

IS THE RECOVERY OF WOLF IN EUROPE REFLECTED BY THE LATEST REPORTS? **A SUCCESS STORY LOST IN THE DATA**



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BACKGROUND

Every six years, the implementation of the EU Habitats Directive has to be reported on by all EU Member States (MS), with particular attention to the conservation status of habitats and species covered by the Directive. During this round of reporting covering the period from 2013 to 2018, all MS were required to submit their reports to the EU by August 2019.

The MS reports are divided into individual assessment of populations by biogeographical region but are not aggregated to EU level assessments per species. Based on this information, the European Environment Agency produced the State of Nature report 2020.

With the same data, FACE conducted an analysis focusing on the conservation status, the population trend, the range trend and the habitat trend of the four large carnivore species in Europe. In general, the individual status assessments of most of the large carnivore populations remained rather constant with some minor deterioration. The situation on wolf populations in the EU is particularly interesting.

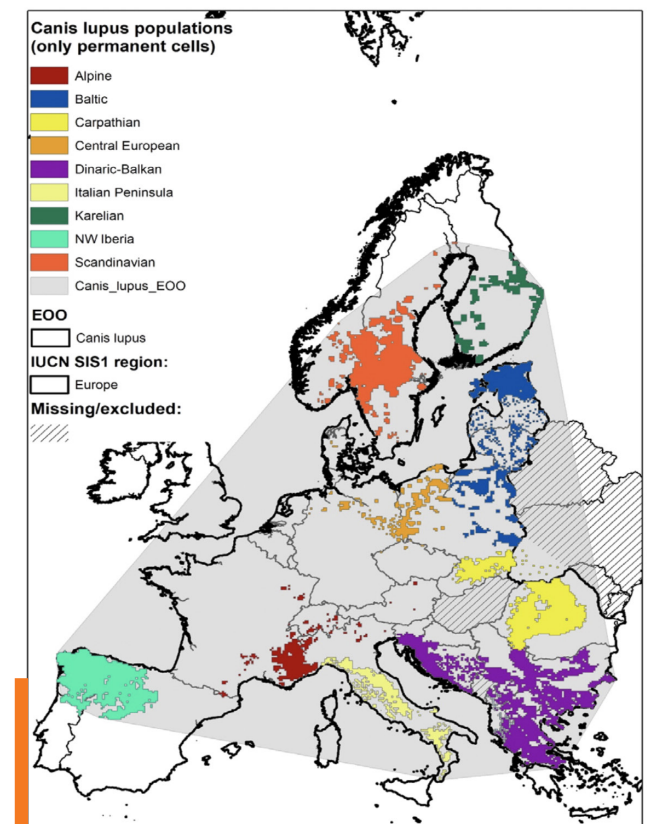
WOLF POPULATION, RANGE, AND HABITAT

In the winter of 2018, the first wolf in 100 years returned to Belgium, and completed thereby the animals' return to all mainland countries in Europe.

The wolf is now widely established and reproducing successfully resulting in an exponential population increase.

To date, scientists and experts from IUCN recognize **9 wolf populations in Europe which belong to one large metapopulation** which was assessed as Least Concern at the European level in the latest Red List assessment from May 2018 (see fig. 1).

Figure 1: 9 wolf populations in Europe based on the latest IUCN Red List assessment; source: Boitani, L. 2018. *Canis lupus* (errata version published in 2019). The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species 2018: e.T3746A144226239. Downloaded on 01 October 2020.



POPULATIONS vs. NATIONAL ASSESSMENTS

Unlike the IUCN, the European Commission does not make an assessment of these recognised population units. Based on the Habitats Directive, species are assessed at Member State level in biogeographical regions.

However, these delineations are meaningless to a species such as the wolf, who ranges often stretch beyond two or more countries. As a consequence of range expansion, the wolf populations become split into more and more sub-units.

Moreover, the term *population* versus *assessments* is often interchanged causing misunderstanding of the actual situation.

IS THE INCREASE IN **POPULATION SIZE** AND **RANGE** ALSO REFLECTED IN THE OUTCOMES OF THE SPECIES ASSESSMENTS UNDER ARTICLE 17?

On one hand, yes. Since the first reporting period (2001 – 2006), 20 new national assessments of wolf have been added to the reports. For the 2019 report, in total, 45 assessments have been listed under the species assessment for wolf.

