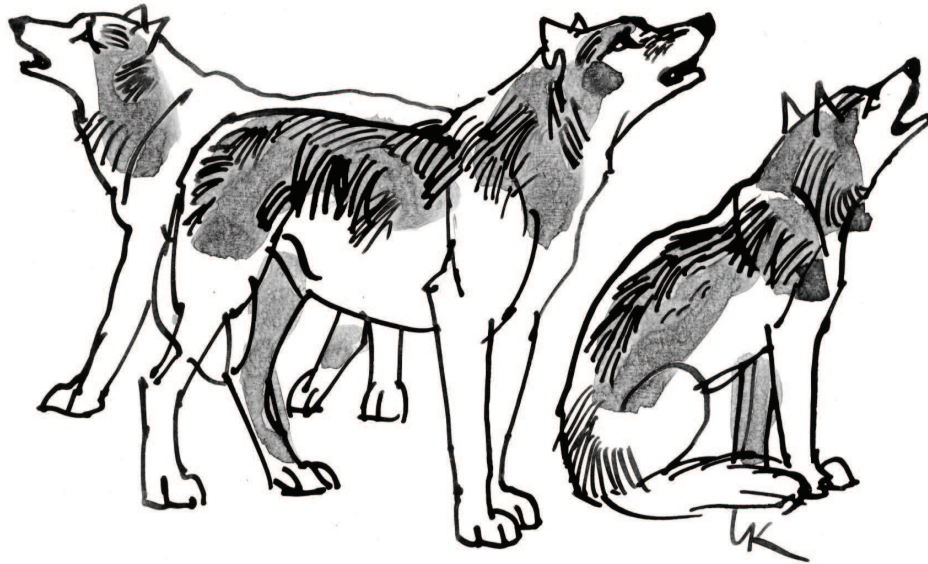




Hnutí DUHA
Friends of the Earth Czech Republic

Perspectives of wolves in Central Europe



Proceedings from the conference held on 9th April 2008
in Malenovice, Beskydy Mts., Czech Republic

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Some questions regarding wolves in Romania

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Abstract

We analyzed some important information which could give a proper overview about the lack of existing knowledge about wolves in Romania. Our goal was to present information which could be used to prepare a proper basis for effective conservation and related problem management issues in central and western European counties where wolves could recover naturally in the coming years. The research was concerned with questions related to population size, legal and conservation status, wolf population distribution and habitat protection, conflicts, damage, public opinion and hybrids as threatening factors.

Introduction

The wolf is one of the most widespread carnivores in the Northern hemisphere, although it was totally exterminated from most European states. According to the official estimates, Romania is home to about 4000 individuals. Due to double counting of several individuals more realistic estimate could be 2500–3000. The interest of biologists in wolves and also in other game species in Romania is still low. The reason for this is that the game species are relatively well studied animals and we already possess some knowledge of them. On the other hand, hunters, game keepers and biologists have often very contrary points of view and therefore collaboration is difficult.

Legal and conservation status

According to estimates, after World War II there were more than 5000 wolves in the forests of Romania. Due to the damage they caused, organized extermination of wolves began in the 1950s. At the end of the 1960s the number of wolves had fallen to around 1500 individuals. The introduction of a ban on weapons favored the recovery of prey species and of the wolf population alike. In 1991, a total ban on the use of poison and, later, the acceptance of the Bern Convention (in 1993) were important steps towards the conservation of wolves as well as other species. Today, the legal framework for wolf conservation is ensured by:

- EU Habitat Directive (Annex II, IV)
- Law no. 407 / 2006 (Hunting Law) – wolves are protected, hunting is forbidden, hunting just is allowed only with permission of the Ministry of the Environment and Sustainable Development and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development

- Law no. 13 / 1993 (Annex II.) - the acceptance of the Bern Convention
- Law no. 96 / 1994 (Annex I and II) – the acceptance of the Washington Convention
EU Wildlife Trade Regulation

According to these laws, wolves are protected but at the same time hunted in a limited number. We do not have a proper overview to find out if hunting is a real factor affecting long-term survival or not. Official data about hunted animals (such as age, sex, etc.) is not always correct. The hunting of wolves is mainly occasional and they are usually hunted with other animals. For example in areas where the wild boar or brown bear are hunted and carcasses are used as bait. Although using carcasses or meat as bait for bears is forbidden, this practice is still widely used by hunters. It is hard to plan a wolf hunt: permission is usually given after the hunter has already killed the wolf. It is possible that more wolves are killed than are presented in official data.

