

Project

# Collaboration for coexistence of livestock grazing and large carnivores in the Swiss Alps

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## Wolves, livestock and volunteers

The return of the grey wolf (*Canis lupus*) to Switzerland nearly 30 years ago<sup>1</sup> sparked intense debate between fervent wolf advocates and equally determined opponents. The Jura region in the canton of Vaud, where wolves killed 62 cattle in 2022–2023 [1,2], has been a hotbed of growing tension for several years. In September 2022, for the second year running, livestock farmers lit a symbolic fire to express their opposition to the wolf's return<sup>2</sup>. Meanwhile, in the same region, activists attempted to hinder official wolf control operations<sup>3</sup>.

The Swiss non-profit Organisation for the Protection of Alpine Pastures (OPPAL) was founded in 2020 with the aim of promoting the coexistence of wildlife and human activities through field actions, awareness-raising, outreach and scientific research. To move towards inclusive and sustainable conservation, we believe it is essential to bring stakeholders together. A collaborative approach, in which everyone's needs and concerns are considered, can help find balanced solutions that respect both wildlife

and pastoral activities. By encouraging dialogue and seeking points of convergence, we hope to transform tensions into a collective force for the preservation of our shared environment.

Through its field actions, OPPAL enables all citizens to get involved in supporting farmers affected by the return of large carnivores to French-speaking cantons (Fig. 1). Livestock is particularly vulnerable to wolf predation during the summer grazing season in high-mountain pastures. Damage prevention is based on the presence of shepherds, use of night pens and, in some cases, livestock guarding dogs (LGDs). Sheep from several different owners are often amalgamated into larger flocks and it is the responsibility of one or two shepherds to gather them into electrified pens at night. The federal state provides financial support for farmers in large carnivore areas to implement damage prevention measures, such as electric-net fences, LGDs and sometimes auxiliary shepherds. OPPAL programmes are supervised by professionals and run in collaboration with livestock owners and shepherds.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.kora.ch/en/species/wolf/distribution>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.24heures.ch/un-feu-pour-les-eleveurs-et-les-bergers-brulera-dans-le-jura-244404376757>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.24heures.ch/loups-trois-activistes-denonces-a-la-justice-vaudoise-318912161306>



Fig. 1. French-speaking cantons in Switzerland (coloured green), showing locations of mountain pastures where OPPAL teams carried out interventions in 2021–2024.

## Surveillance missions

Farmers under pressure from wolves can call on OPPAL to provide night-time surveillance of their herds for a set period. We work with farmers whose livestock has been attacked or who move their animals to areas where wolves are known to be present. Most of the mountain pastures we work in overlap wolf pack territories (Fig. 1). The service is free of charge and enables shepherds and farmers to rest, relieved of the burden of pressure that large carnivore presence puts on their daily lives. To monitor grazing areas, we recruit volunteers and young people fulfilling their civilian service obligation<sup>4</sup> (an alternative to mandatory military service). Applicants register via our website and complete a questionnaire about their previous experience of hiking and camping and their reasons for wanting to volunteer. Most are Swiss although some come from abroad. They then undergo a comprehensive

training course introducing the work of shepherds, species recognition, predator deterrent protocols, mountain safety and other aspects (Fig. 2).

Volunteers do not replace the work of shepherds or breeders, with whom we establish a collaboration agreement. They do not herd or care for livestock. To enable our teams to work efficiently in alpine pastures, at the end of each day the farmers and shepherds we work with must gather their animals into an enclosure (not necessarily a protective pen) in an open area that can be watched during the night (Fig. 3). Cattle owners in Vaud receive subsidies for this task from the canton, allowing OPPAL to work in optimal conditions. Our teams are then mobilised around the flock or herd. They make regular rounds throughout the night focused on detecting and deterring large carnivores.

Each team is made up of a minimum of two people with advanced equipment to maximise efficiency and en-

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ch.ch/en/safety-and-justice/military-service-and-civilian-service/civilian-service>



Fig. 2. Volunteers receiving hands-on training from a shepherd during a specialised workshop while sheep graze inside a flexinet enclosure (Photo: Loïc Bohler).



