



Interview

A livestock owner's perspective

Flavio Oggier
interviewed by
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Why did you start having volunteers?

We took over this mountain pasture in late 2021. We knew there were wolves around and that there had been attacks before, so we got involved with OPPAL from our first pasture season, 2022, as a supplement to livestock protection.

How was it organised?

For the first season, coordination with various owners was done by the mountain pasture manager. Around 15 farms got together and approximately 30 people gathered to help install fences. And that's how we do it every year. A shepherd is also employed each season to watch the flock. For the last two years, young men doing their civilian service also came to help for a week or two. Usually a week in spring to put up the fences and a week in autumn to take them down.

What did farmers think of the idea?

There were different opinions among sheep farmers, not necessarily positive, about the support of OPPAL. They saw volunteers as 'wolf lovers' so they didn't really want to have much to do with them. But then we briefly

introduced the association and presented the idea of being supported by volunteers. Then they soon realised that, yes, we could give it a try. Firstly, it doesn't cost anything. There were certainly a few people who remained sceptical, that's always the case, but it was a small minority. And I'd say that, during the summer, even they changed their minds. They soon realised that, although there are certainly many wolf supporters, those who lead the association are all trying to help. In the field, they saw that the volunteers were there because they love wolves, yes, but they also helped, were active and doing something for us. Everyone appreciated that by the end of the summer.



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Do volunteers help throughout the grazing season?

It wasn't clear at the beginning that OPPAL would have so many people ready to volunteer. I guess in the first summer at least 90% of nights were covered, maybe a little more. In the second year, almost the whole summer was covered, probably 98% of nights, and this year 99%. What was special this year was that they usually had two people on the alp watching the flock every night.

Where do they come from and why?

Volunteers come from all over Germany, France, Spain, England and from all over Switzerland. It's really amazing. Some people just connect and some people want to come in the hope that they'll see a wolf. Others are just there, enjoying nature and the silence. And that's also a kind of adventure of course, a holiday adventure.

What about food?

They organise that themselves. There have even been cases when the shepherd got leftovers from the volunteers or they told him, "Come with us to eat!" They just carry the stuff up themselves every day or two.

How would you rate your experience with OPPAL?

It works great, I have to give it 10 out of 10. The communication, they've clearly divided up who does what. You can write to the founder if there's something wrong or they're doing something new. One person does infrastructure and I usually write to the manager about logistics, "Look, I've got the helicopter for the weekend so we can bring the material up," we write a couple of WhatsApp messages and then there are two options. Either they come themselves and bring their material to the helicopter landing place in the valley or they bring it to our home and we fly it up together with our material. That's always worked.

Have your views on wolves changed?

We sheep farmers certainly don't change from being against wolves to being in favour of them, it's not enough for that. But I think there's a general acceptance that they're here now and you have to protect your animals. Yes, that's for sure, understanding has certainly grown. But shepherds are mostly one or two generations older.

They've been driving sheep up to the alp for so long, for so many years, without protection. And the ratio of costs, time and effort – that's extreme, it really is. Before there were wolves, you used to have to visit the flock once a month, so to speak, and you had a nice day. Now, I have work every weekend. It makes a big difference.

So, you have shepherds as well as volunteers to help?

Yes, there is a shepherd there, but they need to sleep at night. It depends a bit on what kind of livestock protection system you have. On the alp, we owners do all the large pens and fences. That's really in the beginning, in springtime. As soon as the snow has gone, we go every weekend to fence everything. Then in June, after the sheep have been driven up to the alp, the fence building continues. There's always something during the summer, too. Sometimes you have to go up to make a small pen to separate a few animals or repair some fencing. Sometimes the shepherd does some of that on his own, but usually at least one owner will be there to help at the weekend. Problems with diseases and stuff like that come because the animals are so close together at night all summer and you have to check their hooves and do hoof care.

Could volunteers provide enough protection on their own?

No, OPPAL won't come without other measures. I couldn't just say, "There are the sheep, please make sure nothing happens to them". That's not how it works. Volunteers are meant as support, to relieve the pressure on the shepherd, especially at night. Then he can concentrate on the daytime and the sheep owners have peace of mind.

What about livestock guarding dogs?

The local authority wasn't in favour of them, apparently. That's why it was clear from the beginning that we would do without them. But they are not forbidden and, if they said, for example, that we can't do without them, you could certainly integrate them. What do you do with them in winter? That's certainly the biggest problem. And with volunteers here I would find it even more difficult to imagine having livestock guarding dogs. With OPPAL, it could be that one or two new people arrive every day, so you have an old guarding dog and you want to take on so



(Photo: Flavio Oggier)

many more volunteers. I imagine that would be almost impossible. And almost superfluous, because the dog theoretically does the same work at night as the volunteers.

Is there much contact between sheep farmers and volunteers?

During the week, exchanges take place almost exclusively with the shepherd. We meet the volunteers when we go up, especially at the weekend or in the evening. The volunteers work at night and inevitably sleep for part of the day. But when we cross paths we talk briefly about how the night was, how they like it and how long they're staying and so on. Many of them ask how many kilometres of fencing we have, how many sheep and so on. I think they also get a bit of an understanding of our work. If you talk about protection and fences, some people might picture it like a garden fence, but when they're up there and really see all the fences, then they realise just how much work it is. There's certainly a mutual exchange that takes place.

