



# People and carnivores in Latvia: attitude survey

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In 2000, WWF-Latvia with the financial support of WWF-Denmark carried out a study on public opinion about large carnivores in Latvia. The questionnaire was distributed through public schools but the pupils were asked to use 'the next birthday rule' in families to ensure the random sample. In total, 400 replies were obtained. In addition, 157 questionnaires were received from 157 readers of a national hunters' magazine.

The Latvian public generally supported large carnivore conservation. Among the three species considered (wolf, lynx and brown bear), the most positive attitudes were toward brown bears, probably because of its endangered status (there are less than 10 bears in the country) (Fig. 1). Negative attitudes were a result of real or perceived effects large carnivores have on livestock husbandry and game management. Nearly 70% of respondents thought protection of bears should be continued, whereas only 24% of respondents supported control of bear populations (Fig. 2). A majority of respondents believed that wolf and lynx populations should be controlled, but very few respondents (less than 2%) supported total eradication of large carnivores in Latvia (Fig. 2). A greater proportion of rural inhabitants favored control of carnivore populations than residents in other locales. In contrast, hunters (the sample being almost entirely male, mostly rural, and somewhat older) favored unlimited harvesting of large carnivores.

The majority of respondents regularly visit the potential large carnivore habitats - 74% respondents go into forest at least once a week. The most common reason for that was walking and berry- and/or mushroom picking. In most cases, ideas about the wolf diet were close to reality - 60% respondents think that the staple food for wolves is wild ungulates. In the case of lynx, the role of hares and rodents in its diet was over-estimated (66.8%) but bears are regarded almost as vegetarians that feed on plants and berries (87.8%). The audience of the hunting magazine generally had a better knowledge of large carnivore ecology which can be explained by the greater interest of this audience in the subject.

The bear is regarded as the most dangerous to humans carnivore (61.7%) of all three species, followed by the lynx (50%) and the wolf (42.2%). At the same time, more people think that wolves can be dangerous under certain circumstances (37.9% versus 17-18% in case of lynx and bear). Circumstances, when carnivores can pose a threat to humans, varied from realistic ones (rabies or the presence of cubs in the case of bear) to quite unclear statements like "... can be dangerous if a person behaves improperly". Interestingly, hunters often mentioned that injured wolf and lynx could be dangerous to humans, although there are no proved cases from the hunting practice in Latvia. It is also characteristic to the hunters' sample that certain opinions are usually held which can potentially cause problems with regard to trying to change attitudes, and especially where the attitudes are based on incorrect facts.

The majority of respondents obtained information about large carnivores from nature films (76.7%), books (34.6%), magazines and newspapers (34.1%). Also Biology lessons in school (31.6%) and fairy-tales and legends (30.3%) played a significant role. If fairy-tales play such an important role, it is easy to understand why some people grow up being prejudiced, especially against wolves which traditionally have a negative image in folklore.

Respondents mention that when planning large carnivore management, the following groups' opinions should be taken into account: scientists (79.5%),

hunters (49.6%) and farmers (42.5%), while European Union's and tourists' opinions should be taken into account either partly (40.9% and 40.4% accordingly), or not at all (30.2% and 31% accordingly).

At the moment, another attitude survey is being done within the framework of the international project funded by the Research Council of Norway. It covers Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland and the first results should be ready by the end of the year. It will provide an updated information about public opinion in a format that will be comparable between these countries and which can be used for further planning of public education and large carnivore management.

## REFERENCES

For more details on this study see:  
Andersone, Z., Ozols, J. 2004. Public perception of carnivores in Latvia. *Ursus* 15(2): 181-187.  
The website of WWF-Latvia (<http://www.wfjlv>)



Fig. 1. Respondents' opinion on the numbers of large carnivores in Latvia.

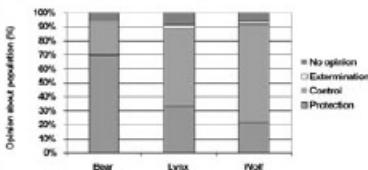


Fig. 2. Respondents' opinion on the necessary large carnivore management in Latvia.

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