

HERD PROTECTION AID BY WIKIWOLVES THE POTENTIAL AND LIMITS OF A NETWORK OF VOLUNTEERS

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1. Introduction

Volunteer work has long been an important part of environmental protection efforts and plays a major role in the management and protection of wolves in Europe. Volunteer initiatives for herd protection aid have been established in several European countries, e.g. the PastoraLoup initiative of French organisation FERUS (www.ferus.fr), the Pasturs project of the Eliante cooperative in Italy (www.eliante.it), the recently founded Dutch group Wolf-Fencing Nederland (www.wolf-fencing.nl) and, until the beginning of 2019, the HirtenHilfe Schweiz (Swiss Shepherd Aid) of Vösa (Union for Ecological and Safe Alp Management).

In Germany, the WikiWolves initiative has supported livestock owners in the implementation of herd protection measures since the spring of 2015 (www.wikiwolves.org). WikiWolves is an open and informal network of volunteers led by a team of regional organizers that act as liaison between volunteers and livestock owners. The network is open for anyone willing to donate their labour in order to assist livestock owners in setting up herd protection fences or similar measures.

WikiWolves aims to:

- assist livestock owners with herd protection measures against wolf attacks;

- promote dialog between people who are interested in or affected by wolves;
- provide information on wolves and livestock farming;
- encourage a wider appreciation of the work of livestock owners.

In the long term, the goal of WikiWolves is to contribute to a more peaceful co-existence of people and wolves. The network is independent of other organisations but thrives on and functions through close collaboration with sheep farming unions, other livestock owner associations, official wolf management representatives, nature and wolf conservation organisations and many other stakeholders concerned with the return of wolves to Germany.

2. Successful livestock protection

The experience of the WikiWolves initiative refutes both the generalization made by many livestock owners that livestock protection measures do not work and also the claim of some wolf proponents that such measures are always successful. Here, I would like to offer my personal perspective of what 'successful livestock protection' means and where I see the potential but also the limits of WikiWolves' contribution.

One of the important roles I see for WikiWolves is to pose questions: ‘How can wolves and humans co-exist with little conflict?’ and, ‘How can livestock protection measures be successful?’ A follow-up to the second question is: ‘What does successful livestock protection mean?’ In the best-case scenario, it would mean that no livestock are hurt or killed by wolves. Reality shows, however, that even with the greatest efforts by livestock owners to protect their herds, wolf attacks cannot be avoided entirely.

A milder but more realistic definition of ‘successful livestock protection’ is that livestock owners are not overwhelmed by the requirements of the protection measures and are able to cope well with a low and calculable risk of wolf attack on their animals. For many regions in Germany this scenario is still far off in the future, requiring many political and societal changes before the goal can be reached, some small and some larger.

3. Activities of WikiWolves

The core activities of WikiWolves are 1–2 day weekend events during which small groups (about four to seven volunteers) help to build permanent fences that meet herd protection requirements (Fig. 1). The livestock owners generally provide meals and, if necessary, basic accommodation (e.g. a place for a sleeping mat or tent). Volunteers almost always cover their own travel costs. Every group event is organized by a WikiWolves campaign leader who either participates or designates an on-site leader.

Sheep farmers in Germany usually use mobile electric fences rather than permanent structures. Set-up and maintenance of such fences require daily attention. The typical 1–2 day events are therefore un-



Fig. 1 Volunteers constructing protection to prevent predators getting under fencing. (Photo: S. Dittgen)



Fig. 2 Break on the meadow during a work assignment.

(Photo: N. Soethe)

suitable for this situation. Nonetheless, WikiWolves has been able to support sheep farmers through individual volunteers who assist the farm in the long term, e.g. taking care of the day-to-day checks of electrical systems and repairs of damaged fencing material.

Volunteers generally require no prior skills. The only important prerequisite is simply the will to actively help as well as a certain openness towards people with different opinions. Occasionally, volunteers have the opportunity to participate in seminars organized by WikiWolves (Fig. 2). In northeast Germany, several 3-day seminars specifically for leaders have taken place. Participants learn about wolf management and ecology, various livestock protection measures and sheep farming. They also gain practical experience in sheep handling, interaction with livestock guardian dogs and the set-up of different fencing systems. One of the seminars’ most successful elements has proven to be a barbecue together with interested livestock owners, giving volunteers and farmers the opportunity to get to know each other.

