



Wolf – livestock relationship in Latvia and Estonia

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Photo: Chris White



There has always been a conflict of interests between humans and large carnivores when it comes to sharing the same environment and the same resources. Whenever both humans and wolves live in close proximity to each other, the conflict seems to be inevitable as both species tend to share the same resources.

In Latvia and Estonia, livestock husbandry is not as extensive as elsewhere in Europe. Besides, both countries have a vast forest cover (40-70% depending on the region), which provides carnivores with plenty of natural prey. But this causes the other conflict – with hunters. Often hunters are those who blame large carnivores, particularly wolves, for reducing wild ungulate numbers. Like human hunters, wolves in the Baltic prey mainly on wild ungulates (roe deer, red deer, moose, wild boar), and hunters regard this resource as their own because they pay rent for the hunting grounds and fee for licences. Besides, many commercial game clubs and even state owned hunting areas earn money by selling trophy hunts. Therefore, every ungulate taken by carnivores is regarded as direct economic loss by these people. At the same time, one must admit that large carnivores cannot be expected to feed on grass and wild animals are their primary food. It is when they attack the indisputable property of the man – livestock – that everyone agrees that this should be prevented. When the natural prey base is rich, wolves seem to prefer that to domestic animals, though an unattended sheep or a calf can lead a predator into temptation even when the forest is full of deer and wild boar in same way as a handful of money found on the pavement would tempt a human being. Some wolves seem to have specialised in taking dogs having killed more than 60 of them in around Laakvere in North of Estonia.

Livestock farmers in Latvia and Estonia often neglect safety of their animals by leaving them in pastures overnight, even in wolf areas. Fencing is not carnivore-proof and it means only to prevent livestock from straying, and wolves have an easy access to animals. Since both Latvia and Estonia are very forested, pastures are rarely further than a few hundred metres away from the forest, often meadows are surrounded by the forest from at least two sides, or the forest is adjacent to

Photo: Andrew Lilley



the pastures. If there are wolves in the area, it is easy to foresee the outcome of the situation when unattended animals are left grazing at night. Shepherds and guard dogs are never used, and livestock is often chained in the pasture to keep it from straying, which makes it an extremely easy target for predatory attacks. In most cases, this is small-scale or subsistence farming where only a few animals are kept for the own use, which makes it unprofitable to invest into predator-proof techniques. Moreover, the overall economic situation of small-scale farmers is so poor that they cannot afford insuring their livestock. Basically, they just take risks and hope for the best.

However, even with the high exposure of livestock to potential predation, the predation rate is low compared to other locations in Europe. In 2003, there were only 33 depredation cases reported to the State

Forest Service in Latvia, in 2004 – <30 attacks (Fig. 1). In Estonia (2004) approx. 70 sheep were killed. Most of the cases happened during night time when livestock was grazing outside. Sheep are most vulnerable to predation, as they often are found in small flocks and surplus killing can

happen. Also, guard dogs chained in the yards of farm-houses are often a target for wolf attacks.

The wolf is the only large carnivore species that causes any significant damage in the Baltic. Every year there are a few bear attacks on bee hives or apple orchards or occasionally livestock and a few cases of lynx predation are recorded so far (one lynx attacked and killed 11 rabbits in an outdoor enclosure and even ripped apart the mesh wire of the cage to get to the rabbits, another lynx killed a dog). A notable exception is Estonian island Hiiumaa, where lynxes have killed 26 sheep.

If such problems are to be avoided in the future, some education of farmers is necessary in the majority of cases, simply turning livestock in for the night would prevent damage. Electric fences also seem to help.



Photo: Zuzana Anderson-Lilley

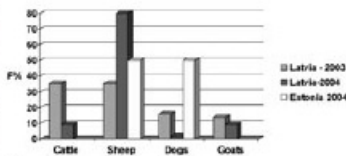


Fig. 1.

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