There are 12 national parks in Romania with a total area of 3075 km² as well as 10 natural parks with a total area of 5398 km². There are only a few studies on the size of wolf pack territories in Romania, but it is clear that it is related to food availability. The wolf territory sizes also depend on the density of livestock. In Romania, wolves may use territories from 150 km² to 300 km², as was shown by CLCP project (Sürth, personal communication)

The national parks can host 10–20 wolf packs, which is around 47–94 animals, representing 1.6 %–3.8 % of all wolves in Romania (assuming an average pack size of 4.7 individuals, as observed in Poland (Nowak et al 2005)). In the case of natural parks, the number of wolf packs might be approximately 18–35, which is around 85–165 animals, representing 2.8–6.6 % of the total.

So, national and natural parks together could be home only to 4.4–10.4 % of all wolves in Romania. Of course wolves do not respect the boundary of the areas. In reality, wolves can not use all protected areas or all parts of them. In this context, protected areas are insular and lack a real network (Even after the designation of the Natura 2000 sites in Romania – according to the most optimistic estimation – protected area could cover only about 20% of whole wolf territory).

Wolves and humans in Romania

Attacks on humans

In Romania there are no realistic data about wolf attacks on humans. According to a study by Linnell et al. (2002), 41 such cases were known in Romania. Of these 41 cases, 33 were proven to be false and just 8 seemed to be real. Two of these happened during a group hunt when the hunters were trying to stop the wounded animal with a stick (alternatively, the hunter tried to kill the trapped wolf with a stick). The other 6 attacks happened when shepherds were trying to kill a cornered wolf. In all 8 cases, the “attack” was actually just a defensive bite.

Predation on wild and domestic animals

There is no official report about the losses of wild and domestic animals to wolves because a damage compensation system does not exist and aggrieved people rarely report the damage. The following is an overview of wolf-related losses obtained during our study in Mures County in 2004 (Tab.1).

	Total number of goats and sheep	Number of animals killed	Number of animals eaten	The highest surplus killing in one case
Included in the survey	6 996	79	25 - 45	34
Extrapolated total for all of Mures County	339 843	3837	1 279 – 2 303	-

Tab. 1. The damage evaluation in Mures County (according to our study in 2004)

We visited 32 shepherd camps where wolf damage occurred. Of a total of 6996 sheep and goats at these camps, 79 were killed by wolves (including those badly injured which had to be destroyed). Usually, shepherds were able to recover the killed animals and wolves consumed only 25 - 45. Surplus killing in a single attack usually resulted in less than 10 killed animals but in one case the highest surplus killing was of 34 sheep. The average loss in the case of shepherd camps with damage was 1.12 % of the flock.

Wolf impact on prey populations

The only available scientific study on wolf diet in Romania (H. Almășan et al., 1970) found that wolves consumed predominantly domestic animals (75,8%) such as sheep (64%), dogs (21%), goats (5%), pigs (4%), horses (3%) and cattle (3%), with only 24.2 % of the diet comprised of wild animals: roe deer (56%), hare (25%), wild boar (14%) and red deer (5%).

First of all, we do not know if the research by Almășan was done objectively. In the 1960s and 1970s the wolf was regarded as a pest animal and that could influence the conclusion of the study. Anyway, in the 1960s and 1970s, wolves were killed because of a high level of damage even in case of a lower number of wolves. Smaller wild prey (roe deer, hare) occurred in relative high number – this leads us to believe that wolves were distributed not in remote mountainous areas but in hilly areas. We suppose that wolves lived in small groups or alone due to permanent loss of pack members.

During our preliminary research on wolf damages and winter wolf diet of one pack in Bistra Valley (Calimani Mountains), in the period from 20.12.2005 to 1.03.2006 we found the following prey: 7 red deer and 2 wild boar, and possibly 1 dog, 1 goat and 1 sheep. This quantity of food may be sufficient for 3-4 wolves for an approximately 70-day period.

