



Coexisting with large carnivores

THE CHALLENGE AND THE OPPORTUNITY

Persecuted for centuries – bears, wolves, lynx and wolverines are now returning to the European landscape.

Can they live with us?

Can we live with them?

Why are they so controversial?

What solutions are there?

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The opportunity

The image of large carnivores in modern Europe often appears incongruous to many people. However, the requirements are in place. Europe's forest cover has increased dramatically. Populations of prey animals - red deer, roe deer, moose, chamois, wild boar - are at record sizes. Legislation offers either total protection of large carnivores or at least regulation on the extent and means of legal killing.

Large carnivores have shown they can live beside us in our modified cultural landscapes.

We have the potential to foster a unique experiment where we reintegrate these wild creatures into the fabric of the landscapes where we live, work and play.

DARE WE TAKE THIS OPPORTUNITY? Can we rise to the challenges of having wild neighbours?

The edge of extinction

Fifty years ago the situation for large carnivores in Europe looked bleak. As a result of human persecution and transformation of the European landscape, populations had declined to the extent that they were absent from vast parts of the continent. Only some small relicts remained, in the mountains and around the edges of Europe.

The spectre of regional extinction was hanging in the air!

Reclaiming a continent

Now the situation is transformed beyond recognition.

Wolves have recolonized Scandinavia, Germany and the Alps. Relict populations in Iberia, Italy, the Balkans and the Baltics have dramatically expanded.

Eurasian lynx populations have reoccupied most of their former distributions in Scandinavia, the Baltics and the Carpathians, and reintroductions have returned them to many parts of the Alps and central Europe.

Bear populations in Scandinavia, the Balkans and the Carpathians have reached record sizes.

Wolverines have returned to southern Scandinavia, and even recolonized some low-lying forest areas.

There probably have not been more large carnivores in Europe for more than a century.



1. Wolves have returned to share our landscape. Photo: Taiga nature & photo | 2. Lynx habitat in Balkans. Photo: Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme | 3. Wolverine habitat in the Swedish mountains. Photo: Taiga nature & photo | 4. Traditional shepherding is the most effective way to mitigate large carnivore depredation. Photo: Taiga nature & photo

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Challenge 1 – Depredation on livestock

The risk of conflict is present wherever large carnivores encounter unprotected livestock. The result is often dead or injured livestock. Fortunately this conflict can be mitigated through a range of technical measures. Most practical is the use of electric fences to protect livestock grazing on pastures, and the maintenance of traditional shepherding practices with livestock guarding dogs.

Challenge 2 – Competition with hunters

Large carnivores and hunters both pursue the same quarry – red deer, roe deer, moose and wild boar. Wolves can also occasionally kill hunting dogs. The competition between hunters and carnivores is virtually impossible to mitigate. Large carnivores need their prey for survival and the return of large carnivores has to be taken into account when setting quotas. The equation is often balanced in areas where hunters can hunt large carnivores in a sustainable harvest.

Challenge 3 – Thinking big

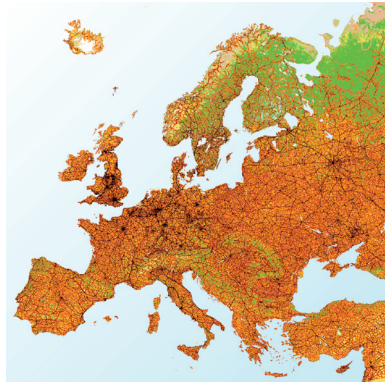
Large carnivores need lots of space. Single individuals roam over areas of hundreds or thousands of square kilometres. They also show a total lack of respect for the borders that humans have drawn across the map of Europe.

Effective conservation of large carnivores requires cooperation between all administrations that share a population. The many Natura 2000 sites across Europe can supply an important refuge and some core habitat. However, for large carnivores it is also important to consider the total landscape within which these sites are embedded.

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1. Roe deer are important prey for European lynx. Photo: J Linnell | 2. Hunters and large carnivores both pursue the same quarry. Photo: J Linnell | 3. Iberian landscape – habitat for humans and large carnivores. Photo: J Linnell | 4. Livestock guarding dog – the ultimate protector. Photo: J Linnell | 5. Scandinavian forests hold a lot of space for large carnivores. Photo: Taiga nature & photo | 6. Large carnivores need their prey for survival. Photo: J Linnell | 7. Electric fences are effective against a carnivore's attack. Photo: C Angst

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Challenge 4 – Infrastructure

Europe is a crowded continent. Remaining natural habitats are still being fragmented through the construction of roads and houses. Large carnivores are moderately tolerant of many developments, but modern highways can prevent movements or even kill animals.

If European habitats become fragmented into small isolated pieces, species that need lots of space, such as large carnivores, will not survive.

The solution lies in the use of crossing structures such as green bridges, tunnels and elevated sections of roads. These allow the safe passage of large carnivores and many other species of wildlife.

Challenge 5 – Small populations

Not all large carnivore populations are large and expanding.

Across Europe there are some small isolated populations that are still not secure. Examples include bears in northern Spain, the Pyrenees, the Alps and central Italy, and lynx in the southern Balkans. These populations are in need of crisis help to reduce mortality from poaching and to secure access to sufficient habitat for expansion.

Challenge 6 – Prejudice

Large carnivores carry with them a cultural history of fear and hate. The ideals of conservation that we have today are relatively new.

As a result there is still prejudice against the carnivores which is often expressed through illegal killings. This is a problem throughout Europe and in some areas it is endangering the conservation of small populations.

There is a need to constantly invest in education, information and law enforcement. Furthermore there is a need to develop fair and democratic institutions that take the concerns of rural people into accounts when management decisions about large carnivores are being made.

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1. Maybe a future recolonizer in a new wolf habitat. Photo: S Kunovac | 2. Roads kill many wolves that try and disperse. Photo: LUPUS | 3. Snares are a common tool for poachers in Europe. Photo: FOP | 4. Bears are illegally killed, also in areas where they can be hunted legally. Photo: FOP | 5. Large carnivore habitats are constantly being fragmented by new roads. Photo: GLOBIO Map

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The bottom line

We have the possibility to create a new vision for the European landscape – where wildlife which is truly wild lives close to us.

The greatest challenge rests within the human mind.

Can we learn to tolerate these species? Can we learn to share our living space and some of our resources with them? Can we overcome centuries of prejudice? Can we turn fear into respect? Most importantly, can we adjust our image of the European countryside to one where there is room for the wild?

The large carnivores have demonstrated that they can live with us, the question remains if we can live with them. Their future is entirely at the mercy of our tolerance.

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1. Enjoy the sight of tracks in the sand. They are proofs of a richer Europe. Photo: V Bologov | 2. Bear populations in Scandinavia, the Balkans and the Carpathians have reached record sizes. Photo: C Senior | 3. Scandinavian winter give lots of opportunities for tracking large carnivores. Photo: T Strømseth | 4. Iberian wolf. Photo: J M Reyero | 5. Livestock are important for maintaining the European landscape, but must be protected from depredation. Photo: Taiga nature & photo



The carnivores have shown they can live with us.

We have yet to show that we are willing to share our landscapes with them.

It is true that large carnivores can be difficult neighbours, but by adapting our lifestyle and our mindset it is possible to live together.

Are we willing to make the changes?

Are we willing to explain to our children why we didn't?

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