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## ESTONIANS AND THE WOLF

**W**olves have always been present in the territory that is nowadays known as Estonia. They have always been numerous or, sometimes, very numerous. Today, Estonia is inhabited by some 150 wolves and six years ago even 700 were counted (Fig. 1). Additionally, according to the counting data provided by hunters, our forests, which cover approximately 2 million ha, are also inhabited by 1000 lynx and 600 bears. These numbers indeed may be slightly exaggerated, but it is true that Estonia is one of the richest places in terms of large carnivores in the temperate zone. It is possible that only in some Russian and Romanian areas may there be more large carnivores. Thus, the people here have a long experience of sharing living space with big predators. This has always meant not only the sharing of sheep, cattle, horses and other domestic animals but also of game. During the periods of the highest population density, the wolf has been a source of immediate danger to humans. According to well-documented data, during the period 1804 - 1853, wolves killed 111 people in Estonia, including 108 children. This has been shown by I. Rootsik who has studied parish registers. Therefore it is understandable that the attitude of local people towards the wolf has been generally the same as everywhere else, i.e. predominantly negative. This sentiment finds expression in folk traditions, fairy-tales etc. In them, the wolf persecutes Little Red Riding Hood, devours seven kids all together and commits other bad things. At the end of the story he receives the punishment and the young reader rejoices.

During the last decades the reputation of the wolf has improved to some degree. Hopefully, part of this change is due to an increased understanding of ecology, but also probably because (city) people's paths cross with the wolves' less and

conflict situations arise less. The embodiment of evil, which must be killed mercilessly, is becoming the opposite extreme – a highly endangered animal species which should be protected always and everywhere, even where they are still numerous today. The myth continues.

The need to study people's attitude in Estonia arose in connection with the drafting of a management/action plan for large carnivores. In taking decisions regarding large carnivores, the opinions of the public need to be considered. At least the decisions should not be in conflict with the overwhelming public opinion.

In order to study the attitude of the people a questionnaire was composed. First of all, the students of the Estonian Agricultural University and Tartu University (n=383) were questioned. Thereafter, to find the opinion of an average Estonian, the questionnaires were also distributed in schools. "The voice of the people" is also represented by persons who received the questionnaire from their children, the latter, in turn, from biology teachers (n=338). Additionally, some small groups - the pupils of the senior classes (n=83), hunters (n=59) and persons whose daily work is connected with nature preservation (n=35) – were also questioned. The total number of filled questionnaires, which were returned, was 898. The questionnaire was carried out in schools in Tartu and in small towns and countryside of central part of Estonia. Our results presumably reflect the attitudes there. How far these results can be generalized to the whole population of Estonia is of course open to question. So much the more, because nearly one third of the total population lives in the capital and its inhabitants were not questioned.

Nonetheless, we received a clear and exhaustive response to the question of most importance for compiling the management plan – what is the acceptable wolf population size and what should be the strategy for the species (protect, hunt?). The survey could be repeated, following all the sociological "game rules," in the future if necessary.

**\*\* How many people have seen a wolf?**

**27.7%** of all people questioned (24.9% of the parents), that is approximately a quarter of Estonians have met wolf at least once in the wild. 18.1% of the pupils(!) and 81.4% of the hunters have seen wolf – these are the extremes.

**\*\* Is an encounter with a wolf dangerous?**

**40.3%** of the questioned parents believed that meeting a wolf can be dangerous, 34.6% took the opposite view and remaining 25.1% had no opinion. The group most afraid of wolf are the pupils (42.7%), those least afraid – nature protectors (5.7%)

Interestingly enough also 10.2% of the hunters consider wolf to be dangerous. 25.6% of men and 41.3% of women are afraid of wolf.

**\*\* How many people have suffered any kind of loss because of wolf?**

**11%** of respondents have in one way or another way some experiences with the “crimes” committed by wolves. Answers like “once in the country a wolf robbed my grandmothers’s lamb,” were taken into account as positive. It would be very interesting to know whether the opinion of the sufferers of damage is more negative than that of others.

**\*\* How large a population of wolves is considered to be optimal for Estonia?**

One can hardly expect that a layman could presume the real number of wolves even at a large scale but he/she knows or remembers what kind of problems may occur accordingly to this or that population density. For this purpose a concise overview of the dynamics of the wolf population in postwar years was added to the questionnaire alongside with a request to estimate, if the present number (100-200) or 30-50 specimens proposed by the environment strategy is too big, fitting or too small.

