



# Meetings

## LIFE WolfAlps EU 2022 Conference: Is the grass always greener elsewhere?

*Summary of the proceedings of the 4<sup>th</sup> International Conference of the LIFE WolfAlps EU Project, held on the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> December 2022 in Barcelonnette (France): sharing management strategies for wolf-human coexistence in Europe.*

A predator of livestock, seen as a competitor by some hunters, poached and legally culled in certain countries, but also an animal central to mythology, an emblem of the wild for its supporters, source of tourist income, protected and closely monitored: the wolf has a special place in the European bestiary. After having been exterminated in certain countries, it is returning naturally and extending its territory on the continent, not without generating tensions. Managing this conflictual situation has become a major issue. How do our European neighbours manage cohabitation with the predator? Twelve experts representing seven European countries provided some partial answers.



© Francesco Panuelli/APAM

A pair of captive Alpine wolves in Italy.

Organised by the French Office for Biodiversity (OFB) with the support of the Mercantour National Park, the 4<sup>th</sup> International Conference of the LIFE WolfAlps EU Project provided an opportunity for speakers from France, Italy, Spain, Germany, Austria, Slovakia and Slovenia to talk about wolf management. Four of those countries – Italy, France, Austria and Slovenia – are parties to this European programme initiated in 2019 (Figure 1 and Figure 2). Yet the wolf draws interest well beyond their borders. In addition to the 39 people who attended the conference in Barcelonnette, in the southern Alps, the discussions were followed online by 474 internet users in 16 European countries.

This international conference was an opportunity to find out how the presence of wolves is managed in each country according to its history, political system, type of livestock farming practised and the way the animal is perceived by the population.



© Francesco Panuelli/APAM

A captive wolf in Italy.

## Centralised or federal country

All the native wolves of Europe belong to the species *Canis lupus*, the grey wolf. There are nonetheless considerable differences in the way the species is managed because of the political structure of the various countries involved (Table 1). In France, the same rules apply throughout its territory. A “National Action Plan on the Wolf and Livestock-rearing Activities” defines the actions to be taken to ensure the viability of the species, the method for population monitoring and the measures for preventing attacks, as well as the conditions for and amounts of compensation in the event of livestock predation. The plan fixes a maximum number of wolves that can be legally culled each year, under strict conditions, in the case of attacks on livestock.

Slovenia and Slovakia also have a centralised approach with management plans for the canid defined at the national level. Compensation is provided in the event of predation. The Slovene government also finances livestock protection measures, which is however not the case in Slovakia.

The situation is completely different in Germany and Austria, two federal countries. Each of the federal states defines its own wolf management policy. In Austria, “the compensations (in the event of predation of flocks) are under the responsibility of the nine federal states, they are not the same for the whole of Austria and the amount therefore depends on where you are”,

explained Klaus Pogadl of the Austrian Centre for the Bear, Wolf and Lynx (ÖZ Bär Wolf Luchs). The same goes for Germany, where the amount of compensation varies from one Land (federal state) to another. The same logic applies to subsidies for measures used in preventing attacks, such as fences or livestock guardian dogs. The method of estimating wolf populations, however, has been harmonised. To manage more effectively the predator’s return in the early 2000s, both countries created management bodies at the national level: the German Federal Documentation and Consultation Centre on Wolves (DBBW), founded in 2016, and the Austrian Centre for the Bear, Wolf and Lynx, inaugurated in 2019. Italy and Spain also give considerable leeway to their regions, and even national parks in the Italian case, for managing the presence of the wolf. In Italy, the assessment of the Italian Institute for Environmental Protection and Research (ISPRA) is required concerning wolf management, but only on a consultative basis. A national action plan for the wolf was adopted in 2002 but has not been revised since. “The current levels of compensation and prevention subsidies depend a lot on the region”, specifies Piero Genovesi from the ISPRA. In Spain, the status of the wolf differed according to the area where it lived. “Wolves could be hunted with numerous restrictions and quotas north of the (River)

Douro and were protected south of the Douro”, explained the Spanish specialist and independent consultant Juan Carlos Blanco. The protection of the species was harmonised at national level in 2021, not without generating tensions.

