

THE ATTITUDE OF ESTONIANS TOWARDS LARGE CARNIVORES

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Abstract. When planning the management of large predators, wildlife managers have to take into account the attitude of the population. A relevant poll using a unified methodology was arranged in three Baltic countries, Poland and Norway. In Estonia, completed questionnaires were received from 1,700 people. Along with personal data (incl. demographic characteristics: sex, age, level of education, etc.), a questionnaire posed 22 different questions designed to reveal the respondents': attitude towards population size and dispersal patterns of large predators; acceptable distance to large carnivores; personal experience with large carnivores; confidence in various institutions in matters concerning large predators; general (and environmental) values and attitudes in life as a background. Survey results confirm that hatred for and fear of large predators are generally not characteristic of Estonians. Extreme views are almost completely lacking and a rational attitude seems to prevail. To the majority of the respondents the present number of large predators appears to be ideal.

Key words: large carnivores, wolf, bear, lynx, attitude

INTRODUCTION

According to the monitoring data in spring 2005, Estonia was inhabited by 90 wolves (*Canis lupus*), 500 brown bears (*Ursus arctos*) and 700 lynxes (*Felis lynx*) (Männil & Kübarsepp 2005). Official counting data based on the hunters' reports indicate even a larger number of all three species.

Whereas the number of bear and lynx has more or less constantly increased in the course of the past 50–60 years and has become more stable in recent decades, the wolf population dynamics has been very 'restless' (Fig. 1). All three species have always been hunted, and the wolf has recently even been considered an 'outlaw'. Now, as a member of the EU, Estonia has to follow the rules and regulations of the European Union where large carnivores are rare and protected. Although this does not necessarily mean putting a ban on the hunting of these game animals, it will involve considerable changes and restrictions in game management organisation. So, the bear is not currently hunted on a regular basis and only the so-called 'nuisance individuals' can be shot. The goals of 'large predator policy' for the wolf, bear and lynx were set in the Estonian National Action Plan (Lõhmus 2002). It prescribed the maintenance of a wolf population between 100–200 individuals, as well as bear and lynx populations with at least 500 individuals. In taking decisions regarding large carnivores, public opinion needs to be considered. In order to study the attitude of the natives, the poll was carried out within the frame-

work of the project entitled 'Large Carnivores in Northern Landscapes: an Interdisciplinary Approach to Their Regional Conservation'. The project funded by the Research Council of Norway and NINA includes Norwegian, Polish, Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian researchers.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The same questionnaire drawn up in Norway was used everywhere enabling us to compare the results. However, we added a number of questions of our own. Along

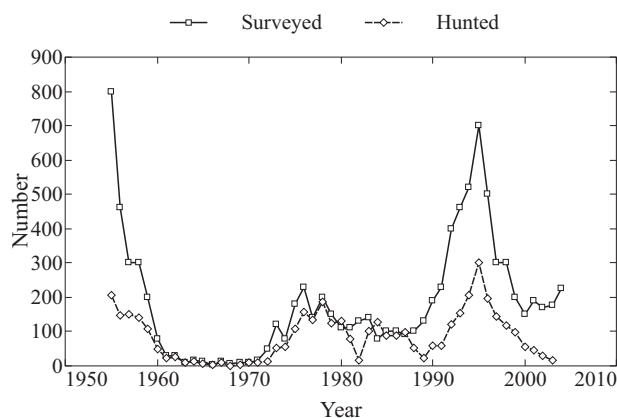


Figure 1. Survey numbers and hunting bag of wolves in Estonia.

with personal data (including demographic characteristics: gender, age, education, etc.) our questionnaire posed 22 different questions designed to reveal the respondents':

- personal experience with large carnivores;
- acceptable distance to large carnivores;
- attitude towards population size and dispersal patterns of large predators;
- confidence in various institutions in matters concerning large predators;
- general (and environmental) values and attitudes in life as a background.

In Estonia, the questionnaires were distributed in the capital city Tallinn and in four counties (in rural areas and small towns). One of these counties had an unusually aggressive pack of wolves, which had specialised in killing domestic dogs and in search of them was not afraid to enter villages. This particular county will be viewed separately as a 'wolf area'. Most of the questionnaires were distributed through schools and pupils were instructed to give them to a family member (15 years old or older) whose birthday was next. In some schools, elder students filled in the questionnaires themselves. In this way, two groups were formed – the general public or 'the people's voice' ($n = 823$) and 'pupils' ($n = 797$). The third group was comprised of hunters who received their questionnaires through hunting clubs ($n = 80$). In total, 2,622 questionnaires were distributed, 1,700 of which were returned completed, with a response rate of 64.8%. In the following, we use the answers of the general public only. In a couple of cases, when comparing the answers given by the general public with those of pupils or hunters, it has been pointed out.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A surprisingly large share of the respondents answered affirmatively to the question '**Have you seen large carnivores in wild?**'. 28.0% of the Estonians have seen a wolf, 21.8% – a bear and 21.0% – a lynx. The results of an earlier similar survey questioning 898 people indicated that 27.7% of the respondents had met a wolf at least once in the wild (Randveer 2001). The results are similar, indeed.

