both in the field and at the regulatory level.

Wolves are classified as an endangered species in Europe and are thus strictly protected. In the vast northern regions of North America and Eurasia, they are regarded as a “keystone species,” essential to and indicative of a healthy wilderness, whether protected or restored. In France, however, where our geography and history are very different, wolves develop their opportunistic behavior—on occasion, they no longer “regulate” weak or sick wild animals and instead attack healthy flocks of domestic sheep and goats. Paradoxically, wolves, covered by their protected species status, are threatening pastoral livestock rearing, which is among farming activities one of the most respectful of biodiversity, and a provider of a variety of ecosystem services.

Since 1992, European policies have sought to promote and support the management of agro-pastoral areas, as having resisted the large trend toward the homogenization of landscapes and the industrialization of conventional agriculture. As a result, many remarkable species—such as rock partridge, red grouse, Alpine ibex, bearded vulture, and many others—found safe habitats in these areas. Pastoral activities maintain mosaics of natural swards, shrublands and wooded grasslands, thus providing and renewing many amenities for those who appreciate flowering plants, insects, reptiles, and amphibians. This biodiversity is also domestic, including for instance rare breeds such as the Raïoles, Brigasques, and Mourerous sheep and the Rove and Poitou goats, which livestock farmers strive to conserve. Both within and outside of national and regional parks, in protected areas as well as in “ordinary” nature, the conservation of wild and domestic biodiversity is a single and common struggle.

The wolf issue is now present at the national level. Well established throughout the Alps, wolves have now spread to Jura, Vosges, and eastern Pyrenees; they have now reached the south-central mountains, as well as the plains of northeastern France. Official counts in 2014 found 27 packs of wolves, two-thirds of which were in the Southern Alps. The population has reached 300 adult wolves in more than 20 French departments, with a growth rate of 20% per year. Each year, officially reported losses amount to 20-25 sheep or goats killed on average by each adult wolf, an impressive tally. Wolf attacks have likewise been reported on heifers, calves and horses. Attacks mostly occur in the high mountains, but are known as well in the foothills, and even in the meadows and fields at the bottom of valleys.

How have we gotten to this point? Should we attribute this rising toll to the growing passivity of farmers and herders? To do so would be to offend them. Since 1994, a variety of protection measures have been proposed by France and implemented by farmers and herders. In the Alps, more than 2000 livestock guard dogs have been acquired and put to work. Where possible, shepherds have taken to penning their flocks within electrified fences every night, and assistant herders have strengthened surveillance. Have these measures proven effective? Wolf attacks seemed to diminish between 2006 and 2009. Since then, however, nothing seems to work. Despite increased protection efforts, losses have doubled in four years.

While farmers and herders have modified their practices, so too have the wolves, and the wolves seem to be winning. Despite guard dogs, wolves now attack in the daytime as well as at night. Even more worrying, the presence of humans no longer appears to be dissuasive. Wolves have learned that they can make their attacks without risk, even near roads and houses. These are behavioral changes that could have been predicted. They have been known for many years in the Western United States, where Wildlife Agencies struggle sometimes daily with the perverse effects of the total protection of some animal species. Encouraging large fauna to maintain their wild behaviors in this day and age demands attentive, even vigorous intervention.

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The conclusion seems unavoidable: even the most elaborate protection measures have lost their effectiveness in just a few years. An array of complementary techniques have been proposed, including illuminated flares, ultrasonic devices, noisemaking drones, and others. These are more likely to frighten the flocks than the predators. Wolves are smart and inventive. The European strategy of coexistence for pastoral activities and protected predators has failed and must be reconsidered. Above and beyond the financial costs, the ecological and human consequences are mounting and are necessarily interconnected.

France has made a commitment to UNESCO to protect the cultural landscapes of agro-pastoralism in the Causses and the mountain range of Cévennes, as inscribed on the World Heritage List. There, as elsewhere in France, the retreat of pastoralist activities will give rise to the overgrowth of plants that come to dominate landscapes and thus loss of diverse habitats required by a multitude of protected species. This is not to call for a status quo: landscapes are living and their inhabitants never cease to evolve. Some groups who previously advocated "coexistence" are now calling for the withdrawal of pastoral activities. But the French countryside is not comparable in terms of size, history and human density to the Western United States. Farmers and shepherds of France do not deserve to be disqualified and dispossessed. Committed, passionate, inspired by their respect for the living world, these men and women are engaged in demanding work for modest returns.

Is there still time to re-design a future for these lands? To prevent the eviction of small farmers providing local, quality agricultural products while maintaining the vitality of diverse and appealing landscapes? Can we still convince wolves to remain "wild" by enjoying them to keep their distance from livestock activities?

Our societies need diverse ecosystems and healthy landscapes. Many of these function and are continually being renewed thanks to the careful work of herders and livestock farmers. Their situation is becoming increasingly untenable, as a major element of our heritage is being put in peril by wolves. An effective regulation is essential. It is late. Not too late, hopefully.

Signatories

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