## Monitoring of wolf populations

The wolf had completely disappeared from France, Germany and Austria. It returned a few decades ago from neighbouring countries. Small, relic populations however survived in Italy, Spain, Slovakia and Slovenia and were able to grow once the species was protected. In all seven countries, wolf populations are monitored in order to know whether the number of wolves is increasing and whether they are colonising new territories (Table 1). In France, Italy, Germany, Austria and Slovenia, these estimations are based on the collection of evidence in the field such as scat (droppings), photos taken by camera traps, hairs, urine, blood or carcasses of prey. Analysis of these indicators using statistical methods allows for an estimation of the number of wolves. For the winter of 2021-2022 and prior to the robust consolidation of estimates by genetic methods, as carried out each year, France provisionally evaluated its

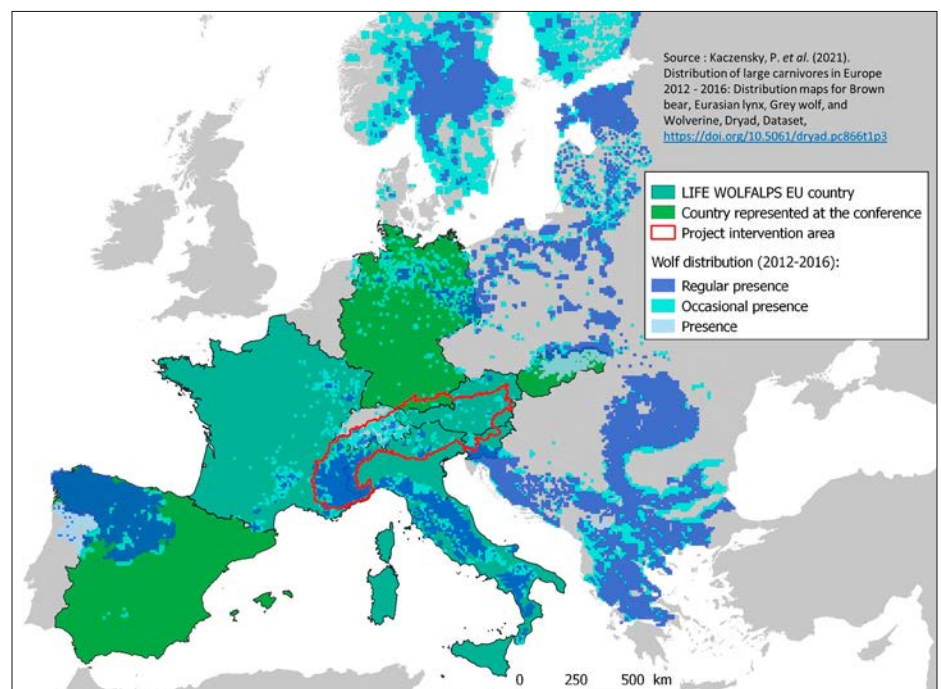


Figure 1. Spatial distribution of the wolf in Western and Central Europe, and countries represented at the 4<sup>th</sup> international conference of the LIFE WolfAlps EU project held in December 2022.

