

OPEN LETTER

Switzerland's December 2023 - January 2024 wolf cull

To Federal Counsellor Albert Rösti and the Standing Committee of the Bern Convention

28th November 2023

We, the undersigned, are extremely concerned about the upcoming cull which would allow Switzerland to reduce Swiss wolf numbers by up to 70%, as well as by the recent amendment to Switzerland's national legislation that undermines wolf protection and provides a legal framework for cantons to extirpate entire packs down to a set quota on a preventative basis, regardless of whether or not they have caused serious damage to livestock or threatened humans.(1,2)

These radical, unilateral measures don't just threaten Switzerland's fragile wolf population, they negatively impact the entire Western-Central Alps wolf population. The Convention's preamble specifically mentions the twin threats of species depletion and extinction. (3) As an apex predator and keystone species, the wolf contributes to a richer animal and plant life. Preventative measures, such as electric fences and guardian dogs, are effective at reducing livestock predation and should be more widely implemented. There are better ways to coexist with this keystone species than random, large-scale killing and culling. (4)

Background

Native to Switzerland, the Grey wolf (*Canis lupus*) was hunted to extinction in the late 19th century, with the last individual shot in the Ticino in 1872. In the mid 1990s, wolves began to naturally recolonise parts of the country from Italy, with the first and arguably the most famous pack forming in 2012 in the Calanda region of the Canton of Grisons. Wolves have since been documented in 20 cantons, mostly in the Alps, but also in the Jura. The wolf has been protected since 1986 under the Federal Hunting Law. (5)

The Federal Office for the Environment (FOEN) put the number of Swiss wolves at 250 "mature individuals" in 2022. (6) KORA, which monitors large predator populations on behalf of the Confederation, estimates there are currently 8 pairs of wolves and 31 packs, 9 of which are transboundary packs shared with France and Italy. (7) Switzerland provides very suitable wolf habitats and half the country could theoretically sustain 50-100 packs. (8) Swiss wolves form part of the larger Western-Central Alps population whose numbers are also increasing. Indeed, France and Italy's growing populations were the reason given by FOEN for the recent re-classification of the wolf from Endangered (EN) to Vulnerable (VU), despite the fact that a population of 250 should be classified as Endangered, based on the D classification criteria. (9)

Swiss wolves continue to face significant threats from legal and illegal killing, collisions with road vehicles and trains, and their small, fragmented populations. This winter's cull and the recently amended legislation underpinning it would allow Switzerland to reduce the population by up to 70% and pack numbers to 12, (10) threatening not just the species' survival in Switzerland, but also potentially impacting the wider Western-Central Alps

population. The cantonal wolf kill quotas would allow packs to be reduced to below the 17 packs, required to ensure a “minimum viable population” for Swiss wolves as part of the larger Alpine population. (11)

The new legislation divides Switzerland into 5 regions (12) and would allow pack numbers to be reduced to 3 each in the two designated “large regions”, namely the “western Alps” which includes the Valais — the most important route taken by transient wolves from France and Italy — and the “southeast” which encompasses the Grisons. The Canton of Valais has already dispatched invitations for hunters to select the pack they wish to target and has announced that it wants to kill 34 wolves and eliminate 7 of its packs.

International Conventions matter

Switzerland ratified the Bern Convention in 1981. The Convention’s aim is to “conserve wild flora and fauna and their natural habitats, especially those species and habitats whose conservation requires the co-operation of several States, and to promote such cooperation” giving particular emphasis to “endangered and vulnerable species”.(13) The wolf is listed in Annex II as a “strictly protected fauna species” which can only be regulated to “prevent serious damage” to livestock provided that there is “no other satisfactory solution” and that the measures will “not be detrimental to the survival of the population concerned” (Article 9).(14)

Switzerland is also a Party to the Alpine Convention, (15) the first international treaty aiming to protect an entire mountain range through cooperation between eight Alpine nations and the EU, one of whose objectives is to “preserve Alpine fauna and flora, including their habitats”. The Convention also recognises that “the Alps constitute an essential habitat and last refuge for many endangered species”, and that, as such, countries share a responsibility for maintaining populations, including of large carnivores, by avoiding “black holes” and promoting a network of sub-population connectivity. (16)

A Convention signed in 2006 between France, Italy and Switzerland stipulates that the wolf populations of all three countries must be considered a single and same Alpine population in the context of national legislation and international law, (17) making it all the more important to implement conservation and management measures that are both coordinated and consistent.