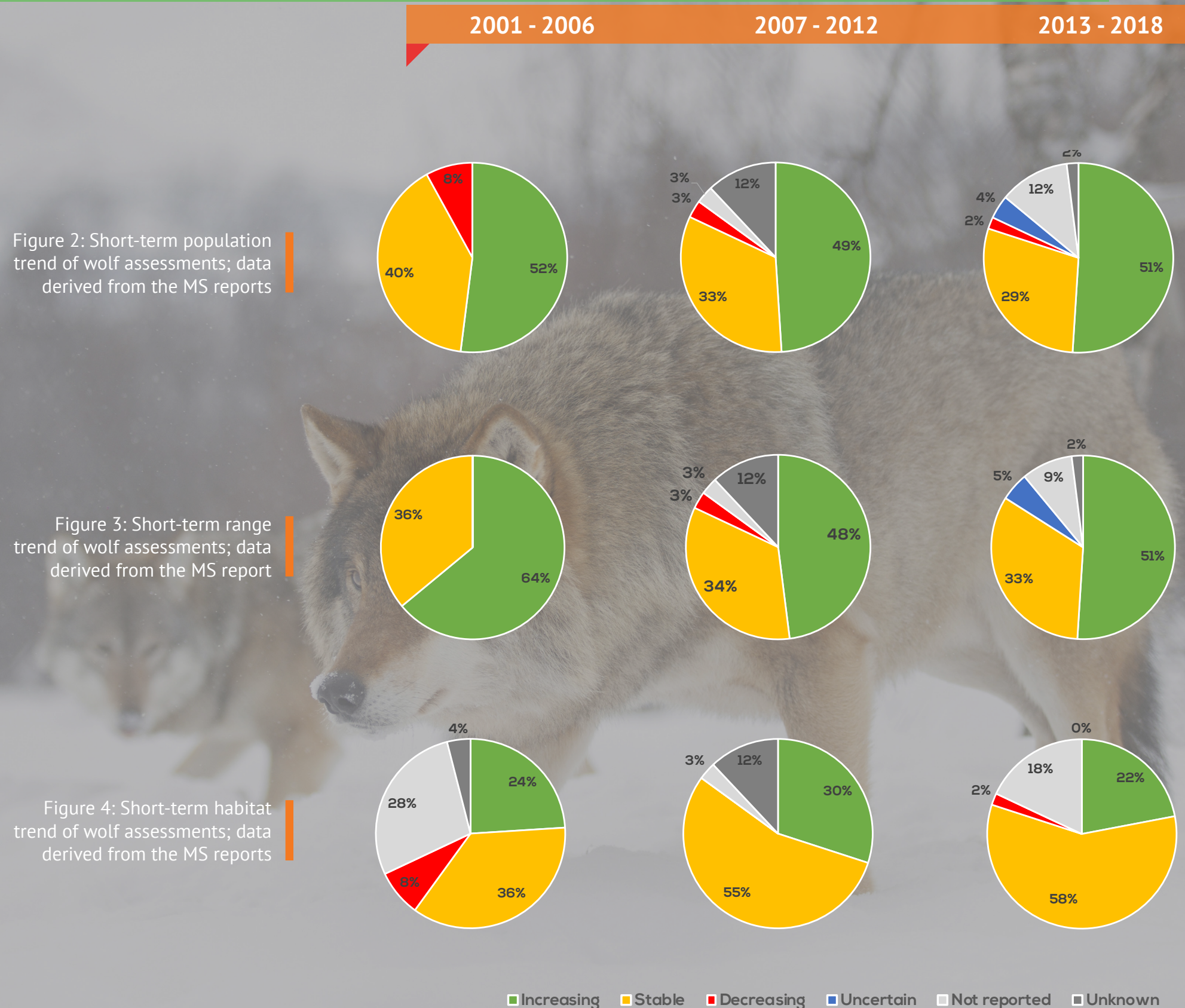
Moreover, the population trend (short-term) of most wolf assessments is considered positive. The trend in population size indicates changes in the overall numbers of individuals in the biogeographical populations over the reported period.

Hence, for all three reporting periods, the population trend of at least 80% of all biogeographical wolf assessments were considered by the MS as increasing or stable (**fig. 2**).

In at least 82%, MS considered the range trend of nationally assessed wolf units as either increasing or stable during the three reporting periods - with the highest percentage in the 2019 report (**see fig. 3**). Also, the steady increase in the number of national wolf assessments from 25 in the first reporting period, over 33, to finally 45 in the most recent assessment highlights the expansion in the range of the wolf in Europe.

The assessment of habitat for the species considers both quality and area. Habitat for the species refers to the resources necessary at all stages in the life cycle of the species. Habitat quality includes elements like the availability of prey but also fragmentation where appropriate for the species.

In the case of Europe, landscapes and habitats have been profoundly altered and fragmented owing to the expansion and intensification of human land use. Hence, even though, Europe is the continent most affected by human-caused fragmentation, the habitat trend for the assessed wolf units remained rather stable over the years (**see fig. 4**). This is largely because the wolf is a habitat generalist.



A MISLEADING IMAGE

Summarized, the trend of population size, range and habitat are generally considered as stable or in a lot of assessments, even as increasing. However, this largely positive trend is not reflected in the overall conservation status of the biogeographical assessments. The conservation status is of particular importance since it greatly influences the management and conservation of the species at national level.

Despite the fact that wolf populations are doing better, the wolf assessments with a favourable conservation status (FV) decreased slightly from 19 (2007 – 2012) to 18 (2013 – 2018). At the same time, the number of wolf assessments with an unfavourable conservation status increased (U1 + U2) from 13 to 19 (see fig. 5).

