

Project

Project Pasturs: Volunteers and farmers cooperating to protect livestock in Italy

Maria Benciolini*, Mauro Belardi, Chiara Crotti, Anna Crimella

Eliante Onlus Social Cooperative Society, Milan, Italy

* Contact: benciolini@eliante.it



Introduction

Project Pasturs was inspired by the French Pastora-Loup project, which has been running for more than 20 years. [Editor's note: see pages 4–9 in this issue.] Eliante¹, a non-government environmental organisation, decided to develop a similar project, adapted to conditions in the Italian Alps. The main objective is to facilitate the activities of shepherds and farmers in relation to the return of large predators (Fig. 1), with young volunteers helping to implement livestock protection measures during the grazing season. The approach is based on the

premise that the local farming community can benefit from the transfer of knowledge and practices for mitigating the impacts of large carnivores, thus reducing the risks of both economic losses and poaching of predators.

Project areas and partners

Preparatory actions started in 2015 and in 2016 the first volunteers went to the Orobie Alps in Lombardy, northern Italy (Fig. 2). The wolf (*Canis lupus*) returned to Orobie Bergamasche Regional Park in 2000, the brown bear (*Ursus arctos*) in 2008 and the golden jackal (*Canis*



Fig. 1. Wolves and bears have returned to Orobie Bergamasche Regional Park in the Italian Alps (Photos: Miha Krofel, Mauro Belardi).