According to the results of snow-tracking, this pack could have had a minimum of 3 and maximum of 5 members. The summer damage and diet study shows that wolves consume mostly sheep and goats (according to damage to livestock in the supposed wolf territory; found excrements).

In 2007 we studied livestock damage in the supposed territory of the wolf pack in Bistra Valley. We obtained on average data from 46 days for each shepherd camp. In this period the average damage was approximately 0.48% of the flock (Tab 2).

Damaged shepherd camps	Loss in 2007 (1.May – 7.Aug)
No. 1	1 lamb + 1 goat
No. 2	7 lambs
No. 3	1 sheep
No. 4	3 lambs + 1 sheep
No. 5	6 lambs + 2 sheep
No. 6	4 lambs + 4 sheep
Total	8 sheep + 21 lambs + 1 goat

Tab.2. The damage evaluation in Bistra Valley (according to our study in 2004)

Coexistence close to humans

In some cases we find that wolves approach very close to human settlements relatively frequently without being observed and without negative consequences. Of course, a fence near the house is necessary to keep dogs or other domestic animals safe. Moreover in our study area, wolves hunt red deer close to villages. We observed villagers who found killed deer and collected the remaining meat.

Public opinion

We conducted a public opinion study in a wolf area to find out what problems can arise because of them. The study was titled “Opinions of pupil's parents from some villages in Mureş County (Romania) about wolves”. It is important to mention that this public opinion survey was carried out with the goal of collecting arguments against an alarming reaction of the media in another county, where wolves reappeared after a 20-year long absence (2 wolves were sighted there). The media induced fear in the general public, suggesting that the presence of wolves meant a danger for children going to school from one village to the other. Villages included in our public opinion survey were chosen only with the consideration of the presence of wolves in their vicinities. The results of this public opinion survey demonstrate that the presence of wolves does not necessarily mean that local people are terrified of these carnivores or that they perceive them as a real danger (Fig. 1–5).

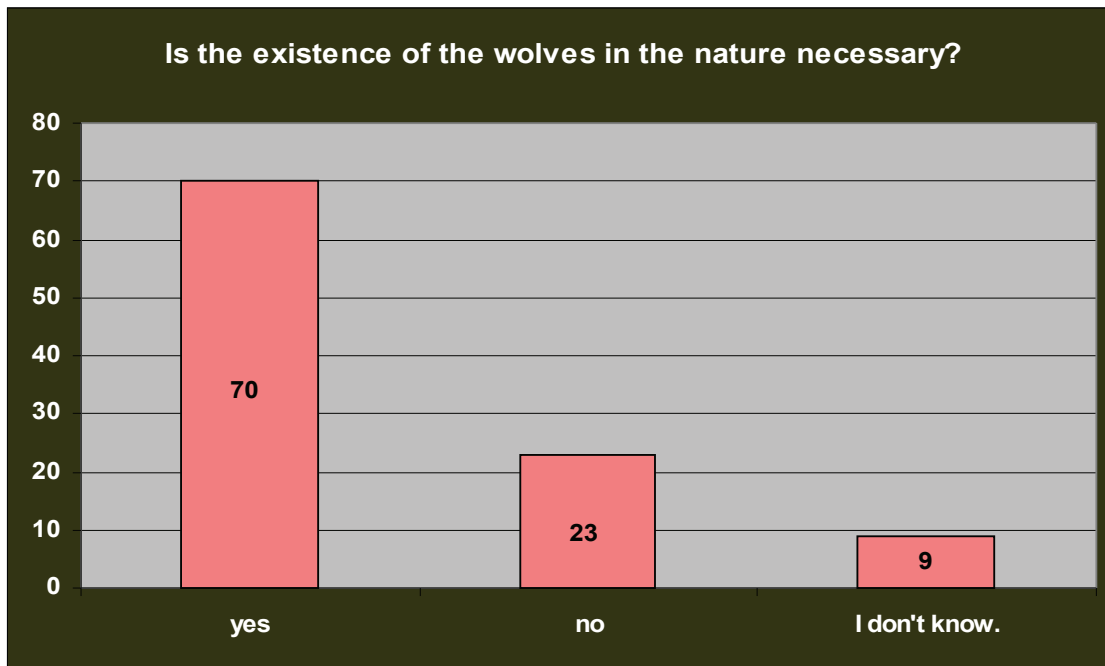


Fig. 1. Results from public opinion research in Mureş County.

