



THE VOICE OF EUROPEAN HUNTERS

FACE

Avenue de la Joyeuse Entrée, 1-5

B-1040 Brussels

+ 32 (0)2 416 16 12

info@face.eu

www.face.eu

Understanding motivations for illegal killing of large carnivores in Europe- Insights from social science

Introduction

This info note examines the complex reasons behind the illegal killing of large carnivores (LC) in Europe, drawing insights from recent social science studies that consider various cultural, social, and regional backgrounds. Understanding these underlying factors is crucial for developing effective conservation strategies that address local contexts and promote long-term coexistence. The lack of social acceptance and acceptance towards large carnivore conservation and management is having strong effects on their recovery, survival, and associated conflicts. Currently, the limiting factor to successful co-existence with large carnivores in Europe is not habitat availability, but factors such as human acceptance and favourable policies¹.

Factors Driving Illegal Killing

The recovery of large carnivore populations is a conservation success in Europe. All mainland EU countries host at least one large carnivore species. However, a number of threats exist. Illegal killing (often termed “poaching”) in form of shooting, poisoning, or trapping is an important threat to the survival and recovery of large carnivore populations in Europe². Illegal killing (or poaching) of carnivores is an especially challenging conservation issue³. Several decades of social science research has consistently shown that human-carnivore conflicts and associated acts of illegal killing are often about deeper social conflicts, for example, between rural and urban areas, modern and traditional values, different social and economic classes, and the distribution of power and decision-making processes⁴. Together with cultural and historical backgrounds, these underlying conflicts shape peoples’ attitudes and behaviours towards the presence of large carnivores.

Cultural perspectives and traditions

Different cultures have diverse historical relationships with LC which influence attitudes and behaviours. Aspects of cultural identity are tangible and can be affected by LC presence and the associated conservation efforts. Despite their significance, socio-cultural factors are often downplayed in discussions about human-wildlife conflicts. Cultural contexts and traditions are still

¹ Cimatti, M., Ranc, N., Benítez-López, A., Maiorano, L., Boitani, L., Cagnacci, F., ... & Santini, L. (2021). Large carnivore expansion in Europe is associated with human population density and land cover changes. *Diversity and Distributions*, 27(4), 602-617.

² <https://nature-art17.eionet.europa.eu/article17/species/summary/?period=5&group=Mammals&subject=Canis+lupus®ion=>

³ Kaczensky, P., K. Jerina, M. Jonzovič, M. Krofel, T. Skrbinšek, G. Rauer, I. Kos, and B. Gutleb. 2011. Illegal killings may hamper brown bear recovery in the Eastern Alps. *Ursus* 22: 37–46. doi:[10.2192/URSUS-D-10-00009.1](https://doi.org/10.2192/URSUS-D-10-00009.1).

⁴ Linnell, J. D. C. & Cretois, B. 2018, Research for AGRI Committee – The revival of wolves and other large predators and its impact on farmers and their livelihood in rural regions of Europe, European Parliament, Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies, Brussels

today shaping people's livelihood activities and practices. For instance, LC management can be inseparably linked to the cultural identities and practices of rural communities. Conservation measures that restrict LC management practices with long-lasting traditions may have adverse effects on the conservation of LC in Europe.⁵

Mistrust in governments and decision-making

The protection of large carnivores is considered by some social groups as a symbol of rural-urban inequality and seen as a threat to rural activities and lifestyles⁶. This occurs at a time when conservation and species protection is high on the political agenda of many regional and national governments in Europe. Consequently, opposing the protection of large carnivores can express mistrust towards environmental institutions and governments and may be seen as defending rural economy and culture. These neglected emotions and fears of rural actors in decision-making processes often lead to illegal killing of bears, wolves and other wildlife⁷.

Socioeconomic Factors

Socioeconomic factors play a significant role in driving illegal killing of LC in Europe.⁸ Livestock farming is an important source of income in rural areas. When large carnivores, such as wolves or bears, prey on livestock, it can result in substantial economic and emotional losses for farmers. In response, some individuals may resort to illegal killing to protect their livelihoods. The fact that rural communities are facing many challenges such as urbanisation, demographic change or limited access to modern resources is making LC often a symbol for urban-rural inequality⁹.

Risks, fear, and safety concerns

Human attitudes towards large carnivores are significantly influenced by actual and perceived risks associated with the presence of these species. The most common risks from large carnivores are linked to damages caused by depredation on livestock, competition with hunters, and attacks on humans and are thought to directly lead to intolerant behaviours by humans, such as illegal killing of large carnivores¹⁰. Fear of carnivore attacks on humans can also drive negative attitudes.

