



Wolves returning to Germany: opportunity and challenge



The return of wolves to Germany destroys the myth that wolves need wilderness.

Although wolves were basically exterminated from Germany in the 19th century, there have always been a few individuals wandering over the border from Poland. The hunting laws in former East Germany required hunters to kill wolves. Therefore, these have all been either shot, or killed in collisions with cars and trains before they had time to establish territories or find mates. Since 1945, at least 34 wolves have been recorded dead in Germany. However, following reunification in 1990, wolves have been protected throughout the country. By 1995, a single wolf had taken advantage of this new and favourable status and successfully established a territory centered at Muskau heath, on a military training area in the Upper Lusatia region of northern Saxony – close to the Polish border. The development of the situation has been closely followed by Ilka Reinhardt and Gesa Kluth of LUPUS Wildlife Consulting. By 1998 this wolf had been joined by a mate, and in the summer of 2000 the first pups were born. Since then pups have been born every summer (2000 – 2003 at least). By 2002 two wolves had established a territory on the adjacent Neustadt Heath and by 2003 pups were born in both territories.

Although the eastern parts of Germany are relatively rural, Saxony has a human population density of 236 people per square kilometer, although it is somewhat lower in Upper Lusatia, a “mere” 148 people per

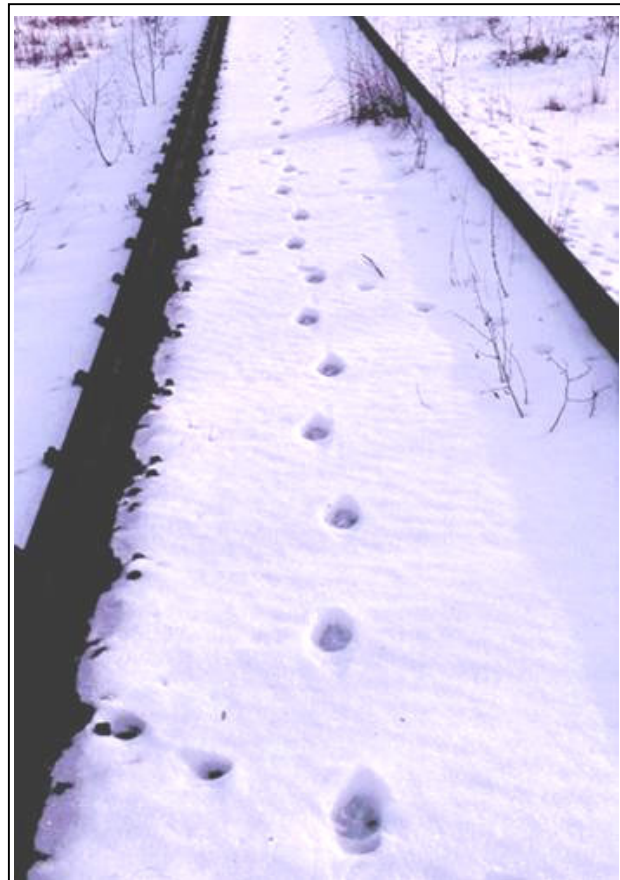
square kilometer. This manicured landscape with its farmland and intensively managed forests is a far cry from the wilderness landscapes that many people associate with wolves. In contrast to the enormous conflicts that occurred in countries like France, Switzerland and Norway as soon as the

first wolves reappeared during the last decade, the return of wolves to Saxony has been surprisingly quiet. The public have been generally positive, and even the sheep farmers have been reassured once their electric fencing was successfully upgraded (however 30 sheep were killed in one episode before such fences were correctly modified). The fact that the wolves have spent most of their time on the military training areas has without doubt helped. Up until 2003, everything was going smoothly and the ingredients for a wolf conservation success story seemed to be in place.

However, in late summer 2003 a photography filmed the six pups in the Neustadt territory. It was immediately apparent that these were not pure wolves, but were in fact wolf-dog hybrids. It appears that the female wolf had mated with a domestic dog. This was later confirmed by DNA analysis. During autumn 2003 there was much discussion about how to react to this situation. The concern from conservationists were that hybrid genes could entirely swamp this tiny wolf population which would to a great extent defeat the purpose of trying to conserve them. Because of the fear of the reaction from animal rights groups, the simplest solution of shooting the hybrids was considered to be socially unacceptable. Instead the decision was made to live-capture the hybrids and transfer them to captivity. Surprisingly, this planned removal of hybrids has been far more controversial than the actual presence of the wolves themselves.

In winter 2004 there were four of the hybrid pups left alive – of these two were successfully captured and transferred to captivity in a wildlife park attached to the Bavarian National Park. The other two pups vanished before they could be captured. This left the adult female wolf (now equipped with a radio-collar) alone at the start of the 2004 mating season. Luckily she did not produce more hybrid pups again this year, despite spending several days courting a local dog (his owners kept him under close control). The whole episode illustrates how complex the business of wolf restoration can be in human-dominated landscapes.

The issue of hybridization has also drawn attention to the wider picture of wolf recovery in Germany. The female wolf almost certainly resorted to mating with a dog as a last resort because she could not find a male wolf. This reflects the fact that the Saxon wolves are basically isolated. Although, these packs are close to the borders with Poland and the Czech Republic, current wolf distribution in western Poland and northern Czech are very scattered. It is therefore several hundred kilometers from Saxony to the nearest known wolf packs, and even further to an area with a healthy wolf population.



German wolf tracks on railway.

The implication is that the Saxon wolves are living a very fragile existence. Threatened by genetic hybridization with dogs, the risk of inbreeding with themselves, or extinction due to chance events. The only chance of securing their long term future lies within a wider wolf recovery throughout eastern Germany, western and central Poland and the Czech Republic. This level of large scale coordination is greatly hindered by the fragmented nature of Germany's federal state structure. Environmental

matters are governed by the individual states (in the case of wolves Saxony, Brandenburg and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern are relevant) with virtually no national level coordination. This type of fragmentation of management authority is not uncommon in Europe (Italy and Spain are similar). The lesson from large carnivore conservation throughout Europe has been that while management must be adapted to local situations, there is a clear need for large scale coordination at national and international levels. Finding a balancing between these two needs in the case of the Saxon wolves will determine their future. As one small step in this direction, the Large Carnivore Initiative for Europe organized a workshop in the Bavarian National Park in May 2004 to bring many of the actors within German wolf conservation together.

And the moral of this story? Once again, wolves have shown that they are ready to reoccupy our landscapes, even if we humans are not quite ready to receive them. Showing no respect for borders, they in many ways reflect model EU citizens. If only they got to vote in the elections!

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