In our experience, participation in a seminar is not essential to provide effective assistance for livestock owners. This is one difference between the WikiWolves approach to herd protection assistance and that of the Swiss HirtenHilfe, in which a multi-day training session was a pre-requisite for a volunteer event on alpine meadows. However, campaigns in the mountains require a different level of commitment and much higher physical robustness than in the easily accessible lowlands. The multi-day on-site training sessions of the HirtenHilfe thus provided each volunteer with the opportunity to discover their own capabilities and limits.

4. Development of the network

The idea for WikiWolves was inspired by WikiWoods (www.wikiwoods.org): an online platform connecting volunteers who want to plant trees as a reforestation measure. Since herd protection from wolf attacks is a much more sensitive and conflict-prone topic than planting trees, it quickly became apparent that WikiWolves could not replicate the framework of WikiWoods directly. Thus, despite its name, WikiWolves could not be shaped by anyone who was simply interested in the subject, as is typical for Wiki platforms¹. The challenge became to combine the wish for a decentralized network that allows participation by people from various regions and with different interests and opinions with the necessity to present shared values in order to allow us to work constructively within a societal conflict situation without foundering.

The result is an initiative shaped primarily by a team of organizers, consisting of a webmaster and liaisons for various federal states of Germany. The liaisons coordinate the network in their federal states in collaboration with regional supporters and under consideration of local possibilities and requirements, giving WikiWolves their own personal touch in their federal state. New liaisons are supported and mentored by established ones from other regions, if necessary. The team of organizers are unified by a WikiWolves codex that is based on past experience and which has been internalized by each team member. This codex presents rules and guidelines for conducting campaigns and representing WikiWolves in public. Its contents evolve and are adjusted as needed and as the organizers gain new experience.

The team of organizers supports each other and regularly shares experience and discusses important issues together. Overall, the network currently consists of around 300 volunteers across Germany. Some volunteers are one-time participants, others regularly take part in events and may even develop a fence-building-routine. The spirit of the network is dynamic: it changes and progresses depending on who participates and contributes. It is fascinating to have watched these developments over the past four years.

5. Key factors for a successful volunteer network

Two crucial factors are the participants' and liaisons' high level of personal commitment and, secondly, cooperation with other NGOs for wolf and nature protection. Finding sufficient volunteers for the individual work assignments is difficult and takes time; thus, every chance to address a new pool of volunteers should be taken. Interestingly, media presence helps in reaching new volunteers but is insignificant for establishing contact with new livestock holders, who are better addressed on the basis of their colleagues' recommendations or from farmers' associations. Since every new volunteer is of high value, we do not recommend a selection procedure. Everybody is welcome as long as some rules of good cooperation are respected. The selection of new liaisons for a new region is a more individual decision process that requires a period of getting to know each other. The interested person should agree with the codex and needs to understand the mediating role of WikiWolves. There is no need to build the network rapidly. Volunteer work is fed by enthusiasm and we acknowledge everyone's capacities and limitations.

6. What effect does WikiWolves have?

6.1 Fences

Between April 2015 and November 2019, WikiWolves assisted over 50 livestock owners through about 130 events nationwide. These events represent about 630 days of unpaid work by volunteers. Obviously, WikiWolves does not have the capacity to perform the additional tasks required for effective livestock protection measures for all of the nearly 20,000 sheep farmers in Germany (minimum herd size: 1 animal, data for 2016; BMEL 2019) as well as owners of other livestock. Our contribution is rather of a symbolic nature: we can support an individual farmer during a specific campaign, showing them that others care about their work and encouraging them to continue despite the additional efforts necessary due to the return of the wolf to Germany. The helping hands of several volunteers allow a project to be completed in a relatively short time, while the farmer would be

¹ 'Wiki' is Hawaiian for 'fast'. A 'wiki' website allows anyone to add, delete or revise content by using a web browser (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiki>)

hard-pressed to find enough time on top of her or his daily duties to complete the task alone.

6.2 Personal dialogue

Some livestock owners appreciate dialogue with volunteers even more than their practical help. Often during events, the central topic of conversation is not the wolf. Participants feel it is more important to work together on a project (building a fence), exchange views and tips on livestock protection measures, and talk about ‘anything under the sun’ while

sharing a beer in the evening. Some sheep farmers particularly enjoy dialogue with wolf proponents and people who think differently from themselves. Such discussions can last until late into the night.

