



Project

# LIFE Lupi Lynx: Creating conditions for coexistence with wolves and lynx in Iberia

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## Introduction

LIFE Lupi Lynx is a new cross-border initiative bringing together seven organisations from Portugal and Spain to contribute to the recovery of the Iberian wolf (*Canis lupus signatus*) and Iberian lynx (*Lynx pardinus*) (Fig. 1). It is being implemented south of the Douro River, where the Iberian lynx is beginning to reappear and the wolf has an irregular presence (Fig. 2). The 5-year project started in January 2024 with the goals of creating the necessary socio-ecological conditions for the re-establishment of wolf and lynx in a transboundary area and to promote coexistence with human communities.

The main idea underlying the project is to promote early engagement with all relevant parties (public and private) in areas where wolves and lynx are beginning to recover in order to improve management, practices and capacity at a landscape level. By focusing on concrete interventions, changing behaviours and improving capacity for action, the project seeks to prevent conflicts that might otherwise arise when large carnivores recolonise areas where they have been absent for a prolonged period. In such areas, people are not used to coexisting with large carnivores and often react to their return with suspicion



Fig. 1. The Iberian wolf and, more recently, the Iberian lynx are trying to expand their ranges south of the Douro River (Photos: Andoni Canela (left) and Rewilding Europe (right)).