Fig. 3. Example of an overnight enclosure for sheep in an alpine pasture (Photo: Fabian Leu).

sure the comfort of volunteers in all circumstances. This includes thermal vision binoculars for effective night-time surveillance (Fig. 4), high-powered spotlights and air horns that can be used to deter predators and walkie-talkies for communication (Fig. 5). On each alpine pasture where we operate, our infrastructure team sets up a camp with power supply, cooking equipment and camping gear. Depending on accessibility, this can take the form of a caravan, large tent, yurt and so on. Equipment is sometimes transported by helicopter to the most remote mountain pastures.

## Evaluating results

In 2023, our teams operated in 16 different mountain pastures for varying lengths of time, from three nights to the whole pastoral season (beginning of June to mid-



Fig. 4. A volunteer using thermal vision binoculars to watch for predators at night (Photo: AFP/Fabrice Coffrini).

October). Most of the pastures were organised into farmers' unions so the livestock of 55 different owners was monitored that year. Sheep, goats and cattle (mainly under two years old) were included, with flock/herd size ranging from a few dozen young cattle up to 700 sheep, in most cases without LGDs. Our teams recorded and verified a total of 45 approaches by wolves to livestock in 2023 (Fig. 6). In 35 cases, scare tactics were applied. During the summer of 2024, over 450 volunteers and 25 people on civilian service contributed more than 22,000 hours of surveillance. During a total of about 50,000 hours of herd surveillance in four years there has never been a successful attack on livestock while our teams were present (Fig. 7).

Since the 2023 pastoral season, participating livestock farmers and shepherds are asked to complete a standardised assessment questionnaire via interviews. So far all respondents (around 30 per year) were convinced of the effectiveness of our system and all of them indicated that they would recommend it to their peers. Interviewed farmers rated their relationship with volunteers as 'very good' (93%) or 'rather good' (7%), despite differences of opinion on the wolf issue. The following are examples of testimonials from shepherds and breeders who have worked with OPPAL in recent years:

*"Following a wolf attack on 25<sup>th</sup> July 2022, I could no longer look after the sheep properly day and night due to fatigue, accidents and lack of enthusiasm for the work. The solution of getting help was adopted. I'd like to extend my warmest thanks to the staff and volunteers of OPPAL for their help protecting the flock and saving my nights' sleep,*

*which is so precious.*" (A shepherd in Valais.)

*"At first I was against this system and herd protection, but now I'm convinced. The OPPAL teams are, in my opinion and for the time being, the best means of protection for cattle."* (A farmer in Vaud.)

OPPAL is currently taking part in a joint HES-SO Valais-Wallis<sup>5</sup> and CREPA<sup>6</sup> study, due to be completed in 2026, to analyse the relationships between our volunteers and the farmers with whom we work. The researchers are interested in the motivations of the various stakeholders, the social bonds created by programmes such as ours and any changes of opinion that may result.

## Working together for coexistence

Farmers suffering from wolf attacks can turn to OPPAL for a rapid response, usually obtaining support within two days. They hear about us by word of mouth from their peers or through cantonal livestock protection officers. We found that canvassing farmers for this type of cooperation does not work. Deploying a team around a mountain pasture often requires adjustments to working methods including building night-time enclosures, corralling livestock each evening and releasing them in the morning. Farmers who actively seek help are more inclined to adopt these changes. As our capacity is limited to mobilising a maximum of ten teams simultaneously, we make sure that we support people who are in real need and ready to collaborate. The duration of support can range from a few nights to several months according to need, agreement and the alternative measures that can be deployed in the medium-term.