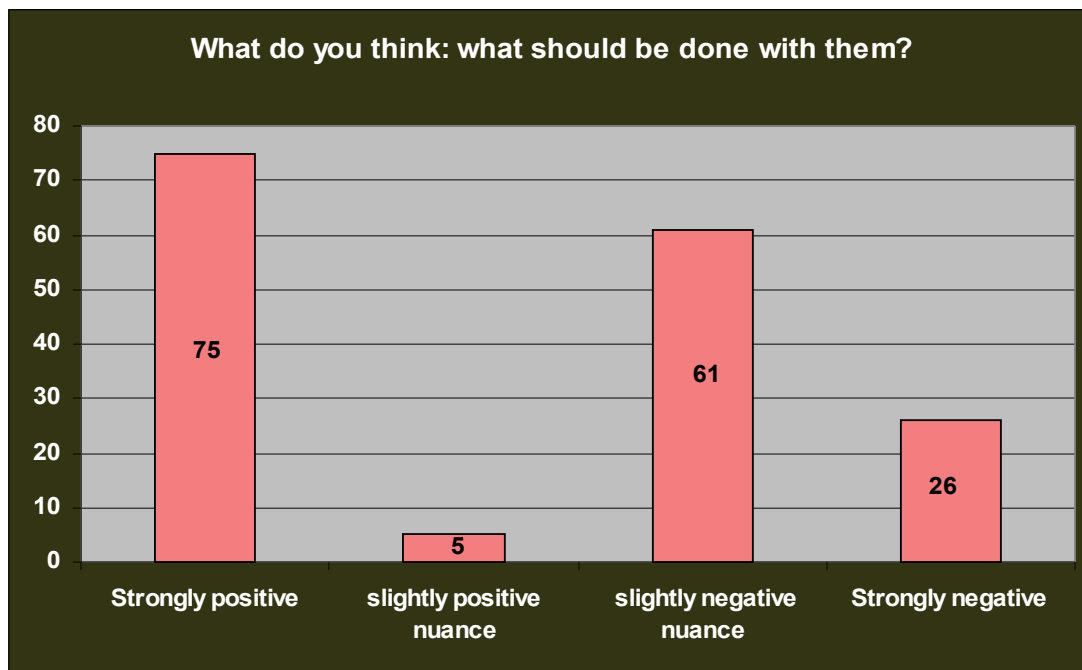


Fig. 2. Results from public opinion research in Mureş County. A **slightly positive** nuance means answers such as the following: “We must assure large areas for wolves where they can live freely without compromising the existence of people and domestic animals.” A **slightly negative** nuance mean answers such as the following: “We must keep wolves in a big enclosure so as not to let them come close to people and domestic animals.”