6.3 Awareness of livestock owners

One motivation for many volunteers is to increase acceptance of the wolf among livestock owners. This is neither one of the aims of WikiWolves (which takes the approach that everyone has the right to their own views about the wolf) nor have I personally had the

Box 1

Sheep farmers’ concerns in Germany

Sheep farmers, in particular, are confronted by a plethora of everyday problems and concerns unrelated to the return of the wolf to Germany, as I have found out in conversations with them during fence building campaigns. Many concerns are related to the low profitability of sheep farming in general, such as prices for sheep products, dependence on subsidies, availability of pastures, feed quality in nature conservation areas, high risk of penalties and sanctions, farming requirements on pastures, and fragmentation of the landscape.

Based on data from 30 relatively large sheep farms in Baden Wuerttemberg (a federal state in south Germany), the average hourly income of sheep farmers was 6.15 euros (LEL, 2015). Similar average income was reported for other German regions, with even lower values for some surveyed farms. The global market exerts downward pressure on meat and milk prices (with meat being economically more relevant in Germany, based on quantity). Wool has mostly lost its commercial value and in most cases the shearing process necessary for most sheep breeds leads to financial losses rather than additional income. Overall, the monetary gain per area is very low in sheep farming, resulting in two important consequences for German sheep farms:

1. Sheep farms are rarely able to compete with other agricultural businesses when it comes

to paying the currently very high land prices (due largely to federal subsidies for renewable resources and speculation with agricultural land). Sheep farmers therefore commonly lack access to sufficiently high-quality pasturing areas;

2. Many sheep farms are economically dependent on subsidies (for example, in the form of contractual conservation management agreements and agri-environmental schemes). This dependence affects the flexibility and planning ability of farmers, since funding measures frequently change and are tied to an allocation plan of areas. Such subsidised areas are generally of low productivity and the pasture has a low nutritional value. Sheep breeds that were optimized for milk output or meat yield, however, require high-quality feed. The animals’ weight gain is usually insufficient in extensive pastures.

These interconnections clearly show that sheep farming can only be economically viable in the long term if labour input is very high. Full-time sheep farmers are used to such intensive workloads, but more than a few of them reach their physical limits sooner or later, even without additional, wolf-related problems. Understandably, these sheep farmers do not have much time or motivation left to deal with the details of livestock protection measures, whether in theory or in practice.

impression that our volunteer campaigns have any direct effect on the attitude of farmers regarding the return of the wolf to Germany. One aspect that noticeably changes through a campaign, however, is the opinion of participating farmers about wolf proponents: the image becomes more differentiated and more positive as they realize that strangers come to their farms to provide hands-on help without wanting anything in return (Fig. 3). Some sheep farmers are surprised to realize that not only students donate their time to help them but also regular working people from the full range of employment sectors. I see this as an enormous success, since the societal wolf conflict to a large part also reflects a conflict in human relations.



Fig. 3 Let's tackle it – together!

(Photo: N Soethe)

6.4 Awareness of volunteers

Many volunteers have little or no contact with the agricultural sector prior to participating in a WikiWolves campaign. They gain many new impressions while helping a livestock owner protect her or his herd, not least an understanding of how much effort is required not just to build protective fences but also to keep livestock in general (Box 1). WikiWolves volunteers learn a lot about the excessive demands that sheep farmers face due to the need to implement livestock protection measures. Anyone who has participated in a fence building campaign gains a much more realistic view of what this work entails in reality (as opposed to in theory) and will see statements such as 'But the sheep farmer could simply...' or 'If it was me, I would immediately...' in a different light.

7. What are the limits of volunteer work?

WikiWolves would like to play a part in making livestock protection a societal matter, but this is limited to providing an impetus in that direction. For some volunteers, their new perspectives on pasturing animals and livestock protection may continue to affect them in their private, non-WikiWolves lives, for example by experimenting with regionally sourced lamb in their cooking. However, the ultimate goal of reaching the general public is something that a volunteer initiative such as WikiWolves cannot do on its own. It can only provide volunteers with experiences at a local level that can be communicated to representatives of government and nature conservation associations with greater societal influence.

A comprehensively conceived livestock protection plan has the best chance of success if nature conservation organizations and livestock owner unions join forces and support not only the unbureaucratic implementation of specific protection measures (with appropriate subsidisation) but also focus more on the societal and political framework of livestock farming.

We can only create good conditions for a realistic coexistence between livestock farming and wolves if we as a society are willing to pay more for the maintenance of a cultural landscape that includes livestock grazing in pastures, for the preservation of species-rich grasslands, for the production of meat, milk and wool and of course also for livestock protection measures.

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