49.6% of the respondents disagreed with the proposition '**To see the wolf in nature would be very exciting to me**', which could be interpreted as reluctance to meet a representative of the species in the wild. An encounter with a bear and lynx would be avoided by 46.1% and 42.9% of the Estonians, respectively (Fig. 2).

14.1%, 2.8% and 2.3% of the population has had unpleasant experiences with wolves bears and lynx, respectively, answering positively to the question '**Have you suffered any kind of loss because of large carnivores?**'. However, the questionnaire did not provide an opportunity to specify the actual nature and extent of the loss. According to the above survey (Randveer 2001), 11.0% of the respondents had had some bad experiences with 'crimes' committed by wolves.

Answers to the question '**At what distance from where you live can you accept the occurrence of large carnivores?**' revealed that 32.0% of the respondents would not tolerate wolves, 28.7% – lynx and 28.1% – bears in 'their county' (Fig. 3).

Answers to the question '**How to manage large carnivores?**' reveal that the majority of the respondents

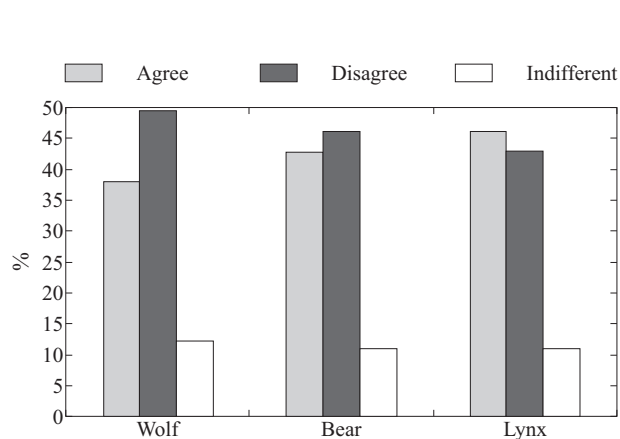


Figure 2. Answers to the proposition 'To see this species in nature would be very exciting for me'.

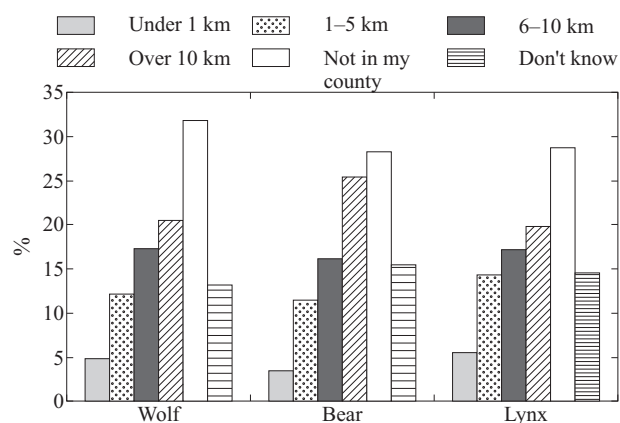


Figure 3. Answers to the question 'At what distance from where you live can you accept the occurrence of large carnivores?'.

would like to keep the present number of bears and lynx. Only 1.9% of those who returned their questionnaires want to see wolves exterminated completely. In the case of bears and lynx, these percentages were 0.6% and 1.4% respectively. The other extreme – to greatly increase the population – found support among 0.9%, 3.7% and 4.2% of the respondents, respectively. It seems that in comparison with other large predators the attitudes towards the wolf are more negative (Fig. 4). With respect to the wolf, the most controversial and conflicting among species, we also intended to determine to what extent the respondent's opinion depends on

his/her education (Fig. 5) and the place of residence (Fig. 6). One notes a more positive attitude of educated people when compared with that of less educated respondents. In comparison with the attitudes of people living in the countryside, those of the city dwellers are more positive. The attitudes of people living in the rural areas are in turn determined by the behaviour or, which almost amounts to the same thing, the number of wolves inhabiting the neighbourhood. People, living in a 'wolf area' have the most negative opinion. The question, whether the attitudes of city dwellers are influenced by their (presumably) higher level of education or, vice versa (again presumed), their lack of specific knowledge and experience, must here remain unanswered.

