



Opinion paper of the German National Advisory Board on Animal Genetic Resources

Short opinion on the conflict between the return of the wolf and the conservation of endangered native livestock breeds

The return of the wolf to Germany and the associated repopulation of habitats is to be welcomed as a success from a species conservation perspective. On the other hand however, the wolf has also brought back problems that particularly affect grazing livestock keepers.

According to the latest report of the Federal Documentation and Consultation Centre on wolves (DBBW), 184 wolf packs and 47 territorial pairs as well as 22 territorial individual animals were confirmed in Germany for the monitoring period 2022/2023. The trend is increasing. Although wolves feed mostly on wild animals, the rapid increase in wolf populations over the last 20 years has led to an increase in attacks on livestock animals. For 2021, DBBW reports 975 attacks nationwide with 3,374 victims in total.

This poses a threat to grazing livestock, in particular to the conservation of native livestock breeds and the preservation of diversity within those breeds. According to the current classification of the Federal Office for Agriculture and Food (BLE) and the National Advisory Board on Animal Genetic Resources, 58 of the 81 native breeds of the species horse, cattle, pig, sheep and goat are threatened with extinction. Reasons for this include the specialisation in animal breeding in the past and the displacement of local, possibly more robust breeds for multiple use.

The populations of endangered native livestock breeds are small in number and therefore affected by genetic narrowing due to inbreeding. A diverse family structure is important for the preservation of diversity in order to counteract this narrowing with targeted matings. With such small populations per breed, each animal killed or the loss of an entire herd can mean a significant loss of genetic variability and therefore have an impact on the genetic diversity of those breeds. Therefore, wolf attacks can cause particularly great damage to those populations. Indirectly, however, increased attacks can also have a negative impact on the conservation of endangered domestic livestock breeds if breeders give up their animal husbandry due to the increased workload and the increased financial and psychological burden and if their animals are not taken over by other breeders. Especially in the field of sheep and goat breeding, many populations are located in small and hobby farming. Here, irreplaceable work is being done to preserve diversity. The herd protection measures (wolf-repellent fences, herd protection dogs) which have meanwhile been promoted in all federal states with established wolf populations - but not area wide there - are often not accepted in these small herds or cannot be sufficiently implemented due to the lack of time capacities or then no longer existing economic efficiency.

But also on the part of the larger professional sheep farms and breeding farms with endangered breeds, there have been wolf-related business closures. A particularly grave example is the Grey Horned Heidschnucke. The Grey Horned Heidschnucke, like the White Horned or Hornless Heidschnucke, is currently classified as an observation population. The population currently includes about 1,200 herdbook ewes in the White Horned Heidschnucke and about 4,500 herdbook ewes in the Grey Horned Heidschnucke. In the case of the latter breed, several large herdbook farms in Lower Saxony with more than 500 ewes in total have already given up sheep

farming because of the wolf problem. With every abandoned farm and every animal that has not been taken over by other breeders, valuable genetic diversity is irretrievably lost, especially in the endangered livestock breeds, and the preservation of the valuable cultural landscape is becoming increasingly difficult to impossible.

In Brandenburg alone, a total of 106 dead animals of the Grey Horned and White Horned/hornless Heidschnucke breeds were documented between 2020 and 2022, for which the wolf has been reliably detected or could not be excluded as the cause (source: Federal Office for Environment Brandenburg). Similar cases are documented for other observation populations such as Waldschaf, Skudde, Rauhwolliges Pommersches Landschaf, Ostfriesisches Milchscharf, Coburger Fuchsschaf and Braunes Bergschaf in Brandenburg between 2020 and 2022 (Landesamt für Umwelt Brandenburg). In contrast to Brandenburg, tear statistics from other states do not or rarely include documentation of the exact breeds.

Therefore, the nationwide herd book database for sheep and goats (Ovicap) has now included a function to record animals killed by the wolf. The National Advisory Board hopes that breeders will make use of this new function to document those cases. With the availability of nationwide figures on wolf tears in endangered sheep and goat breeds, support for herd protection measures for those breeds could be offered in a more targeted and priority manner in the future.

Although there have been some wolf attacks in stables, grazing animal husbandry is naturally affected the most. Caring for the landscapes through grazing is an indispensable part of the preservation of our cultural landscapes, though, especially from the viewpoint of nature conservation. Extensive grazing contributes to the preservation of biodiversity and the protection of ecosystems because landscapes are carefully kept open and protected from scrub, creating and conserving habitats for birds, insects and other small animals. In addition to that, grazing animals, as 'transporters' of plant seeds, contribute to their spread. Thus, grazing provides an irreplaceable contribution to the conservation of biodiversity and to the protection of nature and species. Pasture farming can therefore contribute to the preservation of the diversity of our native livestock breeds, keeping cultivated lands open and to the general biodiversity. The carbon sequestration in the soil is also significantly higher in extensive grazing methods.

Another important aspect of grazing animal husbandry is seen in the improved animal welfare compared to other forms of husbandry. Consumers would like to see an increase in the grazing of farm animals. However, this also implies sufficient protection of grazing animals from predators.

The Federal Republic of Germany has committed itself in several national and international associations to preserve the diversity of native breeds. The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), which is fundamental to the protection of nature and species, also lists the conservation of the diversity of genetic resources for agriculture and food (farm animals, crops, etc.) in action goal 4 of the new Global Biodiversity Framework (Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, KM GBF). The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) sees the preservation of the diversity of livestock breeds as an important building block for future food security.

When protecting the wolf species, other aspects must also be taken into account on an equal footing, such as the conservation of the abundance of domestic livestock breeds for future food security and as cultural property and the care of cultural landscapes and the protection of ecosystems (Natura 2000 areas, nature conservation and similar areas) by grazing livestock.

The National Advisory Board on Animal Genetic Resources therefore supports the following measures in order to enable a coexistence of wolf and grazing livestock:

- Review of the conservation status of the Central European lowland wolf population in accordance with the Flora-Fauna-Habitats Directive and, if necessary, adaptation to current conditions.
- Consistent and timely application of the extraction possibilities according to § 45 Bundesnaturschutzgesetz of wolves that have repeatedly attacked farm animals.
- Further development, strengthening and simplification of the promotion of herd protection measures and damage control, with particular attention to the higher workload for wolf-repellent fence construction and its maintenance also for small businesses and hobby farmers without the status of an agricultural holding and for all affected grazing animal species.
- Replacement of the monetary value of the animals, with particular reference to the breeding value of herd-book animals.
- Promoting the comprehensive recording of the animals damaged in a wolf attack by breed and herd book entry.
- Reimbursement of consequential damages caused by wolf attacks, e.g. replacement of costs for veterinary treatments or the time spent on animal search after wolf attacks.
- Authorisation and subsidisation of predator-proof facilities to shelter animals, including the establishment of appropriate legal bases.
- Full compensation for damage caused by wolf tears even in areas where wolf-repellent fences are not possible due to local conditions, such as, for example, in heavily sloped or alpine areas, on dikes or in areas characterized by drainage ditches.
- Creation of the legal conditions for the establishment of wolf-free zones (such as dikes).
- Improving information on protection against wolf attacks in grazing animals, which is particularly aimed at animal owners of endangered native livestock breeds (small and hobby farms).

Further links:

National Advisory Board on Animal Genetic Resources

<https://www.genres.de/en/expert-committees/expert-committee-on-animal-genetic-resources>

Conservation and sustainable use of animal genetic resources in Germany

<https://www.genres.de/en/sector-specific-portals/livestock>

30 April 2024