

Conservation in practice: A portrait of the reality

Haswell, P.M.

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Conservation in practice: a portrait of the reality

UKWCT EXCHANGE STUDENT PETE HASWELL REPORTS

Then we think of conservation work in the field, we tend to imagine it being rather straightforward. We imagine government and local support of such moral efforts to help protect endangered species, with legislation put in place to aid this process. We imagine that a team of biologists are given funding and support in order to go about their research making a positive difference to the animals or habitats they aim to conserve. Unfortunately in practice it is not so simple.

Bulgaria volunteering on a large singlehandedly by biologist Elena Sedefchevi (except for the help of occasional volunteers and workers on her husband Sider's rare livestock breeds project). I went out as part of the UK Wolf Conservation Trust's student exchange project to learn about the reality of working in the field. Elena, although having colleagues (Balkani Wildlife Society) working with other large carnivores, is currently the only biologist in Bulgaria conducting field research with wolves. The government have refused numerous applications to protect the wolf in Bulgaria; they are seen by most as plentiful pests. Forestry estimates of the wolf population range at over double the figures thought to be more accurate by biologists (approx A lack of government support and 700-900 Wolves). The lack of support from appropriate legislation leaves wolves the government makes conservation very difficult. The project

in recent years had A lack of government funding from "LIFE", but this was cut due support leaves wolves to a lack of unprotected in Bulgaria. government support

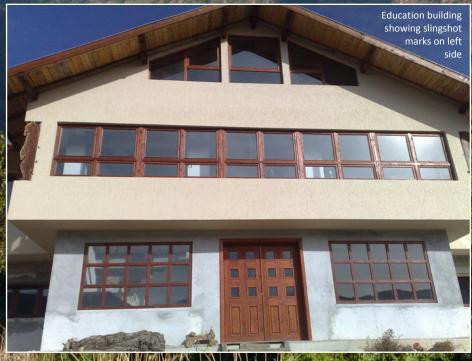
which is ludicrous considering they require funding to gather evidence in order to change government policies. During my time in Bulgaria a member of the Swiss government contacted Elena to find out her views of his idea to export Swiss wolves to Bulgaria as they were becoming too numerous. I think this summarises the lack of knowledge regarding wolves in some governments nicely.

unprotected in Bulgaria. Although restricted

to rifles as the sole of wolves suffer other fates and the policing of such

incidents is very lax. Very early on in my stay we received a tip-off from Elena's friend who happens to be mayor of a town called Oshtavo. Two adult wolves, a male and female, were retrieved from hunters by Elena and myself for data collection. This was a difficult situation which Elena handled in a relaxed manner and managed to retrieve the bodies, explaining that this saves the hunter disposing of them as the law requires at a special facility; this





however, rarely happens in practice. Elena had her suspicions as to the methods of the wolves' deaths with stories of their demise seeming far-fetched with slip-ups by the tellers, known hunters in the area. The stomach contents of the wolves was taken and analysed. It turned out that the wolves were illegally poisoned. Elena reported her findings to the mayor expecting him to deal with the problem on a local level without her losing future chances of retrieving wolves from hunters for analysis. The mayor, however, responded very angrily and was unhappy that we had conducted post mortems: he now refuses to give Elena

It turned out the wolves were illegally poisoned.

future information about wolves brought in that could potentially be analysed. Although the wolves had been culled using an illegal method, the lack of support from local authorities and solidarity of local people makes it difficult for prosecutions to actually take place.

The two adult wolves were thought to be of the Rabish pack, local to the Pirin Mountains surrounding Vlahi. A few weeks later a dead wolf cub, less than a year old, still with milk teeth and weighing only 13kg, was brought to the centre by our shepherds. It transpired that the cub had attempted to attack the livestock and the Karakachan guarding dogs had done their job and killed the cub. We strongly suspect that it was the offspring of the two poisoned adults. Left with no parents to help guide in decisions of when, where and which prey to hunt, the cub made a fatal error in attacking the livestock. The guard dogs since introduced have not lost a single sheep or goat to carnivores when the dogs have stayed with the herd. Although the loss of the wolf cub was sad it shows the effectiveness of the dogs as a method for

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livestock herders. Another cub from the Rabish pack was reportedly trapped by hunters in the local area only to have escaped upon their return to the trapping site. Wolf scats were found by Elena and me in the Rabish pack's territory which either indicates dispersing wolves, or possibly wolves locating to

the area to fill the void left by the removal of the adults, so wolves have not been completely eradicated from the area.

Interestingly livestock such as cattle and horses are often left to graze unprotected by dogs or shepherds. In general most of The large carnivore centre provides employment and revenue for the local area.

bear in the area and who oppose the involvement of the centre in the legal protection of the bear in Bulgaria. A fox tail trimmed of its red hairs to appear like a wolf tail was also found by me hung outside the captive wolves' enclosure. Many of the guard dogs have also been killed by hunters and one disappeared the same day the fox tail appeared and this is suspected to have been the action of hunters. These are all tactics used by the local hunting group in an attempt to bully Elena and Sider into abandoning their work which opposes the unscrupulous behaviour of the hunters who are known to be very trigger happy. Fortunately, the large carnivore centre and Sider's rare breed projects (Semperviva) provide a lot of employment and revenue for the local area; he and Elena are very popular figures amongst the rest of the local population.

a fatal error in attacking the livestock. The guard dogs since introduced have not lost a single sheep or goat to carnivores when the dogs have stayed with the herd. Although the loss of the wolf cub was sad it shows the effectiveness of the dogs as a method for the coexistence of large carnivores and

a mortality signal, signifying his death. After much tracking we retrieved his radio collar which was found dumped in the Strumyani River, south west of Vlahi. After tip-offs and inquiring with local people we also managed to retrieve his discarded body lacking skin and head, clearly taken for

the £50 bounty the forestry commission dispenses. Days previously we had also retrieved a female skin which had been dumped in a garbage container outside the Strumyani forestry agency after the bounty had been collected. We suspect this to have been Tipik's mate. Tipik, a very healthy wolf estimated to weigh 43kg, with highly developed testes, was becoming ready for the breeding season; unfortunately he and his mate were denied the opportunity to raise a family of what would surely have been very healthy cubs.

Although this article paints a gloomy picture it is important to realise the difficulty of conservation work especially involving a species as persecuted as the wolf. It is to the credit of biologists like Elena who constantly work against such opposition and tragic incidents such as those detailed in this article. I am overwhelmed by their commitment to such causes and am inspired by how much they are willing to deal with and yet still do not give in and keep fighting. It is people such as these who we have to thank for the current and continued existence of many vulnerable species.

Peter Haswell - Bsc Upper 2nd Honours Environmental Science (Biodiversity and Conservation) from University of Southampton.

Pete is currently working towards his Masters and will hopefully be working with Josip Kusak in Croatia, a project which the UKWCT also supports. See pages 15 & 26 for more information on Croatia.

