



Wolves, bears, and other large carnivores are returning to western Europe. But is there still room for them?

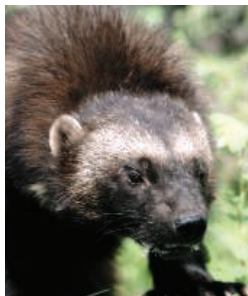
The Carnivore Comeback

ARBAS, FRANCE, AND MARIAZELL, AUSTRIA— This used to be just another sleepy village in the Pyrenees. But lately, the mayor of Arbas, population 250, has received death threats, the quiet central square has been turned into a battlefield between protestors and police, and bottles of sheep blood have been smashed against the sandstone facade of the town hall.

Arbas has become the epicenter of one of France's most hotly debated ecological issues: the government's plan to save the remaining brown bear population in the Pyrenees by reintroducing animals captured in Slovenia, where they are still abundant. Arbas's mayor, François Arcangeli, enthusiastically endorses the plan, and he chairs Pays de l'Ours-ADET, a nonprofit organization promoting peaceful coexistence between bears and humans. So when the government picked sites near Arbas to release three Slovenian bears earlier this year, it was hoping for little resistance; instead, Arbas has become a magnet for frustrated opponents, primarily sheep farmers who say their livelihoods are threatened.



Wild things. Lynx, wolverines, and wolves are increasing in numbers and in territory across western Europe.



France's battle of the bears is one of the most vicious examples of a struggle taking place in several European countries. The original populations of bears, wolves, lynx, and wolverines—the four main large predators native to Europe—were exterminated from many of the western countries in the 18th and 19th centuries as habitat disappeared and hunters sought out the last of the hated predators. But in recent decades, carnivores have been making a comeback, increasing in numbers and expanding their territory.

They have often done so with little or no human help. Bears, wolves, and lynx naturally travel hundreds of kilometers in search of food and mates, and the dismantling of

border fences between western and eastern Europe has allowed new immigration from the often-robust populations in former communist countries. In some cases, governments have urged the process along by transplanting animals from eastern Europe.

The comeback has triggered a wave of new research into the behavior and population dynamics of large carnivores. Scientists are studying how many individuals are needed to sustain a viable population, for instance, and what the most effective management strategies are. They are tracking how far the animals wander, who mates with whom, and how barriers such as highways affect both migrations and genetic diversity.

But although a science-based management plan is essential if the animals are going to thrive, that alone is not sufficient, experts agree. The overriding question, they say, is whether citizens of these densely populated and highly developed countries will be willing to coexist with the animals—even if they occasionally devour livestock and scare unsuspecting humans. The key to success, says John Linnell

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