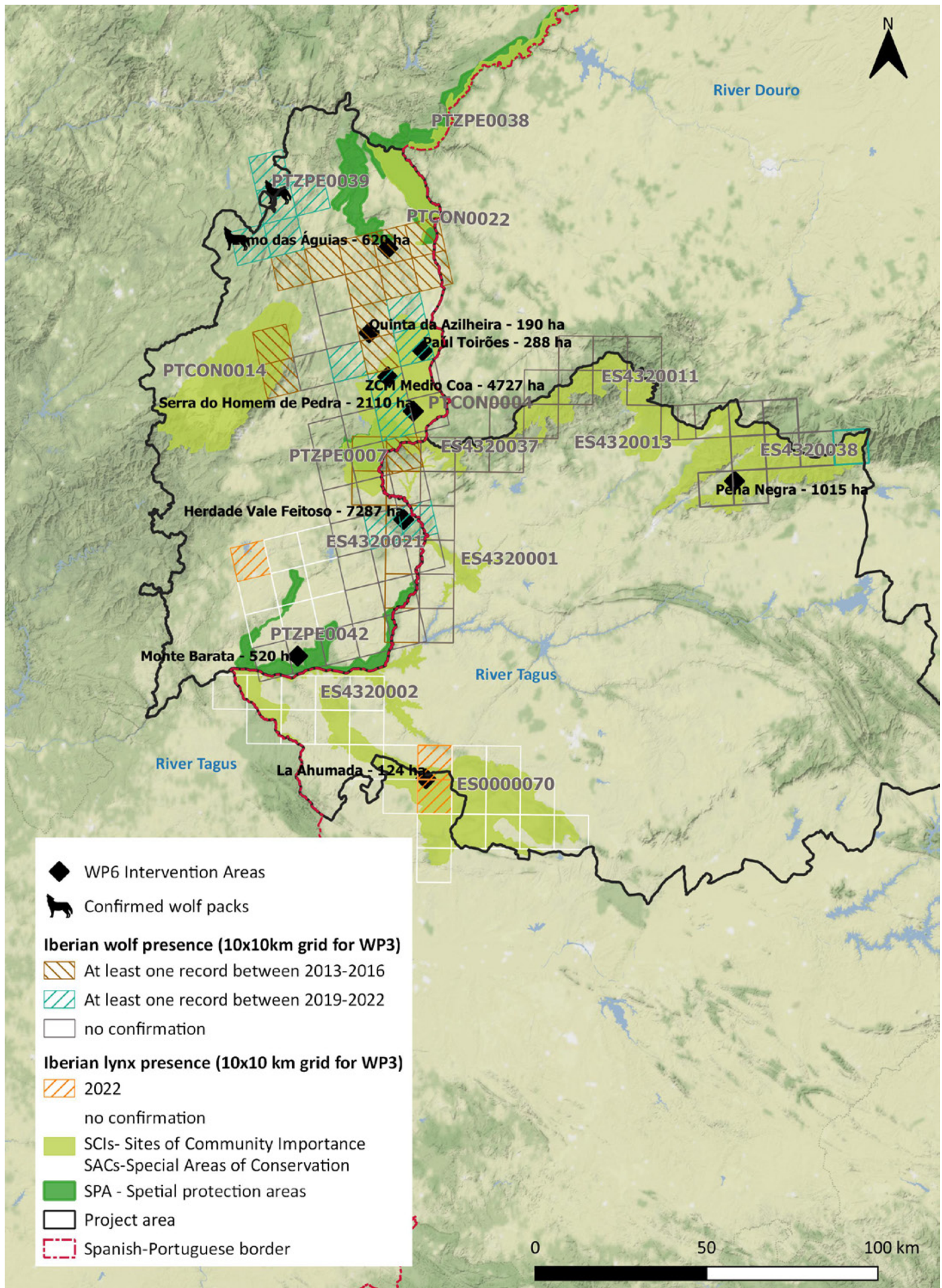


Fig. 2. Intervention areas and reported presence of Iberian wolf and lynx within the LIFE Lupi Lynx project area.



and fear. Implementing livestock protection measures and adapting husbandry systems to carnivores after attacks have already occurred has proven to be too late to avoid conflicts and distrust in governments and conservation organisations. Thus, LIFE Lupi Lynx is based on the concepts of early intervention and collaboration.

The project targets the districts of Guarda and Castelo Branco in the Beira Interior region of Portugal and the province of Cáceres in Extremadura, Spain. The cross-border approach provides an opportunity to achieve better and more comprehensive results, improve the conservation status of the wolf and lynx, improve conditions for their dispersal along transboundary corridors and develop shared knowledge and measures to minimise their impacts on rural communities, thus establishing a more harmonious coexistence between humans and large carnivores.

## Background

The Iberian wolf population is large (around 2,500 individuals) and expanding towards the south and east. However, it is classified by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as ‘Near Threatened’ due to fragmentation in management regimes, lack of a population-level management plan, persecution and the

near-isolation of some subpopulation segments [1]. Within the project area, the wolf was assessed as having an ‘unfavourable’ conservation status during the 2013–2018 Habitats Directive Article 17 reporting period. In the Guarda district, the species’ presence has been unstable, with packs establishing but then disappearing, mainly due to persecution, with the exception of one stable pack in the Trancoso area [*Editor’s note: see Ribeiro et al. (2022) in CDPnews issue 25 for details*]. One of the main threats to the Iberian wolf in Portugal is illegal killing, which is still a widespread practice and includes the use of traps, like snares, and poison baits (Fig. 3). Hence, the objective of the LIFE Lupi Lynx project is to ensure more favourable conditions for wolf dispersal and recolonisation through transboundary coordinated efforts.

The Iberian lynx, having once been regarded as the most endangered felid in the world, has been reclassified by the IUCN from ‘Critically Endangered’ to ‘Vulnerable’ [2]. This reflects the continuous increase in population size over the past decade as a result of intensive ongoing conservation actions based on habitat improvement and reintroductions [3]. Nevertheless, for the 2013–2018 Habitats Directive Article 17 reporting period, the species was assessed as having an unfavourable conservation status throughout its distribution area. There were estimated to be 2,021 individuals in 2023, 86% of them in Spain and



Fig. 3. Illegal snaring directed at wild boar is a cause of wolf mortality in the project area, as shown by the serious injuries suffered by the wolf in this photo, taken in September 2019 (Photo: Duarte Cadete / ZL Zoo Logical (LIFE WolFlux Project)).