¹ <https://www.eliante.eco/>

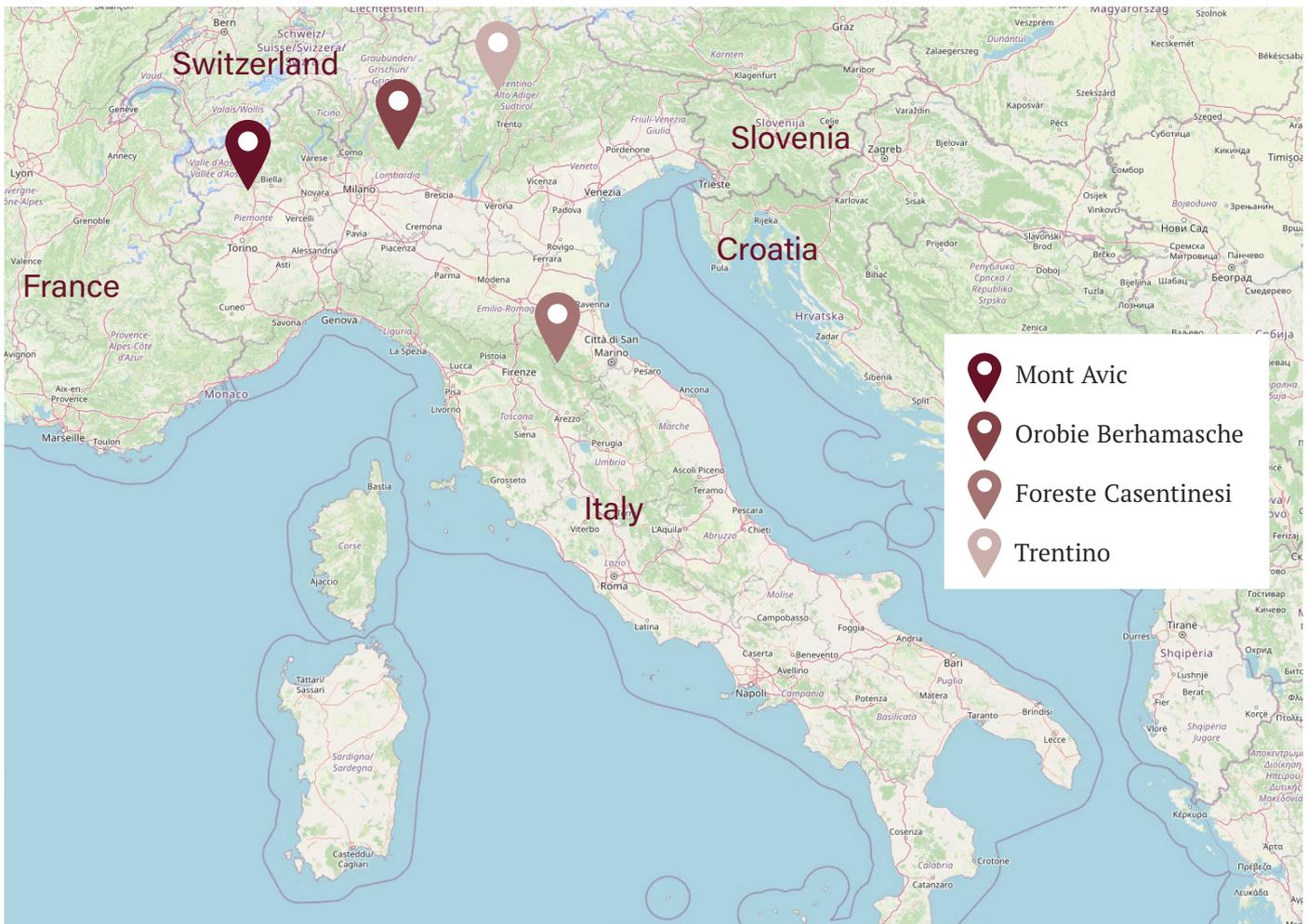


Fig. 2. Locations where Project Pasturs operates (Source: © OpenStreetMap).

aureus) in 2017 [1–3]. Pasturs expanded in 2021 to include Mont Avic Natural Park in Valle d'Aosta region, where there are around 7–8 wolf packs [4] as well as a few Eurasian lynx (*Lynx lynx*) [5]. In the same year, and in collaboration with DifesAttiva², the project began to operate in Casentino Forests National Park, where wolves have been present since at least 1982 [6]. Thanks to the LIFEstock-Protect project [Editor's note: see Rossberg (2024) in CDPnews issue 28 for details], since 2022 the Pasturs model has also been implemented in Trentino, where there are currently about 100 bears, 12 wolf packs, two packs of golden jackals and several lynx [7].

Project Pasturs was initially managed by a balanced partnership: a technical consulting cooperative (Eliante), an environmental association (WWF Bergamo-Brescia), a professional farmers' and breeders' association (Coldiretti BG) and a protected area administration (Parco Orobie

Bergamasche). In each new area, diverse partners are involved, in most cases including a protected area administration.

Volunteer training and tasks

Volunteers are selected in a two-step recruitment process: an application form and an interview with project staff. The interview aims to understand candidates' motivations, their previous experience of volunteer work and their capabilities to operate in mountainous environments. Those accepted participate in a mandatory training course which lasts one or two days, depending on the location. The main topics covered are basic information about large carnivore biology; local status of large carnivores (presence, numbers); safety in alpine environments; livestock protection measures; details of farms involved;

² <https://www.difesattiva.org>

and a workshop on fence building. These topics are presented by a team composed of farmers, alpine guides, biologists and experts on livestock protection measures. Training courses are held at various locations such as park visitor centres, WWF-owned protected areas and farms depending on the specific circumstances of the local organisation (Fig. 3).

Volunteers spend a minimum of one week and a maximum of four weeks with farmers, depending on their workload, logistics and particularly the kind of space they have available to host volunteers. Some farmers prefer to host one volunteer while others want two. Whenever possible, project staff try to meet their needs, although this is not always possible as the number of available volunteers varies through the season. Volunteers mainly help with fencing (construction, transfer to new locations, grass cutting, monitoring functionality), direct surveillance (keeping watch on livestock movements and activity in pastures), management of livestock protection dogs and shepherd dogs (feeding and, in the case of shepherd dogs, instruction to move the flock), raising awareness about biodiversity conservation and livestock protection among tourists and many other tasks. Some volunteers come from veterinary or agricultural schools and offer their expertise in taking care of animals (help with medical issues, births, etc.). The project also offers internships to university students.

Farm selection

Farmers were initially chosen on the basis of their involvement in previous projects. Later, word of mouth and expansion of the partner network contributed to the iden-



Fig. 3. Training courses for Project Pasturs volunteers (Photos: Chiara Crotti).

tification of potential new participants. Farmers are selected for inclusion by project staff based on their openness to livestock protection and the suitability of their farms to host volunteers. Only farms that already use, or are willing to adopt, livestock protection measures are selected. Farms implement various measures such as livestock guarding dogs, fences and direct surveillance, the choice of which depends on their particular situation (Fig. 4). In some cases, project staff provide technical support for the implementation or testing of these measures.

The locations of farms involved in the project vary greatly, from remote and sparsely populated areas to highly touristic zones. The size of farms ranges from a few hundred to a few thousand animals. The most common livestock are cattle, horses, sheep and goats. Exposure to predation risk also varies considerably among farms.

Evaluating outcomes

To date, a total of over 700 volunteers have helped to protect around 9,000 head of livestock at 28 farms. Volunteers each spend an average of two weeks in pastures and cover the entire grazing season (June–September) for all farms involved. Since the beginning of the project, there have been only three episodes of predation at participating farms (in which two goats, six sheep and two donkeys were lost), all due to human error: forgetting to connect fences to energisers or leaving animals outside fenced areas.