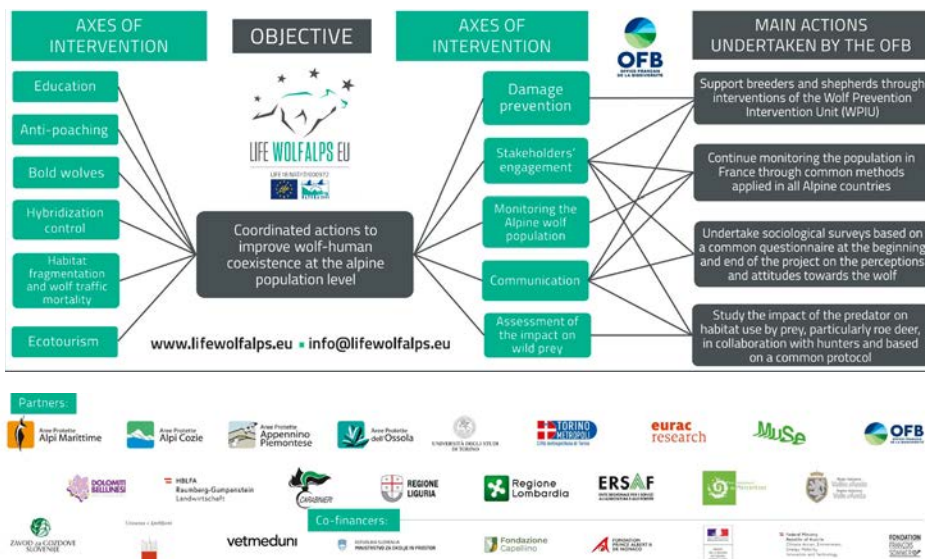


Figure 2. Organisational diagram of the LIFE WolfAlps EU project highlighting the main actions implemented by the OFB.

wolf population as between 826 and 1016 adults, grouped in 128 packs. The packs are concentrated in the southeast of the country, even though some have been established outside the Alpine range since 2019.

Italy, which for the first time carried out a major campaign to gather genetic samples on pilot sites, notably outside the Alps, estimated its wolf population in 2020-2021 as being between 2945 and 3608 individuals. The information obtained was fed into a statistical model to project the number of wolves at the national scale.

Germany focuses on the number of packs and pairs, rather than individuals. In 2021-2022, 161 packs and 42 pairs were detected in its territory, essentially in the northern half of the country in conjunction with a few detections further west.

In Spain, the latest figures available at the national level date from 2012-2014, with 297 packs of wolves estimated by summer detection surveys of breeding packs. Since this period, “the wolves’ range has remained more or less constant and we assume that the number of wolves has not greatly increased”, commented Juan Carlos Blanco. Slovakia bases its estimate on figures provided by hunters, which gave a population of approximately 3100 wolves in 2020. Nonetheless, “these absolute numbers are false” specifies Robin Rigg of the Slovak Wildlife Society, because wolves can be counted several times. Independent monitoring, based on genetic analysis of indicators gathered in

the region of Liptov, estimated the real number of wolves in the country as being five times fewer, i.e., 609 wolves.

In Austria, on the basis of genetic profiling, it seems that there are between 50 and 60 individuals present at least temporarily in the country.

## Flocks and predation, preventive measures and compensation

The difficulties that the presence of wolves cause for livestock-rearing activities are at the core of conflicts with humans.

“The main conflict linked to the return of the wolf concerns the predation of flocks. In a country where wolves had been absent for a very long time, livestock breeders and even their grandparents were no longer used to living with wolves, it’s a big problem”, summarises the German biologist and wolf specialist Ilka Reinhardt. This remark concerns her country, but also applies to France and Austria (Table 1). Each territory has its particular characteristics, depending on the landscape and the type of livestock being bred – goats, sheep, cattle, horses – or the size of the flocks, which can vary from 150 individuals in Slovenia to 1500, or even more, in France. But responses are largely the same everywhere in Europe: re-establishing human presence, through shepherds, in places where it had disappeared, setting up fences or even barns for the night, and using livestock guardian dogs. “It’s very important to have all the flocks protected and not to give the wolf any chance to learn how to get round these protective measures”, stressed Ilka Reinhardt. “It’s not enough to just inject money to solve the problem.” The emphasis in Slovenia is on the correct implementation of protective measures. A joint project was initiated in 2010 with breeders to ensure that the fences are correctly set up and that they are at least 145 centimetres high. “We are one of the few, if not the only country in Europe with a sharp rise in the wolf population and at the same time a drop in the level of damage,” points out Rok Cerne from the Slovenia Forest Service.