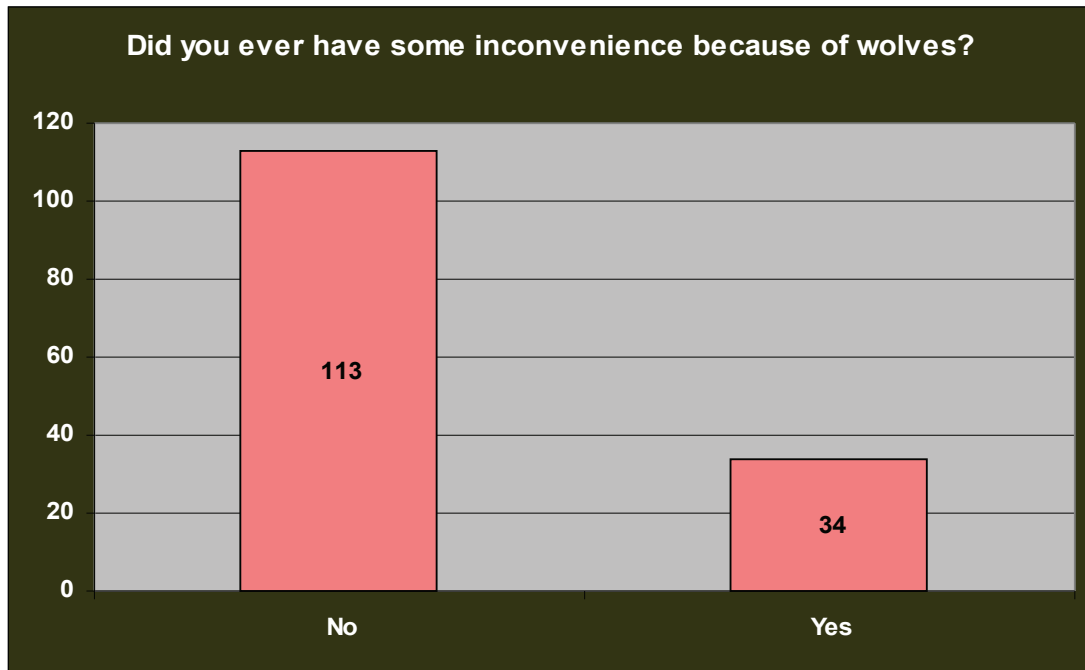


Fig. 3. Results from public opinion research in Mureş County. As a large proportion of villagers keep animals, the “*inconvenience because of wolves*” was the loss of livestock.

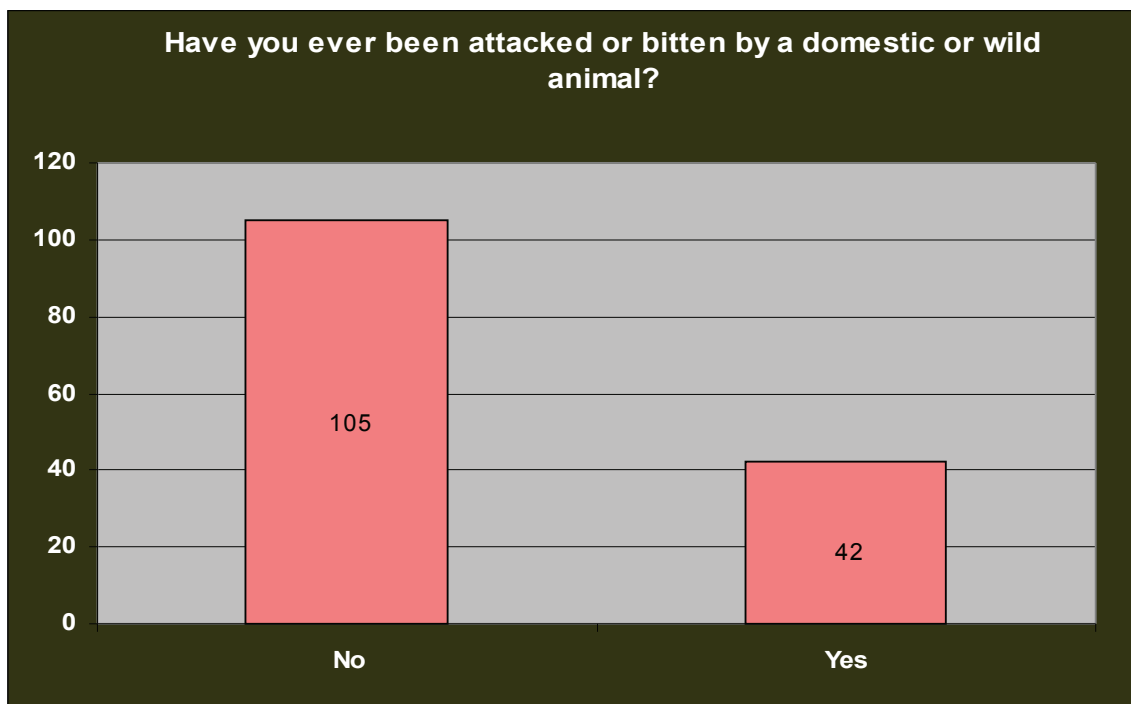


Fig. 4. Results from public opinion research in Mureş County.

