

PARTICIPATORY PROCESSES FOR MITIGATING CONFLICTS AMONG STAKEHOLDERS: REGIONAL PLATFORMS ON LARGE CARNIVORES IN EUROPE

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1. Introduction

The conservation and sustainable management of large carnivores is one of the most challenging tasks facing conservationists and decision-makers in Europe. After centuries of persecution, wolves (*Canis lupus*), bears (*Ursus arctos*) and, to a lesser extent, lynx (*Lynx lynx*) are currently recovering across many areas of Europe for several reasons, including recovery of prey species, enhanced public support and a protective legal framework (Chapron et al., 2014). Part of the challenge, however, is that most European landscapes have been modified by human activities for millennia and large carnivores now occur in human-dominated, or cultural, landscapes, often causing an impact on human activities.

Coexistence between large carnivores and humans is complex. The on-going recovery has intensified impacts on a wide range of human activities, particularly private livestock breeding (Linnell & Cretois, 2018). Although depredation can be mitigated through the adoption of protection measures (e.g. fencing and guarding dogs; see Gehring et al., 2010), this usually requires an additional workload from farmers

(Tudini et al., 2020). There is a need to understand the perceptions of farmers towards large carnivores and management procedures adopted by authorities (Lance et al., 2010). On the other hand, disagreement about how large carnivores and their impacts should be managed can result in conflicts between different societal groups (Redpath et al., 2013; Lute et al., 2018; Hartel et al., 2019). The European Commission has made significant efforts in recent years to engage key stakeholders in discussions regarding conflict species. In 2014, the Commission established the EU Platform on Coexistence between People and Large Carnivores, a grouping of seven organisations representing different interest groups with a joint mission to try to minimise large carnivore related conflicts¹ (Marsden et al., 2018). This has provided a means of sharing views and issues at a higher level, but members recognised that conflicts varied significantly by region, depending for example, on the socio-economic activities, biogeographic and natural conditions in areas where large carnivores are returning (Morehouse et al., 2020). The Platform therefore supported the es-

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/conservation/species/carnivores/coexistence_platform.htm

establishment of regional platforms² following a similar model in different localities across the EU and in 2018 opened a call for offers to implement them in three areas across Europe, for which the Istituto di Ecologia Applicata was contracted.

2. Areas of implementation

The Commission selected locations for regional platforms on the basis of (a) a longlist of proposals by experts on large carnivores and (b) reported difficulties in managing increasing large carnivore populations as assessed on the basis of contacts made with the European Commission. The province of Avila (Spain), the province of Grosseto (Italy) and the county of Harghita (Romania) were chosen (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 Map of project areas (red lines: 1 = Avila, 2 = Grosseto, 3 = Harghita) Updated distributions of brown bear and wolf are represented in the background. (Source: IUCN 2018)

2.1 Ávila (Spain)

The province of Avila (8,050 km²) is in the south of Castile and Leon Autonomous Region. It is characterised by pastures and grasslands (41% of the provincial territory) and small remnant forest patches with extensive cattle breeding, mainly of the local Avila breed, for meat production. Over 50% of the Spanish wolf population is in Castile and León, mainly north of the Duero River (Blanco & Cortés, 2002). Wolves reproduced for the first time in Ávila in 2001, and in 2017 official figures listed 10 packs in the province, with 944 reported attacks (Saens de Buruaga, 2018). Wolves are strictly protected in Castile and Leon south of the Duero River (Annexes II and IV

of the Habitats Directive), while they are managed as a game species north of the river (Annex V). The Regional Administration has used derogations to provide permits for the removal of a limited number of individuals in Ávila, but environmental organisations have argued that the conditions for derogation from strict protection are not fulfilled.

2.2 Grosseto (Italy)

The Province of Grosseto extends over 4,479 km² in central Italy. It is characterised by a largely agricultural landscape (54% of the area), featuring a mosaic of extensive cultivation, shrubs, fallows and pastures, interspersed with broad-leaved forest patches (Selvi, 2010). The landscape is mainly hilly, with the highest areas reaching 1,738 m a.s.l. in the north. Grosseto has one of the lowest human population densities among Italy's provinces (< 50 inhabitants/km²). Historically, it has been shaped by agriculture and livestock production continues to be an important economic activity together with rural tourism, often associated with agricultural production.

