

Wolves and Alpine farming

A report on experience

Josef Zandl

Alpine farming on the Fischhorn farming estate:

The Fischhorn farming estate in Austria manages two adjacent Alpine areas around the Imbachhorn mountain peak of approximately 1,000 ha, including an Alpine forage area of 520 ha. The Alpine meadows stand at an altitude of between 1,500 and 2,400 m above sea level. Every year, from the end of May to mid September, the farming estate grazes roughly 250 of its own cattle along with 100 borrowed livestock from nearby farms (suckler cows with their calves and young cattle) and 10 horses. Agricultural holdings in the neighbouring areas also graze around 130 sheep from mid May to mid September. Two herdsmen are responsible for the grazing of the animals, and additional support with sheep grazing is provided by a shepherd. One of the Alpine pastures stands at an altitude of up to 1,500 m above sea level and can be reached by car; the second, at an elevation of up to 1,700 m above sea level, is accessible with an all-terrain vehicle. The highest peak (Imbachhorn, 2,470 m) in the extensive Alpine area can only be reached on foot (a one to two hour walk).

Record of wolf incidents since June 2015:

Of 127 grazing sheep, 68 were reported dead or missing. Moreover, one severely injured calf, two dead heifers, three dead calves for which the cause of death was unknown, and one missing calf whose skeleton was found in November were recorded.

The "material damage" resulting from these livestock losses amounted to approximately €15,000. The increased costs for shepherding, for the preservation of evidence, for fence repairs and for administration were of approximately €5,000. These costs were offset by revenue arising from grazing tax and financial support for Alpine pastures amounting to roughly €900. In February 2016, livestock farmers were compensated for their livestock losses as a "gesture of goodwill". Compensation for the additional expenses required for the management of the estate was denied for legal reasons.

Consequences:

For landowners and shepherds, the presence of wolves has meant that they can no longer guarantee the safety of livestock grazing in the mountains. The additional costs required far exceed their small income. Shepherding using herd protection measures (electric fences and livestock guard dogs) would cost at least €50 per sheep. In 2016, sheep were no longer grazed on the Alpine pastures. Some criticised this as being an "overreaction" as it was presumed that the incidents were caused by just one passing wolf. However, a repetition of the incidents in the neighbouring Alpine area in June 2016 confirmed that this was the right decision!

Forecast of the developments and consequences of the establishment of wolf packs in Alpine pastures

With the exception of what is now the first wolf pair with offspring in the municipality of Allentsteig (Lower Austria), most wolves currently living in Austria are lone, often male "migratory" wolves. However, looking at the dynamic spread of wolves across central Europe, this will not be the case for long. Reproductive wolf packs are fast approaching Austria's borders,

from Switzerland to Italy and from Slovenia to Slovakia. Even the German-Polish wolf population is rapidly spreading south. The establishment of wolf packs on Alpine grazing land is just a question of time. If we continue to allow wolves to spread across the intensively cultivated landscape of central Europe, then I venture to make the following forecast for my area of activity:

More wolf-proof fencing needed: In order to continue to allow the crossing of wild animals, we are currently erecting barbed wire fences of roughly 20 km with only one or two strands of wire across our Alpine areas. In areas where there is less hoofed game, pastures will also be divided up into enclosures with approximately 6 km-long electric fences. Regardless of whether it is even possible to erect wolf-proof fencing across the very uneven terrain, to protect the herds, all fences need to be converted into electric fences that are at least 1.20 m high and equipped with five strands of wire. In order to make the area of land more manageable for the shepherds, smaller enclosures are required. This means that an additional electric fence of 10 km will need to be erected. The 36 km line of fencing must be checked and cut free regularly to ensure the flow of electricity and to fill any possible holes or gaps. When snow falls during the summer, the fences risk being damaged by snowslides and avalanches.

Hoofed game will also be fenced off from the pastures and will therefore be unable to use the Alpine areas during the grazing period from mid May to end of September. The animals will be forced to remain in the forest, where they will cause more damage. The best breeding grounds for deer are all located on Alpine pastures. These will no longer be available. The game population will therefore have to be adapted to the new conditions (i.e. be reduced). In turn, the value of game will drop.

More shepherds: Two shepherds are currently responsible for between 350 and 400 cattle (suckler cows and young cattle) and 10 horses in the two Alpine areas. In future, the animals will have to be secured in pens during the night. This means that four more shepherds will need to be employed in the extensive area. Additional accommodation will be required, which has yet to be constructed. Herd protection using dogs is not an option as a number of highly frequented hiking trails lead through the Alpine region. This may cause problems between livestock guard dogs and walkers.

