

Interview

# Managing wolves in Switzerland

**Arno Puorger**  
interviewed by  
Daniel Mettler

**How did you come to work on wolves and what do you like about it?**

I didn't have a special interest in wolves. I studied wildlife biology and hunted with my father since I was a child, which is where my interest in wild animals comes from. I found a job in the canton of St. Gallen, but then eventually came back to Graubünden. My job was created because large predators, especially the wolf, create a lot of work. By working in management, I have a more direct link to practice than I would in research. Large carnivores are exciting because of their ecological dynamic and social relevance.

**What are your tasks?**

It's rare in Switzerland that someone's job is practically only concerned with large carnivores. I provide technical support for gamekeepers and take care of some of the communication from the office in Graubünden. I am also responsible for managing cantonal data, the administrative processing of damage cases and planning wolf culling. We have 59 gamekeepers working in the field. Camera trapping, DNA analyses and observations form the basis of population monitoring. Pack size and territories are determined in order to carry out targeted regulation and the culling of individuals implicated in damage.



Arno Puorger, Head of Large Carnivores Department, Office for Hunting and Fishing, Canton of Graubünden  
(Photo: Arno Puorger).

### Do you use telemetry collars?

Yes, we plan to intensify wolf tracking in the future and will train more gamekeepers. This is an important tool for successful monitoring, but also for wolf population control in winter. Both minimising damage and scientifically evaluating wolf movements and packs are important.

### How do you communicate with the public and stakeholders?

We have various communication channels. There is a digital map on our website where observations are displayed for everyone to see. We use a system based on SMS to inform people, especially farmers, about damage and other noteworthy events such as the formation of new packs or bear detections. We also provide information about extraordinary incidents via the media and organise information events in the regions, if necessary.

For farmers, the SMS system has been in place since 2019. It has pros and cons. The aim was to warn farmers when wolves first appeared so that protective measures could be taken at an early stage. Since then, the wolf has spread everywhere so the system is now more for providing information than warnings. In the case of bears, however, it can certainly be called a warning system for livestock owners and beekeepers, as bears currently only occur sporadically and regionally. Sometimes people have cancelled the service because there were too many messages. Too much information can also give a false sense of a complete overview.

### Is there too much talk about wolves already?

In principle, informing the public is an important measure. It is important to communicate objectively and transparently. However, the discussion about large carnivores is still very controversial, partly because almost every event involving them is reported in the media.

There is still a need to inform people about unusual events such as habituated bears or wolves that show strange behaviour, because this sometimes causes great uncertainty among various people affected. Open communication on the part of the administration promotes trust on the part of the public.

### How was last winter's wolf cull organised?

We organised the regulation of wolves primarily with gamekeepers. I coordinated the planning with them. The district chief was responsible for the organisation. We discussed the objectives and any conditions together and drew up a plan for targeted shooting. In some cases, hunters were also involved.

### Will wolf culling become routine in Switzerland?

We will see. We have a new law that allows the population to be regulated pre-emptively. But it remains an emotional issue. The wolf is a protected species but is not threatened with extinction. However, regulation remains very challenging because the wolf is both social and adaptive. We don't know yet the long-term effects of regulation on damage and social behaviour. One aim of culling is for wolves to become shyer of humans over time.

### What are the benefits of culling and targeted removals for conflict mitigation?

It is too early for conclusions. In some cases, we shot individuals that were showing signs of strong habituation to humans. We were able to solve the problem here. The effect on damage to livestock cannot be assessed yet. The regulation of wolves in Switzerland is partly based on the assumption that by shooting the 'right' wolves [*those that attack livestock*] we can eliminate 'bad' habits. The first aim of regulation is to control the population. However, we also want to 'educate' the wolf population and take a differentiated approach depending on the extent of the conflict. In Switzerland, the federal government (Confederation) and the cantons have different tasks and roles. The Confederation lays down the principles of species protection, damage compensation, non-lethal and lethal measures, while the cantons' task is to implement them.

### Is killing wolves the only option?

The canton is convinced that shooting wolves alone cannot solve the problems. The canton's strategy is based on both herd protection and regulation. Both must be planned and developed over the long-term.

The best protection measures are fences and livestock guarding dogs. Acoustic and visual deterrents can support these measures in the short-term but cannot replace fences or livestock guarding dogs.



### What do shepherds need to know about wolves?

Advice on protection is a matter of farmer-to-farmer mentoring. This is organised by the official advisory centre. However, it is also important that farmers learn how wolves behave, what is normal and what is unusual. Should I be worried, how can I react, what do I have to report? An appropriate response to an incident and the use of protective measures are key. The canton has a clear division of responsibilities between wildlife management and the agricultural advisory service.

### Is it true that some wolves 'specialise' on cattle?

We have experience with the Beverin pack, several members of which repeatedly killed cattle. This shows us that we need to monitor developments closely in order to intervene in good time. Different preferences emerge between packs and we can react to them.

### Does high availability of wild prey help protect herds?

There are studies that make a connection between prey supply and livestock kills. In this respect, the availability of wild prey is also likely to play a role. It will be exciting to see how prey populations develop in Graubünden in the future.

### Are the Alps suitable for wolves?

The Alps are used by people in very diverse ways, including for tourism and forestry as well as agriculture. All

these stakeholders have to make certain compromises. Coexistence with wolves is less a question of ecological viability than of social acceptance.

### What impact do wolves have on wild ungulates and the Alpine ecosystem?

We can see that roe deer populations are declining in certain areas where wolf and lynx ranges overlap. We have to take this into account when planning hunting. The impact on the forest is another complex issue that has not yet been researched in our country.

The wolf can also have positive effects. However, so far little is known about this in Graubünden and it remains to be investigated to what extent prey populations are influenced in terms of numbers, distribution, health status and possibly also collisions with vehicles.

### Does the wolf also have a positive influence on Alpine farming?

The challenges in Alpine farming have been recognised more strongly in recent years than before the return of the wolf. Ultimately, however, the wolf has only been around for a few years in most regions of Graubünden and its effects will become apparent in time.

### What is your wish for the future?

Mutual trust in conflict resolution and an understanding of the interests and roles of the various stakeholders.



(Photo: Amt für Jagd und Fischerei Graubünden)