Permanent wolf occurrence has been recorded in the area since the early 1980s (Boitani & Ciucci, 1993). In 2012–2014 there were a minimum of 13 packs (Salvatori et al., 2019), while in 2017 the population was estimated at c. 100 individuals in 22–24 packs (Ricci et al., 2018a). An average of 330 depredation events/year were reported in 2014–2017 (Ricci et al., 2018b). The regional government and the EU have funded compensation and prevention measures, but these solutions have not been considered satisfactory (Marino et al., 2016) and conflicts have arisen among interest groups.

2.3 Harghita (Romania)

The County of Harghita is situated in the Eastern Carpathians of central Romania. It extends over 6,635 km², with elevations from 490 m to 1785 m a.s.l., and terrain characterised by narrow valleys and steep slopes. Around 30% is agricultural land, of which 80% is semi-natural grasslands largely used for extensive livestock and honey production (Scarlat et al., 2011). Forest habitats cover about 40% of the area.

Harghita hosts brown bears, Eurasian lynx and wolves, but the most abundant and, from the perspective of human–large carnivore coexistence, the

² https://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/conservation/species/carnivores/regional_platforms.htm

most relevant, is the bear, which was managed as a game species until the country joined the EU in 2007 (Enescu & Hălălişan, 2017). Since then, derogations have been used to control the population but in 2016 a ban was imposed on bear hunting following pressure from environmental associations questioning the reliability of population estimates used to set yearly quotas (Popescu et al., 2019). Bears come close to human settlements and feed on human-related food sources, often resulting in accidents with humans, several of which have been fatal (Bombieri et al., 2019).

Overarching management decisions on large carnivore conservation, derogations, hunting and compensation are taken at the national level by the Ministry of Environment, Water and Forests while the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development is responsible for decisions on agricultural financing. There are no schemes yet in place regarding advice or funding for prevention measures.

3. Stakeholders involved and platform members

The process for selecting platform participants started by contacting scientists and managers involved in large carnivore conservation and management in the three areas, who were able to produce a preliminary list of people and organisations to be contacted. These candidates were interviewed and asked to suggest other potential participants following a snowballing process. Table 1 lists all interest groups identified in the project areas and the number of interviews made in order to assess their positions and record all issues they reported (Balian & Salvatori, 2018; Salvatori et al., 2018; Salvatori, 2018).

The majority of people interviewed stated they would be willing to take part in the platforms, either representing an organisation or bringing their own individual positions and values. Many stated that their willingness to take part was conditional on it leading to concrete solutions. At the end of each interview an overview of planned steps was given.

The process of selection and engagement of participants was overseen by a team of nine experts from the fields of carnivore conservation, social science, policy and conflict mitigation. Up to three members of this team contacted participants and attended meetings, while the rest were consulted for planning and de-briefing after each stage.

Table 1 Number of interviews held in each project area divided by interest group

Group		
Avila	Grosseto	Harghita
Institutions		
3	4	5
Livestock breeders/Beekeepers (also represented by associations)		
9	4	3
Hunters/Foresters/Land owners		
3	1	2
Environmentalists		
3	2	4
Animal welfare		
0	2	0
Scientists		
2	1	0
Total		
20	14	14

4. Tasks and approaches

Task A: platform establishment

We foresaw a series of steps aimed at implementing the approach most suited to local conditions (Fig. 2), following the suggestion of Redpath et al. (2013). In order to do this, an initial *scoping* phase had the objective of collecting all information available from each project area in order to map existing conflicts (Salvatori et al., 2020). Once the main issues were identified, a professional facilitator was contacted for each project area and the first meeting for *establishing the process* was carefully planned.

While interacting with platform members, the expert team always followed the principles of:

Neutrality with regard to the issues under discussion. The team would only make suggestions on the process to be followed but this would also be adaptable depending on requests of the participants.