So, to answer the question: Is this increase in population size and range also reflected in the outcomes of the species assessments under Article 17? The answer is no; the increase in population size and range of wolves during recent years is not/hardly reflected in the outcomes of the MS species assessments under the Habitats Directive.

The main reasons for an increased number of assessments with an unfavourable conservation status include:

- different methods or improved knowledge/more accurate data as reported for some Spanish wolf assessments;
- highly contested data as in the case of Bulgaria;
- new assessments have been reported (i.e. Croatia and Luxembourg) from countries where wolf territories are newly established or only starting to recover. Naturally, those countries cannot report a favourable conservation status for their assessments;
- Europe's 9 wolf populations are divided by national assessments into artificial units. Hence, national assessments reflect in most cases only partially the conservation status of a given population.

All these reasons lead to a misleading impression of the conservation status of Europe's wolf populations. Thus, the recovery and the positive development of wolf populations in Europe is to a great extent unheard and unseen.

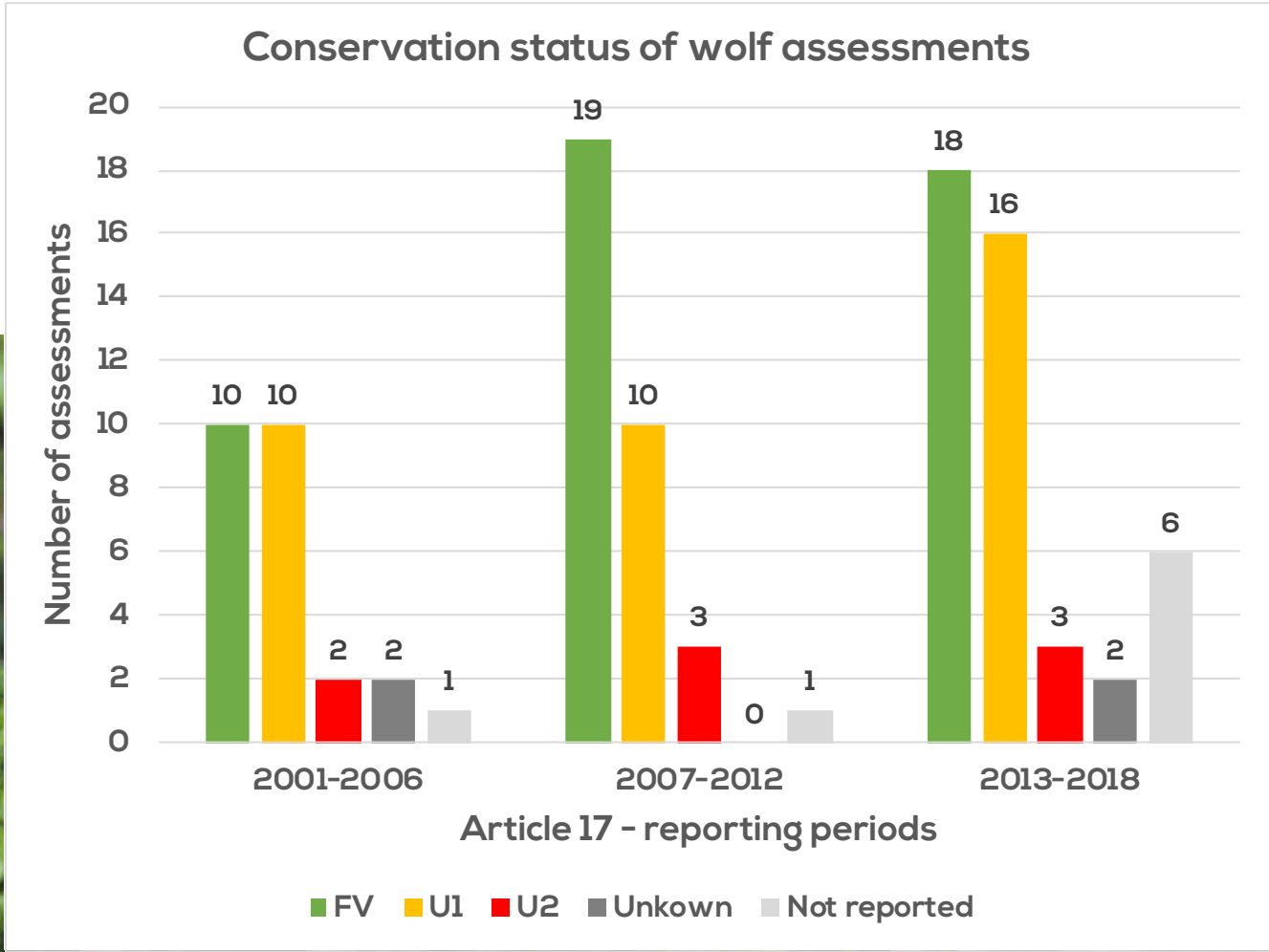


Figure 5: Conservation status of wolf assessments; data derived from the MS reports





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