Hunters' efforts against illegal killing of LC

When management frameworks work well, hunters value large carnivores like other game species. In such cases, conflicts are often low along with poaching. At the same time, hunters and hunting associations can play an essential role in addressing illegal killing of wildlife. Advocacy and awareness initiatives are common, where hunters raise awareness within their communities and with other rural stakeholders about the significance of long-term coexistence with LC.

Moreover, reporting and monitoring efforts of hunters are crucial in combatting illegal activities. Their first-hand knowledge of natural environments, changes in habitats and species composition

⁵ Thondhlana, G., Redpath, S. M., Vedeld, P. O., van Eeden, L., Pascual, U., Sherren, K., & Murata, C. (2020). Non-material costs of wildlife conservation to local people and their implications for conservation interventions. *Biological Conservation*, 246, 108578.

⁶ Skogen, K., Krange, O., & Figari, H. (2017). *Wolf conflicts: a sociological study* (Vol. 1). Berghahn Books.

⁷ Skogen, K., & Krange, O. (2020). The Political Dimensions of Illegal Wolf Hunting: Anti-Elitism, Lack of Trust in Institutions and Acceptance of Illegal Wolf Killing among Norwegian Hunters. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 60(3), 551-573.

⁸ Kaczensky, P., Jerina, K., Jonozovič, M., Krofel, M., Skrbinšek, T., Rauer, G., ... & Gutleb, B. (2011). Illegal killings may hamper brown bear recovery in the Eastern Alps. *Ursus*, 22(1), 37-46.

⁹ Zscheischler, J., & Friedrich, J. (2022). The wolf (*canis lupus*) as a symbol of an urban-rural divide? Results from a media discourse analysis on the human-wolf conflict in Germany. *Environmental Management*, 70(6), 1051-1065.

¹⁰ Carter, N. H., & Linnell, J. D. (2016). Co-adaptation is key to coexisting with large carnivores. *Trends in Ecology & Evolution*, 31(8), 575-578.

allows them to provide crucial information to authorities and conservation organizations, aiding in the identification and prevention of illegal killings.

Collaboration with law enforcement is another key aspect, with hunters actively assisting in surveillance efforts and investigations. Wildlife crime prevention is a shared goal, leading hunters to organizing workshops, seminars, and training sessions on hunting laws to push for stricter penalties and improved enforcement.

Engaging in conservation projects demonstrates the commitment of hunters and hunting organizations. They contribute financially and through their knowledge and volunteer work to initiatives focused on habitat management, research, and public education.

The LIFE Lynx project is a good example of a project driven by hunters and other stakeholders. The primary objective is to prevent the Dinaric-SE Alpine lynx population from extinction and to preserve it in the long term. Before the start of the project, the population was small, isolated, and extremely inbred. It urgently needed reinforcement by introducing additional, healthy animals from another population. The project is a good example of joint efforts towards long term lynx conservation between hunters, foresters, and researchers. Hunters are key partners in monitoring the lynx populations and are standing strong against illegal killing. During the project, the Hunters Association of Slovenia organized training sessions for prevention and successful persecution of illegal killing of wild animals for police officers.

For more projects on hunters' efforts in LC conservation and management see:

<https://www.biodiversitymanifesto.com/category/large-carnivores/>

FACE position on combatting wildlife crime

In October 2022, the FACE General Assembly, which represents the views of 7 million hunters, adopted a new position on wildlife crime, reinforcing FACE's long-standing position on "zero-tolerance".

The position:

- Advocates for strong support for "zero-tolerance" towards wildlife crime.
- Calls for a better understanding of the root causes driving wildlife crime as a basis for decision-makers to appropriately design policy responses and legislation.
- Appeals to policymakers to work together with the hunting community in order to combat wildlife crime.
- Supports the need for effective and efficient enforcement of legislation related to wildlife crime.

Conclusions

The long-term conservation and recovery of large carnivores will mainly depend on their acceptance and tolerance by people that share their everyday space. Local communities must be involved in and supportive of management processes and plans. Legal large carnivore management in form of well-regulated and transparent quota systems can act in favour of conserving their populations and increasing their acceptance¹¹.

¹¹ Pohja-Mykrä, M. (2018). 3 Socio-political illegal acts as a challenge for wolf conservation and management. Large Carnivore Conservation and Management: Human Dimensions.