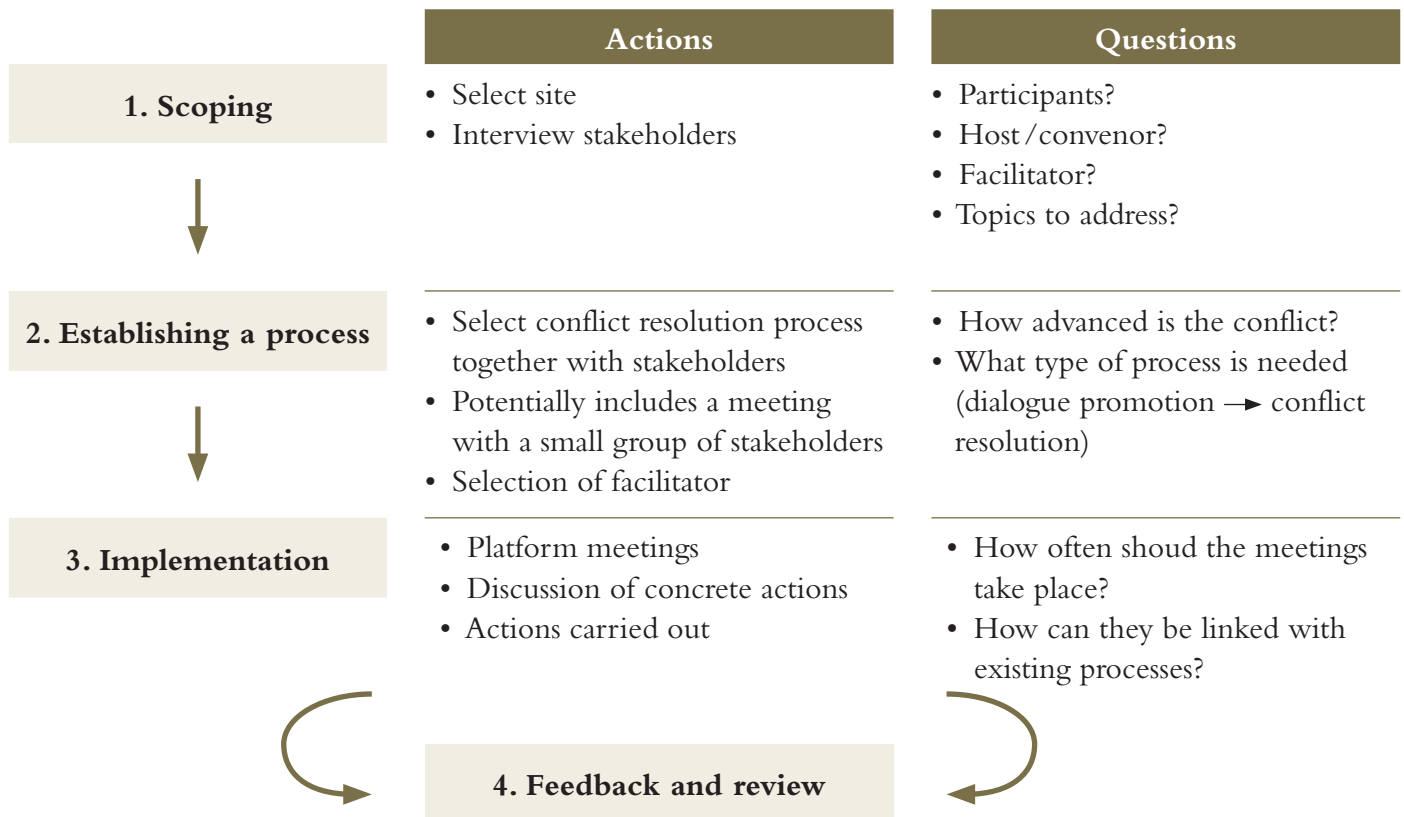


Fig. 2 Steps adopted for implementation of Task A: platform establishment.

Equality in supporting every stakeholder equally in terms of understanding what is important to her/him. Considering all viewpoints as being of equal worth and taking proper account of knowledge shared from different sources.

Transparency with regard to decisions made by the team on the process and the reasons for making them.

Confidentiality with regard to who provides the team with what information. Information gathered (e.g. through interviews) was reported to the Commission as well as to the other stakeholders involved but no information was linked to specific individuals.

The approach for the implementation of the platform will include a series of activities aimed at increasing trust and confidence among participants and for supporting them in the identification of common ground that could potentially lead to the development of agreed concrete interventions for improving current conditions during Task B. This phase is currently being developed and adapted to local conditions.

Task B: implementation of concrete solutions

Once a list of agreed interventions has been ranked against set criteria, participants will be asked to express their interest in taking part in the implementation of