A wolf in captivity in Italy.

© Francesco Panuolo/APAM

Parameter	France	Italy	Austria	Slovenia	Spain	Germany	Slovakia
Governance	Centralised	Decentralised	Decentralised	Centralised	Decentralised	Decentralised	Centralised
Wolf status	Protected species	Protected species	Protected species	Protected species	Protected species	Protected species	Protected species/game
Historical background	Eradication followed by recolonization	Expansion from refuge area	Eradication followed by recolonization	Expansion from refuge area	Expansion from refuge area	Eradication followed by recolonization	Persecution followed by expansion from the east
Estimated number of wolves or packs (year of estimation)	826 – 1 016* (2022)	2 945 – 3 608 (2021)	50 – 60 (2022)	106 – 147 (2022)	1 225 – 2 375 (2018)	161 packs et 42 pairs (2022)	> c. 600 (2022)
Demographic trend (since 2016)	Growing	Growing	Growing	Growing	Stable	Growing	Growing
Number of depredated sheep and goats (year)	10 285 (2022)	8 400 (2019)	861 (2022)	139 (2021)	3 360 (2020)	2 881 (2021)	733 (2021)
Lethal control (legal removal of wolves)	Under derogation to protect livestock	Absent	Anecdotal	Anecdotal	Absent (since 2021)	Anecdotal	Absent (since 2021)
Wolf-dog hybrid management	Monitoring	Capture, sterilization and release	Monitoring (but no case as of yet)	Destruction	Destruction	Destruction	Destruction (but no case as of yet)

Sources: « Assessment of the conservation status of the Wolf » report of 2022 produced by the « Large Carnivore Initiative for Europe », DREAL AuRA and personal communication from conference participants. \*: provisional estimate before consolidation by genetic methods.

**Table 1. Comparison of the current context of wolf management in the countries represented at the LIFE WolfAlps EU 2022 conference.**

Some governments subsidise these preventive measures, for example France up to 80% or even 100%, but there is no public aid in Slovakia. The compensation scheme for the livestock killed, injured or lost during attacks also varies between countries and even within certain countries. Livestock breeders in France receive the same amount for an attack whether it takes place in the Alps or in Brittany. “If we can’t exclude the wolf being responsible, we compensate”, says Juliette Bligny, from the Regional Directorate for the Environment, Development and Housing of the Auvergne Rhône-Alps Region (DREAL AuRA), a decentralised department of the ministry in charge of the environment, responsible for steering the management of the wolf in France. This is not the case in Germany, Austria, Spain or Italy, where the compensation procedures and amounts vary depending on the region. In Slovakia, protection measures are not subsidised by the State. In Austria, where the return of the wolf is recent, a pilot project is being run by the Grabnerhof School of Agriculture to teach future livestock farmers how to better protect their flocks.

## The legal culling of wolves

In France, shooting of wolves under derogation is an integral part of the protection of livestock. It falls within the scope of exemptions to the strict protection of the animal, and is undertaken to “prevent damage to the flock”, provided that “it is shown that there is no other satisfactory solution” and that “the legal culling does not harm the favourable conservation status of the population”, explains Juliette Bligny. A limit on the number of wolves that can be legally killed is set each year and corresponds to a maximum of 19% of the estimated average population size, i.e. 174 wolves in 2022. It is difficult to measure whether culling reduces the number of attacks against the flocks. According to Oksana Grente, who wrote a PhD on the subject in France in 2021, “the impact of culling in France was highly variable depending on the context. Most of the effects involved no change, the other effects being a reduction or an increase in depredation.”