Can such exchanges help people understand each other better?

That's difficult to say. I think it always depends a bit on who's coming up against each other. If, on one side, there is one of our shepherds who is the biggest opponent of wolves and, on the other side, a volunteer who is a strong supporter, that will go nowhere. I don't think you can be strongly swayed there. Most of the time, those conversations are short and each tries to defend their posi-

tion. But mostly there is understanding and mutual acceptance.

How is the relationship between volunteers and shepherds?

I think all good shepherds like peace and quiet. If the volunteers or the shepherd prefer to be alone, then certainly, they won't seek contact with each other. Communication can be limited if there isn't a shared language. But they sometimes eat lunch together or have dinner. You wouldn't do that without acceptance. Also, there is sometimes feedback saying, "I've spoken to the people from OPPAL, they haven't seen a wolf" or maybe someone has said, "Yes, there was a wolf, it came from Italy" or something like that. In autumn, when we're all together, everyone is happy and there is appreciation. The shepherds are actually satisfied, they say to me, "Write to them, thank them again!"

Have there been any problems with volunteers?

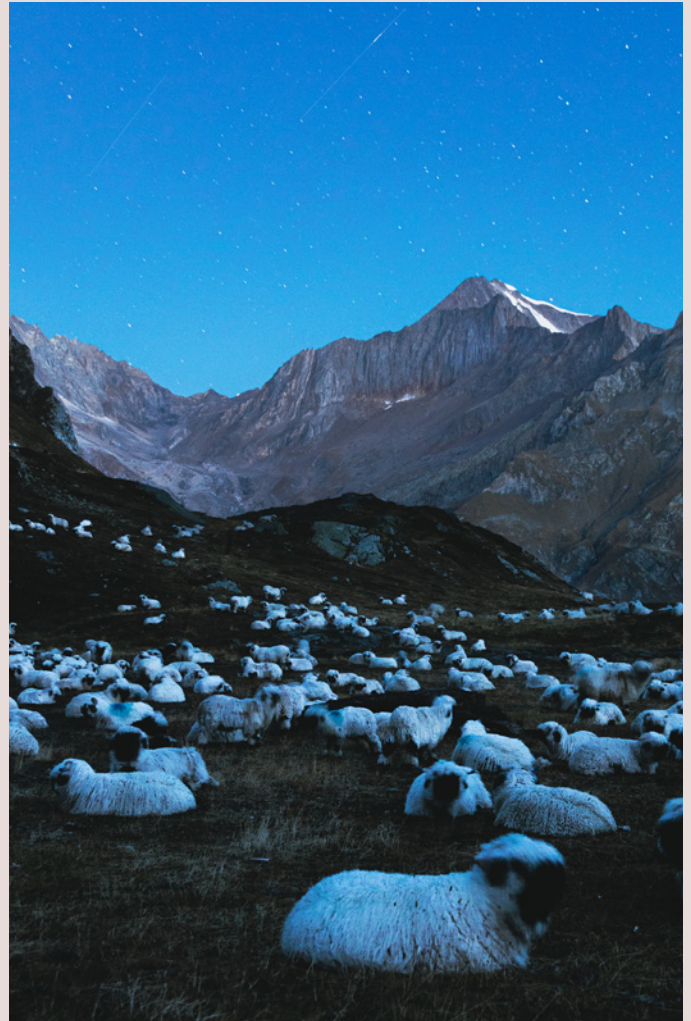
The only thing that's happened was in the first year, when a volunteer didn't find the alp. We've also had the odd rocker with aerial and speakers. There were shepherds who stayed overnight and got up twice every night to check if everyone was still quiet outside. If you have to do that for 100 days the whole summer, it's not sustainable. But no, overall, it's a great help. I'm sure we'll be grateful that they continue. And, so far, it's working very well.

How is it for owners?

It's also a relief. Because I think even if you know that a shepherd is up there, some people are still unsure. Is the fence really enough? If something got in, that wouldn't be fun. By being able to say that, yes, the flock is being watched over every night, the owners can sleep peacefully.

Do you see any limitations to volunteer help?

Maybe you have to ask yourself how many sheep you have? If someone has 50 animals and they need the same number of volunteers as on an alp with 500, then that would certainly be a bit of a luxury. Then it would be almost the same as organising a shepherd for 100 sheep, which is certainly not profitable. And then on farms and alps with guarding dogs there isn't a need. But volunteers are certainly a very good option for places with a hiking trail running through. I don't know of any blacknose sheep breeders who have livestock guarding dogs or live up on the alps. Those are all small flocks, often kept in stables in villages during winter, and none of them wants a livestock guarding dog. Also, at the moment, OPPAL has enough volunteers, but that might be different in the future. They do crowdfunding, I think, for thermal imaging cameras and stuff like that. I'm amazed by that side of things – how do they get that together? It has to be paid for somehow. Hats off to them!



(Photo: Fabian Leu)



(Photo: Flavio Oggier)