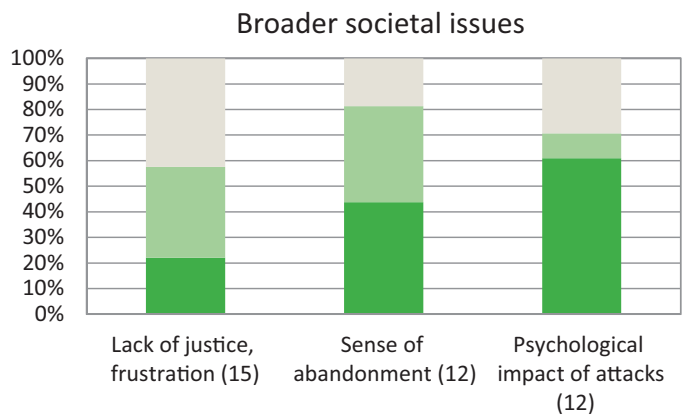
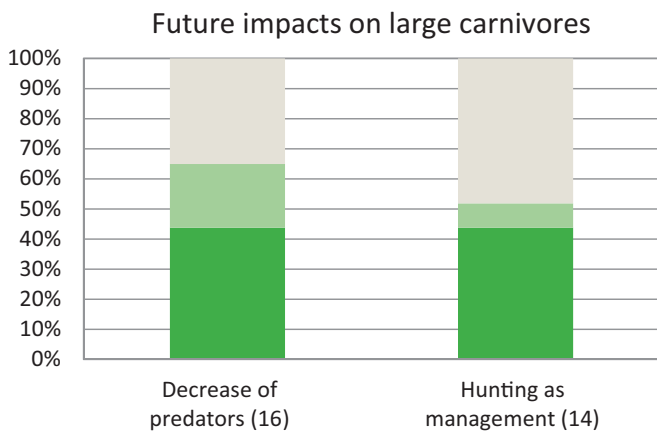
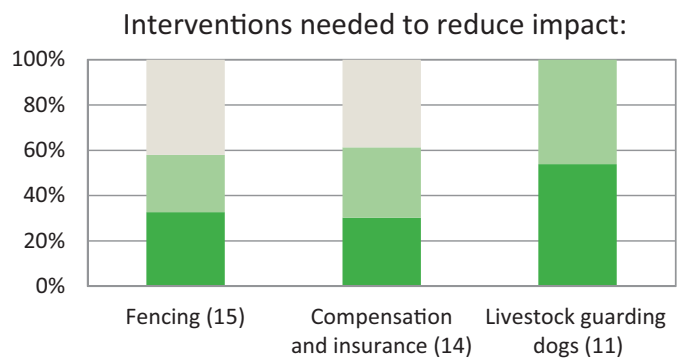
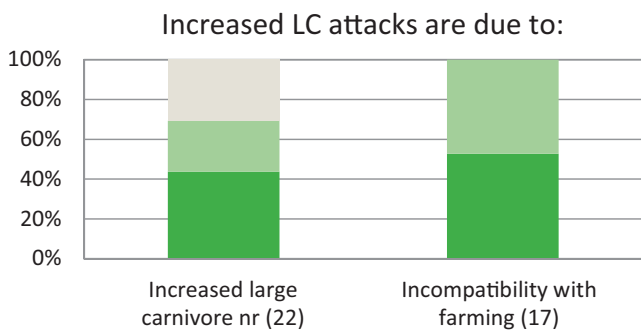
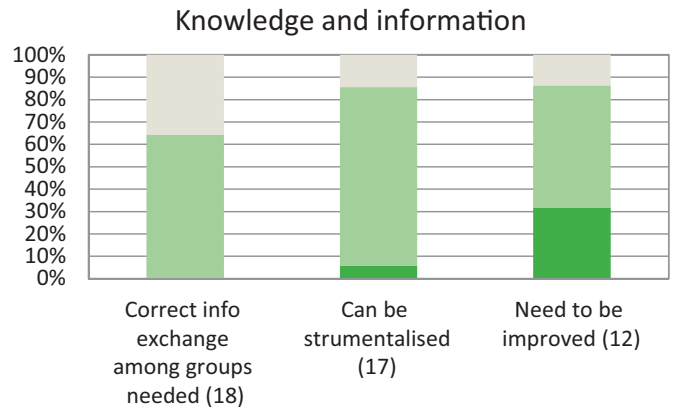
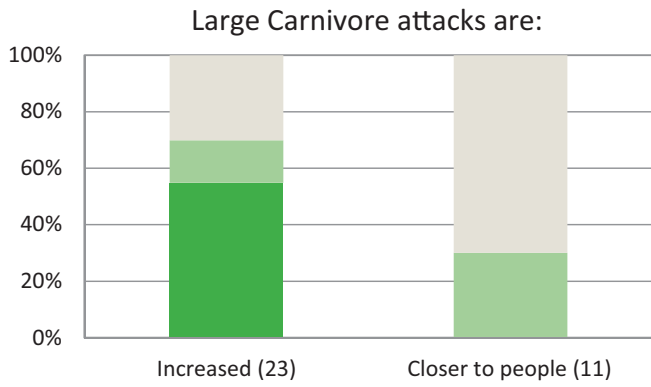
the highest ranking ones and a budget of c. € 40,000 will be made available. In some cases, there could be matched funding from other sources.