Farmers were interviewed by project staff in order to assess their experience of hosting volunteers. They expressed their appreciation of receiving practical help and were happy to meet new people, while having company



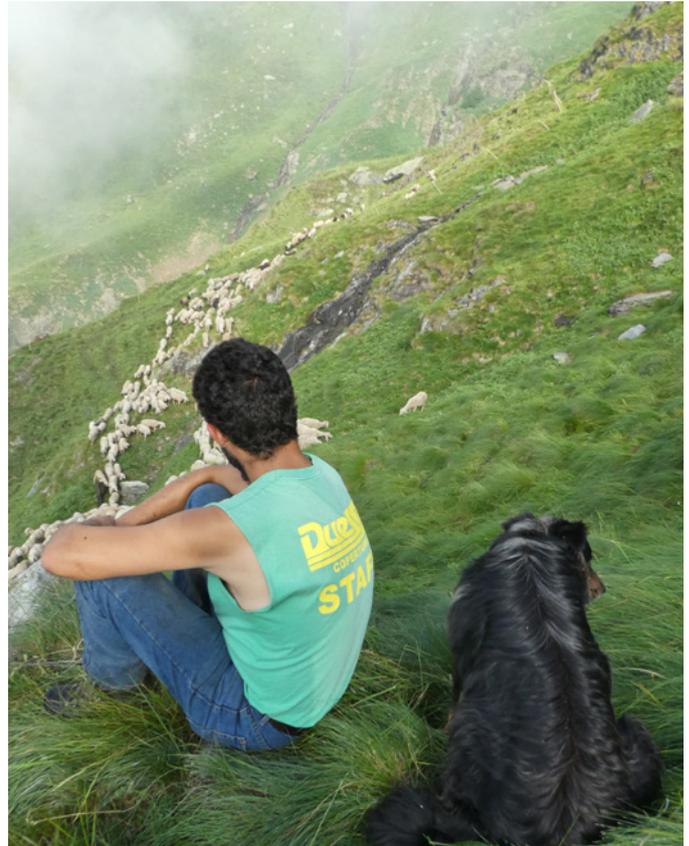


Fig. 4. Examples of livestock protection measures implemented at farms participating in Project Pasturs (Photos: Anna Crimella, Maria Benciolini).

was also greatly appreciated at the most remote farms. Difficulties related to some volunteers not being able to adapt to the pasture situation or treating volunteering as a holiday rather than helping.

For volunteers, the experience allows them to interact with the alpine environment in a new way and to discover different ways of life. The feedback received from a questionnaire filled in by volunteers at the end of their experience has been overwhelmingly positive: 77.8% declared they were “very satisfied” and 19% were “quite satisfied” while only 3.2% were “not satisfied”. Two volunteers were inspired to enrol in a shepherding school and one decided to become a professional shepherd. The main difficulties reported by volunteers related to possible misunderstandings with farmers and shepherds, mainly concerning different views about nature, animal

welfare and cultural differences as well as difficulties managing the workload.

For the staff involved, the project requires a considerable amount of work and energy. Hundreds of candidates apply each year, and selection and training take significant amounts of time. Additionally, project staff regularly visit participating farms during the grazing season to monitor the progress of activities.

Project Pasturs has been cited as an example of good practice for coexistence by the LIFE EuroLargeCarnivores project³, the EU Large Carnivore Platform⁴ and a research paper commissioned by the European Parliament’s Policy Department for Citizens’ Rights and Constitutional Affairs⁵. In 2024 the project received a Bandiera Verde⁶ (Green Flag) award, the most important national environmental award given to private organisations.

³ <https://www.eurolargecarnivores.eu/en/stories/guarding-dogs-and-volunteers-building-coexistence-with-large-carnivores-in-northern-italy>

⁴ https://wayback.archive-it.org/12090/20230305152952mp_/https://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/conservation/species/carnivores/case_studies.htm

⁵ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/596844/IPOL_STU\(2018\)596844_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/596844/IPOL_STU(2018)596844_EN.pdf)

⁶ <https://www.legambiente.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Bandiera-verdi-e-nere-2024.pdf>



Fig. 5. Volunteers with a farmer in Orobie (Photo: Chiara Crotti).

The project has also featured in various local and national newspaper articles⁷ as well as on television⁸. Considerable media exposure, while certainly positive in terms of raising public awareness and spreading the word, can be problematic in contexts where conflict is high and positions are polarised. The project itself and the people involved (staff, partners, farmers) have been the target of hate speech and mobbing. When this occurs, staff react calmly and try to mitigate conflicts.

