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Conservation in practice: A portrait of the reality

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Wolf Print

Published: 01/06/2010

Other version

Cyswllt i'r cyhoeddiad / Link to publication

Dyfyniad o'r fersiwn a gyhoeddwyd / Citation for published version (APA):
Haswell, P. M. (2010). Conservation in practice: A portrait of the reality. *Wolf Print*, *40*(Summer), 16-17.

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12. Oct. 2024

Conservation in practice: a portrait of the reality

When 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.

UKWCT EXCHANGE STUDENT PETE HASWELL REPORTS

During late 2009 I spent three months in the mountain village of Vlahi in Bulgaria volunteering on a large carnivore conservation project run 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 700-900 Wolves). The lack of support from the government makes conservation very difficult. The project in recent years had funding from "LIFE", but this was cut due to a lack of 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.

> A lack of government support leaves wolves unprotected in Bulgaria.

A lack of government support and appropriate legislation leaves wolves unprotected in Bulgaria. Although restricted to rifles as the sole method of termination, many 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,

Herd protection dog

Education building showing slingshot marks on left side

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 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.

It turned out the wolves were illegally poisoned.

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 the coexistence of large carnivores and 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 farmers I have encountered neither hate nor like the wolf; they simply accept its existence. They accept that they will lose animals to large carnivores, it's just the way it has always been. Many don't even bother to collect compensation from various schemes put in place by conservation charities. The main opposition that the conservation project faces on a local scale is from hunters. During my stay the centre's carnivore building suffered vandalism by slingshot (imitating bullet holes). This is suspected to have been carried out by local hunters who had previously illegally killed a 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.

The large carnivore centre provides employment and revenue for the local area.

My main conservation activities in Bulgaria centred on the radio tracking of a wild wolf named Tipik who had migrated away from the Pirin Mountains, and settled in a neighbouring range. After tracking Tipik for almost three months he disappeared. After trying for over a week to locate him we got 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.

The main opposition the conservation project faces on a local scale is from hunters.

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.