Task C: communication

This was considered a critical issue in all project areas and, apart from the first meeting held in Harghita, where a journalist was present who published articles on the beginning of the work of the platform, information to the outside world about the activities undertaken during the meetings and the results achieved was not shared locally. Technical reports were regularly published on the Platform website of the European Commission. Information flow with the EU Platform was always maintained, while a wider communication of the results achieved was only agreed upon once the list of concrete actions was produced.

5. Results

Given that the processes are ongoing in all three project areas, only the results of completed steps are presented here. The *scoping* phase was successfully achieved for all three project areas and interviewees reported a series of consistent issues regardless of the species of large carnivore and the geographic area. A



Perception of Urgency (Urgent N = 34)

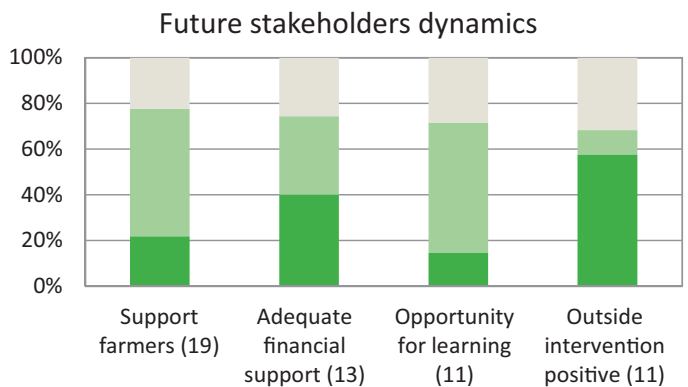
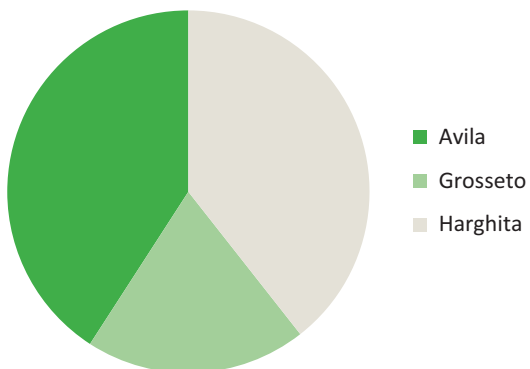


Fig. 3 Main issues reported by at least 25% of interviewees in each of the project areas.

summary of the issues reported by at least 25% of interviewees (N=11) is shown in Fig. 3. Further details can be found in Salvatori et al. (2020).

In all project areas, the majority of people reported an increased number of attacks on livestock by large carnivores in recent years, with higher intensity in Avila and Harghita. In Grosseto and Harghita attacks were said to be closer to people. The reason behind this was identified as an increased presence of large carnivores clashing with extensive farming. Technical tools for reducing such impacts were mentioned, among them fencing, compensation of damage and livestock guarding dogs (the latter particularly in Avila and Grosseto).

Knowledge and information issues were reported mainly in Grosseto and Harghita, but interviewees from Avila also thought that information needed to be improved. In this respect, increased interaction with other stakeholders was seen by many as an opportunity for learning from other sectors and the majority of people wished to see more support to farmers through adequate financial support in the near future. A general sense of frustration, abandonment and lack of justice was expressed, mainly from the agricultural sector in all project areas. The general impression was that if the situation remained the same large carnivores would decrease in the near future, due to either natural or human causes. In all cases interventions for improving the situation were considered urgent.

6. Conclusions and way forward

The results obtained through the *scoping* phase provided the necessary background for entering into the next steps of *platform establishment* through the engagement of stakeholders. Face-to-face interviews established a connection with people and, during the work ahead, attention will be paid to maintaining this personal connection. All interviewees declared they were willing to take part in a participatory process, even if they had already been engaged in other negotiations or projects in the past, showing a positive attitude. In Harghita and Grosseto, local contact people have previous working experience in the area and good relationships with stakeholders and the local administration. In Avila, gaining approval from the regional authorities and local delegation was more challenging and continued efforts will be made to engage them.

Work ahead includes the identification of local professional facilitators and implementation of participatory processes through a series of workshops in order to support participants in the co-production of agreed solutions. The project is due to end in December 2020.

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