It turned out that approximately half (53.3%) of all people questioned, or 49% of the parents consider present number to be optimal (Fig. 2). If we exclude the respondents not having an opinion and observe only the people presumably more informed or at least more active, then one can see that even 65.8% shared the view, 12.6% thought the number to be too

small and 15.1% too big. 19.1% of the people questioned had no opinion of their own. The opinion of the hunters practically coincides with that of the “voice of the people” – accordingly 49.1% and 49% believe that namely the present number is fairly good. At the same time, not a single hunter considers the number of wolves to be too small and 35.1% find it too big. 30-50 wolves proposed by the environment strategy are generally considered to be too small. Nature protectors are unsurprisingly here the most numerous group (77.1% of them). Interestingly 41.4% of the hunters think a more numerous wolf population to be desirable, which is quite similar to the “voice of the people” (37.5%), even a bit larger.

Among those who have developed their own opinion in the question, 70.6% consider the number mentioned in the environment strategy to be too low, 28.0% find it to be fitting and 1.4% - too big. It is interesting to add that the opinion of persons whose sheep or dog has been carried away by wolf is very similar to that of the others. 41% of persons, having some bad remembrance connected with wolves and 46.2% of persons without an experience of this kind think a population of 50 wolves to be too small.

**So, one of the most clear conclusions which can be made is that the present situation, i.e. 100-200 wolves is considered to be optimal number**

The shortage of this questionnaire was that it was left unspecified what was meant by “if it is needed.” There could be quite different conceptions of necessity. As a matter of fact we can deduce the answer to this question indirectly from the other parts of the questionnaire – foremost opinion concerning the optimal number of wolves. “The voice of the people” thinks prevailingly that the number of wolves has to be regulated if it is needed (92.7%). Only 1.8% would like to extinguish wolf as a species from earth (or at least from Estonia) and 3% would like to leave it completely to it’s own. 2.5% have no own opinion (Fig. 3). If we compare so-called “suf-

**\*\* Should wolf numbers be controlled if needed?**

**\*\* Should we enable wolves to choose their habitats freely or should they be confined to the wildlife reserves?**

**\*\* If and to what extent should the opinion and interests of the following interest groups be taken into consideration when determining the size of the Estonian wolf population: hunters, nature protectors, cattle breeders, European Union?**

ferers” with the other groups we can detect a bigger resentment of the first. A whole 11.5% of the first and only 1% of the latter believe that the predators should be mercilessly exterminated. But it is worth remembering here that the opinion of the two groups about optimal number of wolves coincides.

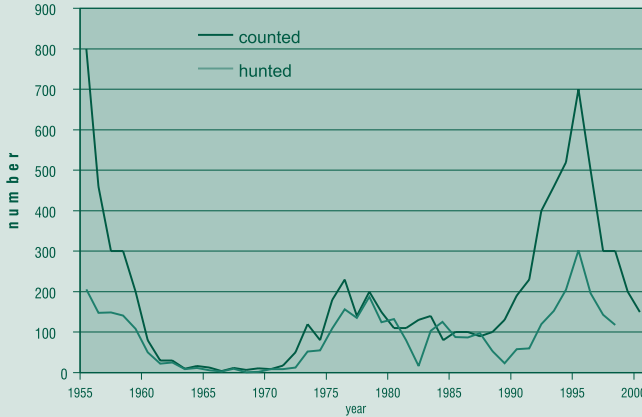
The answers were following: 74.5% said “yes”, wolves can choose the habitats freely. 19.3% would prefer to keep them within the limits of wildlife reserves or national parks and 6.2% proposed some third possibility. And again the answers of the sufferers and the others were quite similar. 83.3% of the first and 73.1% of the latter thought that one should not prevent wolves from choosing their habitats. The sufferers seemed to have even a bit more liberal opinion. But there is no statistical difference, of course. This question was the one to which quite many verbal commentaries were added.

The answers (not the “voice of the people” but all the answers taken together) are as follows in the table:

	Yes, at first	Yes, to some extent	No
Hunters	23.9	58.4	17.7
Cattle-breeders	21.9	68.7	9.4
Nature protectors	74.0	25.3	0.7
European Union	2.8	41.9	55.3

The opinion of nature protectors is generally accepted. On the other hand, Estonians find that it is not necessary to follow the recommendations of the EU. The opinions of different groups of people are quite similar except that of the nature protectors, who are essentially more fond of the EU (respectively 8%, 72% and 20%). Why? It’s a matter of interest.

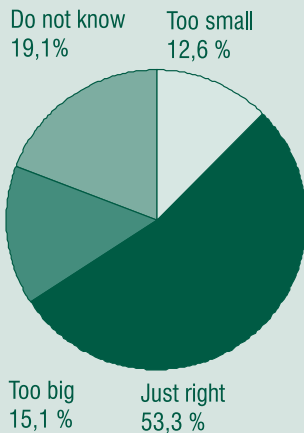
It seems that hatred for, and fear of the wolf is generally not characteristic of Estonians. Extreme positions are almost completely lacking and a general attitude of rationality seems to govern. The present number of wolves generally appears to be ideal. As a fortunate coincidence, this is also the opinion of specialists.