Fig. 4. The use of livestock guarding dogs and electric fences, that have proven to be effective in reducing wolf damages, will continue to be implemented in the new project (Photos: Sara Aliácar (left), Blue Nomads (right)).

the remainder in Portugal [4]. In the project area, there are 35 individuals on the Spanish side and one on the Portuguese side [4,5]. Although there are so far no official records of attacks on livestock within the project area, it is known that Iberian lynx sometimes prey on domestic animals [6]. Pro-active measures could therefore help prevent possible conflicts as the lynx population expands and increases.

LIFE Lupi Lynx follows on from work carried out within the LIFE WolFlux project in 2019–2023, building on the knowledge and experience gained as well as on collaborations already established with local communities and other stakeholders. Its objective is to further strengthen the conflict mitigation actions already developed and expand them to other regions of Portugal and Spain. The trans-boundary aspect will facilitate the exchange of experience between the two countries, fostering collaboration and joint management of wolves and lynx.

## Project activities

Baseline surveys of Iberian wolf, lynx and their prey will be carried out. Improvement of ecological conditions will focus on increasing the abundance of wild prey and enhancing habitat, whilst the socio-economic aspect will include promotion of positive coexistence with rural communities and local development. Planned actions cover supporting farmers to prevent damage and increasing capacity to detect environmental crime including through promotion of knowledge exchange in the assessment of

such situations. This holistic approach aims to help build the social and ecological conditions needed for both species to thrive in the project area.

Improving the abundance of wild prey will be one of the main objectives of the project's ecological dimension. This will be achieved through habitat restoration and the establishment of demonstration areas for restocking with European rabbits (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*), as these are the main prey of the Iberian lynx [7]. Ungulates are the main prey of the wolf [8] and may also be an important prey item for Iberian lynx [6]. A small grants scheme will support hunting managers and associations in implementing best practice measures to increase prey abundance. Wild ungulates will be monitored and their habitats (riparian zones, native woodlands and grasslands) restored to promote functional abundances in key intervention areas.

A key aspect of achieving a more positive coexistence is prevention of damage to livestock. The project will encourage the use of proven protection measures such as livestock guarding dogs (LGDs) and diverse types of fences as well as turbo-fladry for protection of vulnerable animals and at night (Fig. 4). To foster the adoption of these measures, capacity building and knowledge exchange among livestock breeders will also be promoted across the project area.

Another action will focus on creating a better legal framework for the use of LGDs in Portugal, as such dogs are currently considered pets and thus are not allowed to be in public places without the presence of the owner or being muzzled. The use of LGDs has been increasing with-



in the wolf range and is a precondition for farmers to be entitled to compensation for damage, but the legislation has not changed to reflect this situation and may cause some incompatibilities.

Capacity building to improve procedures within the damage compensation schemes will also be implemented. For example, transboundary training in forensic and genetic analyses will be carried out with rangers and veterinarians.

To combat environmental crime, which is a major threat to wildlife, exchange of knowledge between the environmental law enforcement authorities of both countries will be facilitated. Livestock guarding dogs provided within the project and equipped with GPS collars will act as sentinels, helping to detect any dogs that may fall victim to illegal activities (poaching/poisoning). The project will also carry out necropsies and toxicological analysis of other dogs (e.g. hunting dogs) that died with a suspicion of having been poisoned, allowing collection of reliable information and providing a more realistic view of the illegal use of poison which can guide prevention and control actions.

Communication and dissemination will be another major project component with the implementation of various activities targeting local communities and young people. These include an environmental education programme for local schools as well as awareness-raising campaigns involving local municipalities. A network of wildlife ambassadors will be created to disseminate information about the target species and to encourage engagement between peers. Moreover, four issues of *CDPnews* will be translated into the project languages in order to make them more accessible to Portuguese and Spanish readers worldwide.

Lastly, the socio-economic and wider benefits that biodiversity can bring to local communities will also be emphasised. Acknowledging the value of improved cooperation with business, there will be activities designed to integrate wildlife conservation into tourism and local products. The solutions to be implemented are aimed at strengthening the competencies of nature tourism operators, supporting local businesses in developing synergies, joint marketing and product development to in-

crease their visibility in the regions, as well as creating an added value for farmers in adopting good coexistence practices. The project will run until December 2028.

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