Conclusions

Pasturs began as a project focused on damage prevention, but communication and socio-cultural dimensions

have become very important aspects of the work. Practical support to implement livestock protection measures is undoubtedly an effective means of building dialogue with farmers, much more so than simply disseminating information and protocols. Since the majority of volunteers come from urban contexts, time spent in pastures is also an opportunity for cultural exchange and mutual understanding (Figs. 5 and 6). Growing trust between staff and farmers is one of the most important achievements of the project. This allows potential problems to be managed in a proactive, positive way, avoiding increased wildlife impacts and social conflicts.

Around three or four additional farms ask to join Pasturs each year and we plan to continue the project in the future, funds permitting. Other similar projects have been set up in Europe, in some cases thanks to Pasturs' example. Besides those featured in this issue of *CDPnews*, there are *Entre Chien et Loup* in France⁹, *Les Mastines* in Spain¹⁰, *Wolf Fencing Team Belgium*¹¹ and *WikiWolves* in Germany¹² [Editor's note: see Soethe (2020) in *CDPnews* issue 19]. They are all in contact with each other and in 2023 several got together for a meeting in France.

Acknowledgements

The first phase of Project Pasturs was funded by Fondazione Cariplo, a banking foundation, and later by both public and private funds (the EU LIFE programme, protected areas, private donors). We thank our partners Parco Regionale Orobie Bergamasche, Parco Natural Mont Avic, Fondazione Cariplo, LIFEstockProtect, WWF-Italy, Coldiretti Bergamo, Parco Nazionale Foreste Casentinesi monte Falterona e Campigna and DifesAttiva.

References

- [1] Meriggi A et al. (2009) Monitoraggio dei grandi predatori nel parco delle Orobie Bergamasche [Monitoring large predators in Orobie Bergamasche park]. Technical Report. Parco Orobie Bergamasche, Università degli studi di Pavia [in Italian].
 [2] Giovannini R et al. (2009) Rapporto Orso 2008 [Bear report 2008]. Provincia Autonoma di Trento, Trento.
 URL: <https://www.calameo.com/read/000195356ad0f56c15c07> [in Italian].

⁷ <https://www.ilpost.it/2023/04/26/pasturs-progetto-lupi-orsi-pastori>

⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1722662891478064>

⁹ <https://www.wwf.fr/projets/entre-chien-et-loup>

¹⁰ <https://www.lesmastines.org>

¹¹ <https://www.wolffencing.be>

¹² <http://www.wikiwolves.org>



Fig. 6. A volunteer and farmer in Valle D'Aosta (Photo: Anna Crimella).

[3] Lapini L (2021) Lo sciacallo dorato (*Canis aureus*) in Italia: sintesi delle conoscenze aggiornata al 2021 [The golden jackal (*Canis aureus*) in Italy: summary of knowledge up to 2021]. Habitatonline. URL: <https://www.habitatonline.eu/2021/04/lo-sciacallo-dorato-canis-aureus-in-italia-sintesi-delle-conoscenze-aggiornata-al-2021/> [in Italian].

[4] Avanzinelli E et al. (2024) La distribuzione del lupo nelle regioni alpine 2021–2023 [The distribution of the wolf in the Alpine regions 2021–2023]. Technical Report. LIFE Wolf Alps EU. URL: https://www.lifewolfalps.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/CAMPIONAMENTO-2021-2023_REGIONI-ALPINE-LWA-EU.pdf [in Italian].

[5] Virgilio A (2023) Il ritorno della lince. Intervista a Bruno Bassano, Direttore del Parco [The return of the lynx. Interview

with Bruno Bassano, Parc Director]. Voci del Parco 2: 13. URL: https://www.pngp.it/sites/default/files/documenti/Pubblicazioni/voci_del_parco_2023-2.pdf [in Italian].

[6] Boscagli G (1985) Attuale distribuzione geografica e stima numerica del lupo (*Canis lupus* Linnaeus 1758) sul territorio italiano [Current geographical distribution and numerical estimate of the wolf (*Canis lupus* Linnaeus 1758) on the Italian territory]. Natura 76: 77–93 [in Italian].

[7] Groff C et al. (2024) Rapporto Grandi Carnivori 2023 [Large carnivore report 2023]. Servizio Faunistico della Provincia Autonoma di Trento, Trento. URL: https://grandicarnivori.provincia.tn.it/content/download/15356/263827/file/RapportoGrandiCarnivori_2023_ITA_03_web.pdf [in Italian].