Many NGOs that work on large carnivores, particularly wolves, take a militant approach that brings them into conflict with stakeholders such as livestock owners and shepherds. In contrast, OPPAL has a unifying and inclusive philosophy, recognising that coexistence with wildlife calls for coexistence of stakeholders. Our missions encourage mutual respect, dialogue and exchanges of experience between people with diverse opinions and backgrounds, bringing them together around a common goal and providing the opportunity to work as a team (Fig. 8). Our aim is to create a dynamic in which agricultural professionals, conservationists and citizens all play

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.hevs.ch/fr>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.crepa.ch>

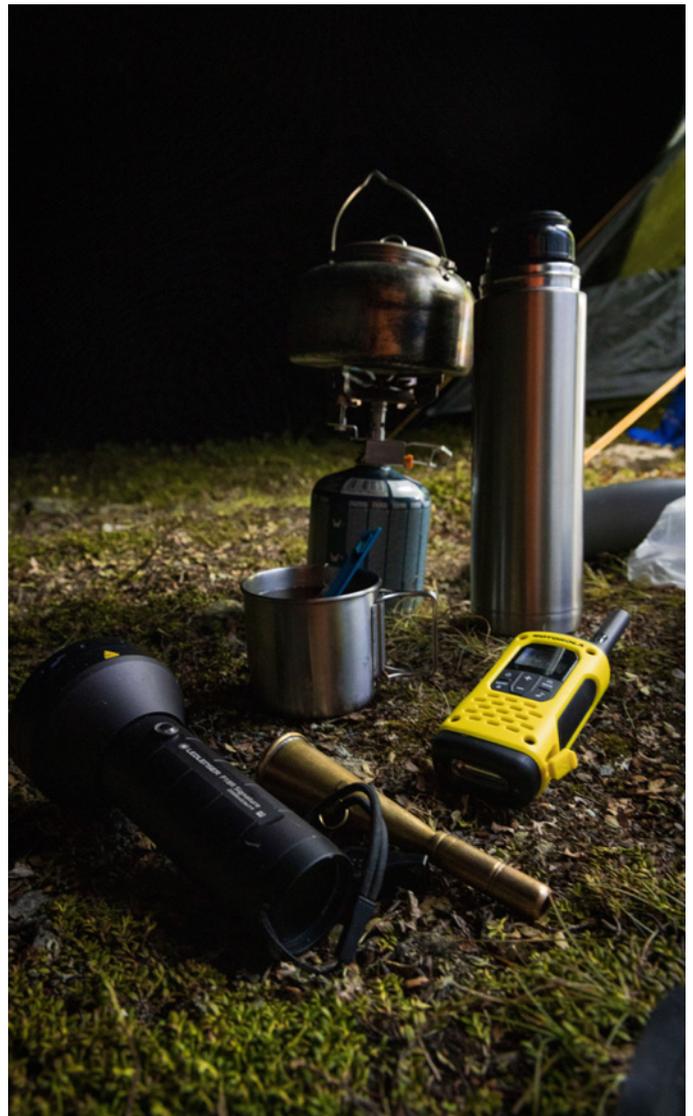


Fig. 5. Volunteer team equipment (Photo: Fabian Leu).



Fig. 6. Two wolves approaching a sheep flock in Valais observed with thermal binoculars (Photo: OPPAL).



Fig. 7. An OPPAL volunteer checking the surroundings of a herd in a mountain pasture in Valais (Photo: Fabian Leu).

their part in building a rational, collective and sustainable model for livestock protection and coexistence with large carnivores.

## Acknowledgements

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## References

- [1] État de Vaud (2022) Prédation et indemnisation – Archives 2022 [Predation and compensation – 2022 archive]. État de Vaud. <https://www.vd.ch/environnement/biodiversite-et-paysage/grands-carnivores/en-cas-dattaque-et-indemnisation> [in French].
- [2] État de Vaud (2023) Prédation et indemnisation – Archives 2023 [Predation and compensation – 2023 archive]. État de Vaud. <https://www.vd.ch/environnement/biodiversite-et-paysage/grands-carnivores/en-cas-dattaque-et-indemnisation> [in French].



Fig. 8. A shepherd discusses his work with State Councillor Vasilis Venizelos during a field visit to learn about OPPAL's work (Photo: Loïc Bohler).