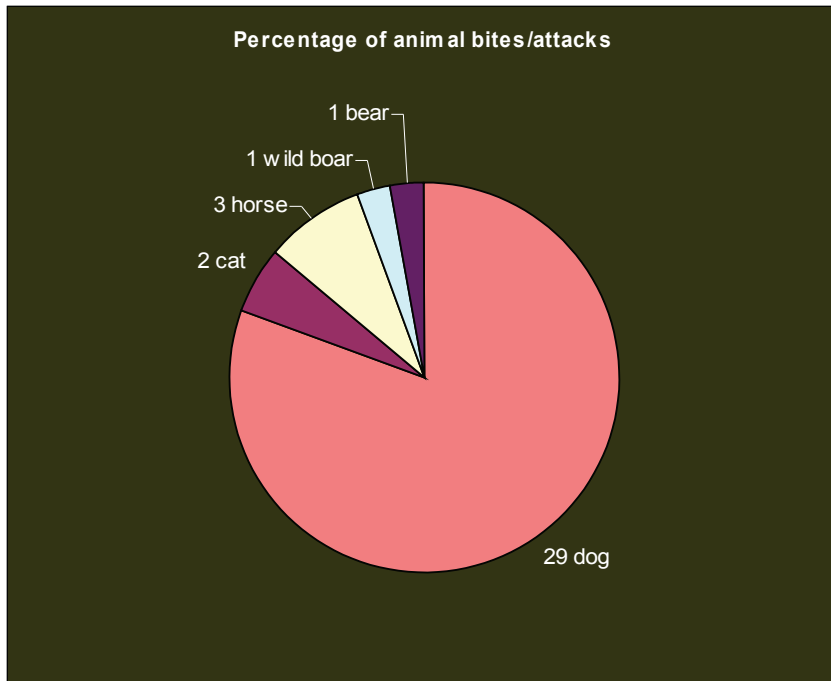


Fig. 5. Percentage of animal bites or attacks in Mureş County.

Another public opinion study had the aim of finding how people who have had conflicts think about wolves, otters and bears. We asked only aggrieved persons to uncover the most negative scenarios. In spite of the fact that healthy wild wolves almost never attack or kill humans, animal keepers showed an almost total lack of sympathy toward them, while there was more sympathy towards bears, even though every year there are cases of bear attacks, some of which even claim human lives.

Feral dogs and wolf-dog hybrids

In the last few years, we have collected information about direct wolf observations taken by shepherds or hunters. In the first years we believed that shepherds' observations of wolves could not be "usable" for us due to their poor explanation or exaggeration. However, they can contain some valuable information. Hunters and foresters consider the possibility of wolf-dog hybridization in nature as unreal. They base their arguments on the "well known fact" that dogs are the most preferred prey of wolves. However, the existence of wolf-dog hybrids or crossbreeds in the wild is not just a myth. The existence of wolf-dog hybrids and their backcrosses have been recorded in several countries.

Wolf-like animals, which show some strange characteristics (tail position/shape, body conformation, coloring, lack of shyness) are considered by shepherds and hunters as wolves or simply as feral dogs. This means that an analysis of wolf trophies would not be sufficient. In this way, data about wolf-dog hybrids or crossbreeds could be lost.

Taking into account the points mentioned above, we try to make a data selection about wolves described by shepherds and hunters to gain a picture about the abundance of strange colored animals.

Except for finding the perpetrator of damage at shepherds' camps, it is an increasing challenge for us to find out the number of feral dogs, wolf-dog crossbreeds and backcrosses present in the Romanian wolf population.

We possess information about 149 specimens, including stuffed specimens (16) or skins of shot animals (4). Of these 149, 10 were black or very dark colored, 81 were probably "normal" colored and 2 were brown. We have also noticed observations of hunters about a "wolf" specimen which was lactating in late August and other observations of wolves not afraid of humans.

Wolves observed under different visibility conditions and in different phases of molting could show a large range of fur color from darker through reddish or grayish to yellowish or even white. However, in a group of several wolves, strangely colored specimens can be sufficiently conspicuous to attract the observer's attention.

Taking into account the above facts, we think that the animals described and categorized as not of "normal" coloration could have been wolf-dog hybrids, crossbreeds or simply feral dogs.

However, a research about hybrids can be done only by genetically research, When ever a stable wolf population is present, it is unlikely the hybrids are common or represent a threat. Only if they come from captivity.

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