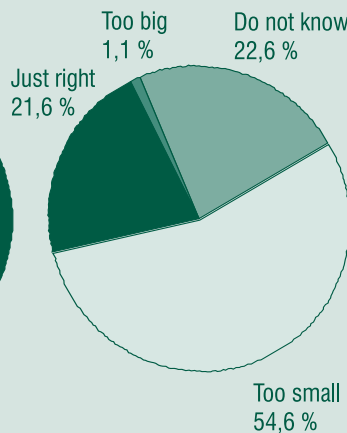
**\*\* What can be concluded from all of this?**

**Fig. 1**  
Development of wolf population in Estonia

**The present number of wolves (150) is**

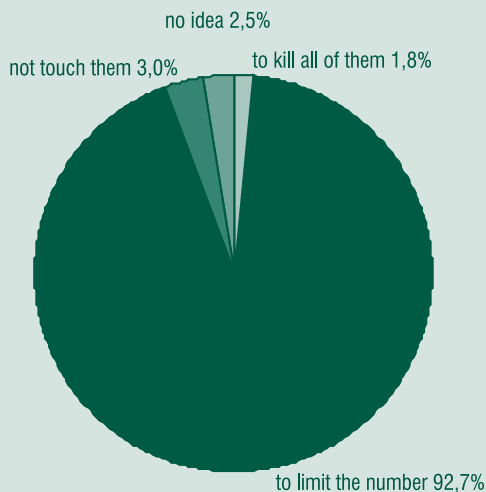


**The number of wolves fixed in Environmental strategy (30 - 50) is**



**Fig. 2**  
Answers to the question "How big population of wolves is considered to be optimum for Estonia?"

**Fig. 3**  
Answers to the question  
“What do you suggest  
to do with wolves?”



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## ESTŪ POŽIŪRIS Į VILKUS

Publikacijoje pateikiami anketinės apklausos duomenys, atspindintys estų požiūrį į vilkus, jų skaičių ir skaičiaus reguliavimą. Istoriskai susiklostęs neigiamas vilko vertinimas paskutiniaisiais metais pakito dėl dviejų priežasčių: pirma, miesto gyventojai su vilkais beveik nebesusiduria, o antra – didelę įtaką daro gamtosauginė propaganda.

Didžiausią apklaustųjų dalį sudarė studentai, kiek mažesnę – moksleivių tėvai. Žymiai mažiau apklausta aukštesniųjų klasių mokinių, medžiotojų ir gamtosaugininkų. Daugiausia anketų užpildyta Tartu mieste ir centrinėje Estijos dalyje. Iš viso gauti 898 atsakymai.

Paiškėjo, kad gamtoje vilką yra matę 27.7% visų apklaustųjų. Mažiausiai mačiusiųjų buvo moksleivių, daugiausiai – medžiotojų.

40.3% apklaustų moksleivių tėvų mano, kad susitikimas su vilku žmogui yra pavojingas. 34.6% jų mano atvirkščiai, o 25.1% nuomonės šiuo klausimu neturi. Labiausiai vilko bijosi mokiniai, mažiausiai – profesionalūs gamtosaugininkai.

Vienuolika procentų atsakiusiųjų teigia, kad vilkai yra padarę jiems vienokios ar kitokios žalos. Ar šių žmonių požiūris į vilkus yra labiau neigiamas, analizuota nebuvo.

Dauguma estų mano, kad Estijos Aplinkos apsaugos strategijoje nurodomas optimalus šaliai vilkų skaičius yra aiškiai per mažas. Nepriklausomai nuo to, ar patyrė žalą, dauguma apklaustųjų estų optimaliu laiko dabartinį vilkų skaičių šalyje, t.y. nuo 100 iki 200 individų. Straipsnyje pateikiama ir atskirų socialinių grupių apklaustųjų vilkų skaičiaus vertinimai.

Absoliuti dauguma (92.7%) respondentų mano, kad vilkų skaičius šalyje turėtų būti reguliuojamas. Tik 1.8% apklaustųjų norėtų, kad vilkai būtų visiškai išnaikinti. Kartu dauguma (74.5%) sutinka, kad vilkams reikia patiems leisti pasirinkti gyvenamąją vietą, tačiau penktadalis apklaustųjų mano, kad vilkai turėtų gyventi tik draustiniuose ar nacionaliniuose parkuose. Nukentėjusių nuo vilkų žmonių požiūris šiuo klausimu statistiškai nesiskiria.

Apklaustieji estai mano, kad, nustatant Estijos vilkų populiacijos dydį, pirmiausia turėtų būti įvertinta gamtosaugininkų nuomonė. Didesnioji respondentų dalis sutinka, kad turėtų būti atsižvelgiama ir į gyvulių augintojų bei medžiotojų nuomones. Tačiau 55.3% respondentų teigia, kad į Europos Sąjungos rekomendacijas šiuo klausimu atsižvelgti nereikia. 17.7% atsakiusiųjų mano, kad nereikėtų atsižvelgti ir į medžiotojų nuomonę.