Elsewhere, the legal culling of wolves remains the exception (Table 1). In Slovenia, a wolf may be culled particularly in the event of repeated attacks, hybridisation

or if it loses its wariness of humans, but numbers are negligible in relation to the population (12 removals in 2019, three in 2022). In Germany, between 2008 and November 2022, ten wolves were killed, including one to prevent hybridisation with a dog. In Italy, an action plan dating back to 2002 rules out any culling. When a wolf attacked a woman in the south of Italy, it was captured and placed in captivity but “it was not killed”, explains Piero Genovesi of ISPRA. “Until now, there has been a great deal of attention paid to the protection of the wolf”. In Spain, the legislation changed in 2021 and since September of that same year, no wolves have been culled legally. Similarly, in Slovakia, the legislation has evolved over the years: since 2021, the wolf has been strictly protected with zero culling, compared to 39 killings in 2020.

## Changing protection status

The wolf is a species protected in Europe by the 1979 Bern Convention and by the 1992 EU Habitats, Fauna and Flora Directive. These texts nevertheless contain provisions enabling different countries to modulate the level of protection afforded to the species according to the local context.

In Spain and in Slovakia, the regulations for protecting wolves have changed radically in recent years. Until 2021, the wolf in Spain did not benefit from the same level of protection depending on where it lived. It was strictly protected to the south of the Douro River, but not to the north, in the three regions home to approximately 95% of the population. At the same time, the wolf attracts tourists to rural areas in the north of the country. In 2019, defenders of the animal campaigned to have it added to the list of protected species. The proposal was adopted two years later, in a vote by all the Spanish regions, even those without wolves. It passed by a single vote, with all the regions where the predator is present voting against it.

Slovakia, where the wolf did not completely disappear during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has seen major changes in the protection of the canid since the 1970s. In 1994, the country signed the Bern Convention but retained the right to hunt wolves. Ten years later, it joined the European Union but the hunting still continued. In 2013, an infringement procedure was opened by the European Commission, leading to a sharp reduction in hunting plans to zero wolves legally culled in 2021, as well as a ban on hunting in certain areas and the adoption of a national management plan for the wolf in 2016.

## Hybridisation

Wolves and dogs have more than 99% of DNA in common and can interbreed. The standing committee of the Bern Convention recommends that States do everything in their power to prevent breeding between the two canids, by combating stray dogs and, if necessary, eliminating hybrid wolves (Table 1). In Italy, “we don’t have a credible estimate of hybridisation at national level”, says Piero Genovesi of ISPRA, but “in certain regions of Italy, hybridisation is relatively widespread”, as in Tuscany, while it is still possible to limit it in the alpine zone. One possibility is to capture the hybrids and sterilise them. The Slovenian policy is to eliminate hybrid wolves. “We are trying to carry out genetic analyses” to target the right individuals, says Matej Bartol of the Slovenia Forest Service. Suspicions

of hybridisation led to the culling of a wolf in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, in the north of Germany in 2020, while a study published in 2019 (available at the [loupfrance.fr](http://loupfrance.fr) website) concludes that the rate of hybridisation in France is relatively low.

## Communication

“Talking to people is essential,” says Rok Cerne from the Slovenia Forest Service. The visitors’ centre in the town of Pivka aims to promote coexistence with large predators – bear, wolf and lynx – and explain how to minimise conflicts. The emphasis is on working with children, but also livestock breeders and hunters (on the human dimensions of the LIFE WolfAlps EU project, see the box below). Transparent communication is essential, as the case of the return of the wolf in France has shown. The animal was observed for the first time in November 1992 in the Mercantour National Park, but “the observation was kept confidential for six months to certify that the animal observed was not a stray dog, to ensure its [legal] protection by an

interministerial decree and to prepare a protocol in the event of depredation”, recounts Nathalie Siefert, head of the park’s Knowledge and Heritage Management unit. “These six months of silence gave rise to a rumour that the wolf had perhaps been reintroduced, maybe by the Park” and “the doubt remains engraved in the memory of certain local people”, even though a parliamentary commission concluded that the wolf had returned naturally from Italy.