As a Contracting Party, Switzerland is bound to uphold the aims and Articles of all these Conventions. Instead it has repeatedly and increasingly sought to weaken the wolf’s protection at both the European and national levels, culminating in this winter’s cull. By its unilateral actions, Switzerland isn’t just threatening the survival of its own already fragile wolf population, it is in effect outsourcing the responsibility of wolf conservation to its neighbours.

Facts matter

Proponents of the cull have painted the wolf as a blood-thirsty predator that wantonly kills livestock and poses a threat to humans (“cattle today, children tomorrow”(18)), but KORA hasn’t recorded a single “intrusive” or aggressive wolf in Switzerland since the species’

natural recolonisation in 1995 (19) and the Swiss wolf Management Plan already allows for wolves that develop “problematic” behaviour towards humans to be shot.(20)

Conflicts do arise from attacks on livestock that target mostly sheep (over 90%), some goats (6-8%), and only rarely cattle, horses and camelids. However most attacks involve herds left unprotected on summer pastures. Large carnivores, mostly wolves, account for just 6% of sheep mortality during summer grazing on Swiss mountain pastures. Disease and accidents are responsible for most livestock deaths. (21)

Switzerland has long and fully exploited the flexibility of Article 9 of the Bern Convention to remove stock-raiding wolves that cause “serious damage”, and far more wolves have been legally shot (54 individuals, i.e. 42%) than have died in traffic collisions (38) or been poached (11) in the last 25 years (22). There is therefore no need for a downlisting of the wolf’s protected status nor a need for the cull.

Science matters

The supposed aim of this winter’s cull is to reduce livestock predation and, in the words of the Federal Council, to “make the wolf fearful again” (23). However less wolves don’t necessarily mean less damage which, in Switzerland, is subject to numerous variables such as farm structures, livestock protection measures, prey density and traditional husbandry practices.(24) Livestock predation can actually increase after a wolf cull, (25) possibly due to impacts on demographic, territorial, and social structure of wolf populations. This can in turn lead to higher reproduction rates and possible changes in animal behaviour, including hunting habits thereby risking defeating the cull’s supposed purpose. A 2020 study showed that “lethal control and translocation were less effective than other measures” such as ropes hung with coloured flags (visual warning) and guardian dogs, at reducing livestock predation. (26)

Indeed, preventative measures such as guardian dogs, electric fences and human presence have proved remarkably successful at reducing wolf damage in Switzerland, as testified by OPPAL,(27) an organisation which aims to improve cohabitation between human activities and large carnivores. The number of livestock killed by wolves in Switzerland in 2023 decreased by 29% compared to the previous year (850 vs 1,200), despite an increase in wolf numbers.

Regulating the wolf population is unlikely to prevent livestock kills as long as herd protection remains inadequate, and legalising and condoning the killing of protected species has been shown to increase the risk of poaching. (29) Moreover, the anti-wolf rhetoric underpinning the cull doesn’t just risk undermining support for wolves, it also seriously subverts the role of science in their management.

Public opinion matters

According to a 2019 survey by Pro Natura, (30) Switzerland’s oldest nature conservation organisation, 79% of Swiss people do not want wolves killed when farmers fail to protect their livestock. Electric/solar fences have shown particular promise. They are expensive, but subsidies are available. The FOEN has set aside CHF 3.7 million for livestock protection measures.(31) Today, sheep and goat farming in hilly and mountainous regions is threatened

by globalisation and is no longer profitable, so it is often only practised as a side-line occupation. Many farmers refuse to use deterrents, and so the predation continues. The wolf is made a scapegoat in a debate that is symbolic of wider societal divisions such as the urban vs rural split or right vs left-wing politics. Switzerland's high socio-economic standard is inversely proportional to its tolerance for wolf-livestock conflicts.

However, in 2020, the Swiss public voted in a national referendum against an amendment to the law which would have made it easier to kill wolves. Two years later, undeterred by the public vote, parliament passed a new version of the 2020 law that had been rejected by the electorate. It provides the latest legal framework to set canton-level wolf quotas to regulate entire packs "proactively" instead of "reactively" as of 1 December 2023.

The recent amendment to the Ordinance (OChP) which legalises the upcoming cull,(32) marks the culmination of over 60 motions in parliament and 17 years attempting to weaken the wolf's protection on both the European and national stages. Moreover it came into force on 1st November without a legal and proper consultation process.

The cull is not science-based and has everything to do with political grandstanding and vilification. It risks further polarisation and further inflaming tensions.

Nature matters

We are currently experiencing a mass extinction of species. The wolf plays a vital role in maintaining the balance of ecosystems and its return to Switzerland is a rare success story in a country with some of the highest percentages of threatened species in the OECD.(33)

Decades of progress could be undone this winter and beyond.

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