



Short Communication

HOW CAN AN INEXPERIENCED PERSON PERFORMING CIVILIAN SERVICE SUPPORT FARMERS TO PROTECT LIVESTOCK AGAINST CARNIVORE ATTACKS ON ALPINE PASTURES?

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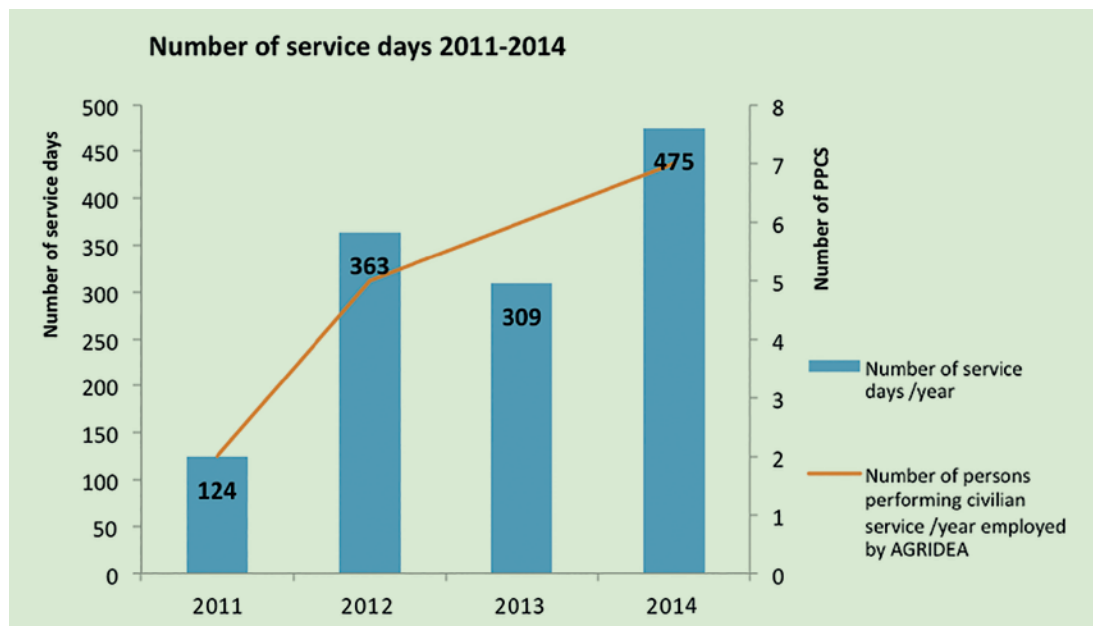
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Being aware of the increased workload for farmers who implement livestock protection measures on a daily basis on their alpine summer pastures, AGRIDEA was looking for a possibility to offer practical support. The support was intended to be short-to-medium-term, flexible, with no administrative and little financial load for the farmers. Under the special Swiss policy, article 59 of the federal law, young men have

the possibility to substitute their military service with “alternative civilian service”. Starting in 2010 with one person performing civilian service employed by AGRIDEA to support farmers/herders who practice livestock protection measures, the number has been continuously increased up to 7 persons in 2014 due to very positive experiences and thus an increasing demand from the alpine pasture managers (Fig. 1).

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Fig. 1. Development of the number of persons performing civilian service within the scope of livestock protection and the number of service days carried out.



Civilian service is an alternative service for persons qualified to perform military service, but unable to do so on grounds of conscience objections. The aim of the civilian service is “to contribute to a sustainable development and preservation of cultural heritage, to facilitate social coherence and nonviolent conflict resolution” and must be for a public benefit. Once the request of a young man for civilian service instead of military service is granted, he then has a choice of approved employers/ enterprises where he can apply for a post as “person performing civilian service”. Since 2010, AGRIDEA has become such an approved enterprise able to offer employment for “persons performing civilian service” (in the subsequent text referred to as PPCS) within the scope of its livestock protection project. During his service for the livestock protection project, the employed PPCS first attends a compulsory, three-day introductory course treating theoretical as well as practical subjects of livestock husbandry in the Alps. Then he will work for one week at a sheep farm of a Swiss livestock guarding dog breeder to become familiar with working dogs and livestock. Afterwards he is sent to work on different pastures all over Switzerland, with an intervention lasting from several days up to several weeks – the average duration in 2013 being 11.5 days, the longest 44 days. The main tasks are to help with the erection, maintenance and dismantling of fences, material transportation, surveillance of the animals, feeding the livestock guarding dogs and helping the shepherd to treat sick or injured animals. The precon-

ditions for working as a PPCS in the Alps are a strong motivation, good physical condition and endurance, flexibility respective to working hours, places and weather conditions, ability to work independently as well as in a team. On the other side the preconditions for a pasture manager to ask for the support of a PPCS are the presence of large carnivores and the associated use of livestock protection measures, plus the facilities to board and lodge PPCS. In return AGRIDEA takes care of administrative matters and wages.

Although AGRIDEA puts the focus of a practical support by PPCS on work directly related to livestock protection measures, other situations may be considered as well, like in the summer of 2014, when sheep farmers in the upper Valais came under pressure from wolf attacks. Because of the general preconditions on those alpine pastures (small and often heterogeneous flocks of 30–200 animals, no shepherd, no fences, lack of infrastructure) no protection measures could be taken at short term. Nevertheless, after an agreement between AGRIDEA and the sheep farmers, and the understanding that the presence of a PPCS may possibly influence the attack behaviour of the wolf but would not represent an effective protection measure, a PPCS was sent to that area in order to maintain a daily surveillance of the animals including morning and evening hours and report any kind of irregularity or new attacks. Also in this case, the sheep farmers highly appreciated the presence and reliability of PPCS, giving them the possibility to invest in haymaking in the lowlands and at the same time being daily infor-

med about the situation on the pastures.

In 2013 AGRIDEA launched a survey among the 16 alpine pasture managers who did benefit from the PPCS project about their satisfaction regarding the work carried out by PPCS. Of the 16 questionnaires sent out, 8 have been filled out and returned. Since the persons performing civilian service are not professionals in the field of agriculture or livestock husbandry, it was especially important to find out how far the quality of their work corresponded to the expectations of the farmers/shepherds. The results show, with few exceptions, a positive feedback: 94.3% reported that the PPCS was “always” or “most often”:

- a help;
- not physically or psychologically overstrained;
- sufficiently equipped;
- communicating clearly;
- motivated, flexible, punctual and trustworthy.

Only 5 times one of the questions was answered in a negative way, reporting that PPCS were:

- either psychologically (3 times) and/or physically (1 time) overstrained;
- having difficulties in working independently (1 time).

Over the period from 2011 to 2014, only one PPCS terminated his assignment altogether because

he could not cope with the situation in the field.

Nevertheless it must be considered that the return of filled filled-out questionnaires was only 50% and no subsequent interrogations on the reasons of the low return rate have been carried out. Thus, it cannot be excluded that the alpine managers who did not send back the questionnaires were at the same time the less satisfied ones. To get better founded conclusions it should be considered to repeat the same survey every year or every second year at the end of the season.

Overall, the possibility to offer practical support through persons performing civilian service on Alpine pastures that are confronted with additional work due to the presence of large carnivores is a very positive experience and will certainly be continued in the years to come. To ensure a good quality also in the future, a careful selection must be made each year to employ PPCS candidates who conform best with the job's demands. The question may arise, whether it makes sense to invest even more in the initial training of PPCS to enable them, for example, to work with a sheepdog, in order to be even a more significant help for the shepherd/pasture manager.