## Conclusion

Is there any country where the grass is greener? Everywhere, the presence of the wolf is forcing us to rethink the way in which we share the land and manage competition between human activities and predators in an attempt to appease conflicts (see box on page 6). The intensity and frequency of these conflicts depend very much on the resources deployed to protect pastoralism, the activity most exposed to the return of the wolf, as well as on communication with the general public and dialogue with all the stakeholders.

### How is the wolf perceived in different countries?

How is the wolf perceived in Italy and in Slovenia, where it has never been completely exterminated, in France, where it made a return in the early 1990s, and in Austria, to which it returned in the late 2000s?

In 2021, 7610 people were questioned in 16 areas of these four countries where the carnivore is present, including members of the general public, hunters, livestock breeders, education professionals, tourism professionals, NGOs and journalists.

“The existence of large carnivores depends on the success of their coexistence with humans”, explains Bernarda Bele, a biology researcher at the University of Ljubljana, who presented the study at the Conference in Barcelonnette.

What can we learn from these surveys? “In the areas in Italy, in France and in Slovenia, most respondents said they were in favour of wolves and supported their protection”, says Bernarda Bele. Conversely, in Austria, “a large majority of respondents described themselves as opposed to wolves and did not support their protection”.

“The central Austrian areas and one central Italian area were sampled solely using online questionnaires, while the other areas used a mixture of different sampling methods”, the researcher added, however. “The sampling methods may have introduced a bias in the data”.

On the whole, “hunters were mostly opposed to the complete protection of the wolf” and livestock breeders “were mostly opposed to wolves in all the countries”, she went on to say.

A new survey was carried out in 2023/2024, and results are currently being analysed.

**Points of view: Eric Hansen**, Provence-Alpes-Côte-d'Azur and Corsica Regional Director at the French Biodiversity Agency (OFB) and **Nathalie Siefert**, Director of the Knowledge and Heritage Management unit at the Mercantour National Park.

**Eric Hansen** and **Nathalie Siefert** commented on what they had learnt at the Barcelonnette Conference: “a round-up” that “showed what happens elsewhere and allows for comparisons”, they considered.

“This seminar was particularly important” for “getting feedback” and “not reinventing the wheel every time”, says Éric Hansen. “We realised that wolf management is complex everywhere and that there is no magic formula”, he points out.

The French system offers “fair treatment to livestock breeders”, says Nathalie Siefert. “The centralised nature of France with its diverse predation situations is a fairly unique case”. It remains however to be seen if this is a strength or a weakness.



Participants in the LIFE WolfAlps EU 2022 conference.

The OFB's scientific and technical resources portal on the wolf (in French):

- [https://www.loupfrance.fr/ressources/#new\\_tab](https://www.loupfrance.fr/ressources/#new_tab)

LIFE WolfAlps EU website:

- <https://www.lifewolfalps.eu/en/>

Conference programme:

- <https://www.lifewolfalps.eu/en/f/>

Summary of presentations:

- <https://www.lifewolfalps.eu/fr/lherbe-est-elle-toujours-plus-verte-ailleurs-resume-de-la-4eme-conference-internationale-lwa-eu-2022/>

Video recordings of the conference:

- <https://www.youtube.com/@LifewolfalpsEurope/videos>

## Meetings

Director of publication: Olivier Thibault

Coordination: Anne-Isabelle Six, Stéphanie Belaud

Editorial staff: Laure Fillon, Ricardo N. Simon, Hélène Fournet and Nolwenn Drouet-Hoguet

Project agency: Parimage

Printing: Cloître - Printing on paper produced from responsible sources

Publisher: OFB – 12, cours Lumière - 94300 Vincennes

Available at: <https://professionnels.ofb.fr/fr/rencontres>

ISBN web: 978-2-38170-197-4

ISBN print: 978-2-38170-198-1

Free of charge