The unaffordable additional costs on the one hand, and the impossible task of erecting wolf-proof fencing in Alpines regions at reasonable expense on the other, will force livestock farms to give up grassland rearing in the mountains. Herds will have to be reduced and it will only be possible to keep them in the valley. If wolves then make their way into the valley, which is highly likely, herd protection would have to be ramped up there too. Livestock could then presumably only be kept in secure stalls. Livestock farming would evolve from natural, organic animal husbandry allowing for extensive grazing to an industrialised form of production with animals housed indoors throughout the year. Additional investment would also be necessary. If this does not prove economically viable, then farmers will give up livestock farming. Grassland farming in the valley will be abandoned, and the areas will be put to other uses, such as for energy forestry, transforming the landscape drastically.

No longer used for grazing, mountain pastures would be afforested or at the very least would gradually become forests again. Approximately 400 ha of the farming estate would be affected. From an environmental point of view, this would result in a significant loss of biodiversity. Black grouse habitats that are currently of high quality would be lost. Up to 50 griffon vultures live in the Kapruner Tal valley during the summer. Bearded vultures are also regular visitors. The vultures mainly feed off grazing animals that have died. However, this source of food would no longer be available if grassland rearing is abandoned.

The abandonment of Alpine farming would also have a significant economic impact on local tourism.

Thoughts on how to integrate wolves in Europe without conflict

Wolves are not an endangered species in Europe. Enough land is available for wolves to be able to live without coming into major conflict with humans. However, it is also unrealistic to think that it is possible to integrate wolves without conflict throughout the central European cultivated landscape. To do so would not be beneficial to wolves as a species either. Conflicts would be inevitable in densely populated urban areas or in Alpine pastures. People living and working in these areas would be unable to live with the consequences of the permanent presence of wolves. It is therefore unfair to burden those that live off livestock breeding with the presence of wolves, when we ourselves are not prepared to live with the consequences. To demand that those living and working in the vicinity of wolf packs unconditionally "adapt" to the presence of wolves is just as one-sided as to refuse to accept wolves under any circumstance and to seek to eradicate them EU-wide.

A good example of how wild animals can be integrated into the cultivated landscape is provided by the wildlife ecological spatial planning instrument developed for deer in Salzburg, Austria. Areas where deer are present are divided up into wildlife management zones, based on areas where deer and people may conflict. Deer-free zones are areas which would be suitable habitats for the species but where it cannot be tolerated due to the high risk of damage that it may cause to agriculture and forestry. Although the shooting season opens and closes, during the shooting season, all deer must be shot according to mandatory legal regulations. This particularly applies to arable land and wooded recreational areas in urban centres in the north of Salzburg. Areas in which people can coexist well with deer are known as core deer zones. These areas strive to ensure habitat security for the wildlife species and sustainable use with a strict hunting plan. The regions concerned are primarily Alpine pastures along the High Tauern mountain range in the south. Boundary deer zones are located in between these areas and serve as a "buffer".

Just as we cannot afford to allow unregulated deer populations to roam freely across our cultivated landscape, we cannot in the long term afford to allow wolf populations to spread unopposed. In order to conserve wolves in Europe and to secure them a home here – which they need in order to survive insofar as possible without conflicting with humans – they need to be hunted across Europe as well as regulated in areas where their density is too high. Herd protection in the face of wolf populations roaming freely can only work under certain conditions, as wolves lose their "natural" shyness of humans. In order to obtain easy prey, they are becoming increasingly creative when overcoming obstacles (fences).

While some may not like it, hunting above all can provide pragmatic solutions for the integration and the conservation of wolves in Europe. Cross-border wildlife ecological spatial planning for wolves in Europe could make it easier to ensure the integration of wolves in the long term. Based on conflict potential (maps of possible conflict areas), the following zones should be designated: core zones (areas with low conflict potential allowing for sustainable hunting and habitat protection), free zones (areas with high conflict potential where significant hunting takes place) and boundary zones, in between the two aforementioned areas, serving as corridors for genetic exchange. This could lay the foundation for the tolerable coexistence of humans and wolves. The political world is called upon to create the relevant legal framework for this.

Ultimately, it is up to society to decide who they want to see living on Alpine pastures: the wolf or the farmer? If the wolf stays the farmer goes!

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Contact:

Josef Zandl

Gutsverwaltung Fischhorn GmbH & Co KG

Knappenbühelweg 17

5671 Bruck an der Glocknerstraße,

Salzburg, Austria