We also tried to identify the opinion leaders in discussing the topics related to large predators. So we asked **'In your opinion how much you can trust the following when they discuss large carnivores?'** (Fig. 7). The potential opinion leaders are scientists (66.9% of respondents completely trust, 24.8% trust to some extent, 2.0% do not trust, 6.2% do not know), experienced hunters (49.4%; 39.5%; 3.9%; 7.1%) and employees of the state forest service (31.9%; 46.2%; 6.5%; 15.3%). At the bottom of the list are politicians: local politicians (3.1%; 22.6%; 54.7%; 19.6%) and the members of the parliament (0.9%; 14.7%; 63.6%; 20.9%).

The most feared of the three large carnivore species is the wolf. Presumably, the main reason behind this is the danger caused by this species to domestic animals. Perhaps, the sense of wariness, which has been etched in the consciousness of the people, also plays a role

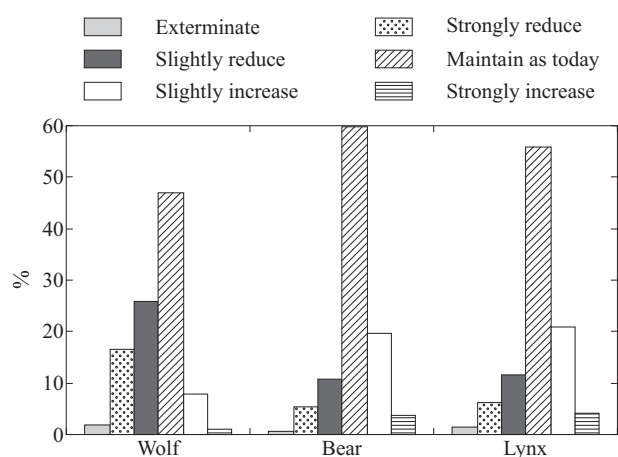


Figure 4. Answers to the question 'How should large carnivores be managed?'.

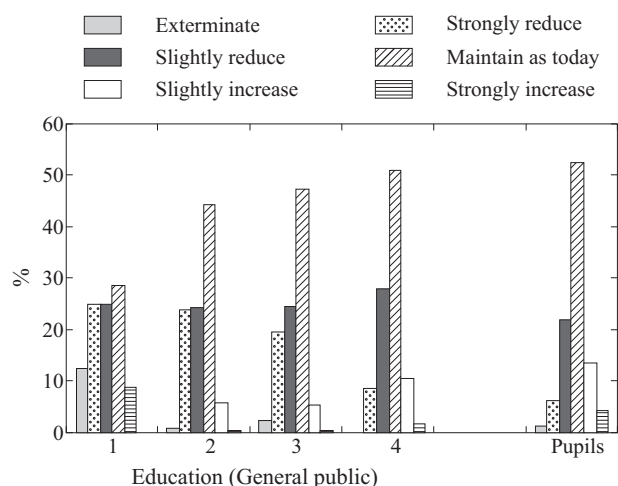


Figure 5. Answers to the question 'How should the wolf population be managed?'. Dependence on education: 1. Primary school; 2. Secondary school – academic; 3. Secondary school – vocational; 4. University.

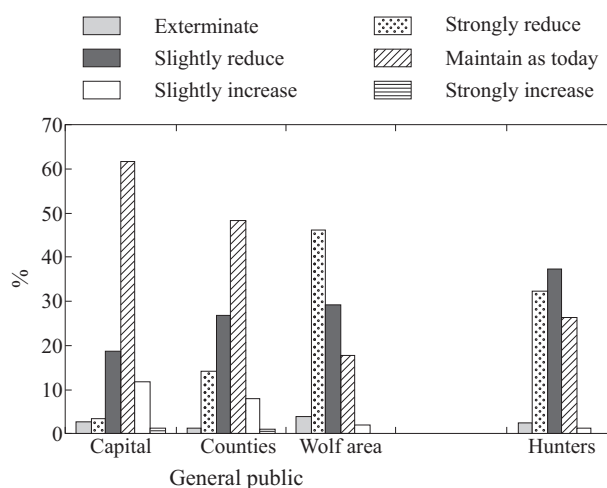


Figure 6. Answers to the question 'How should the wolf population be managed?'. Dependence on residence.

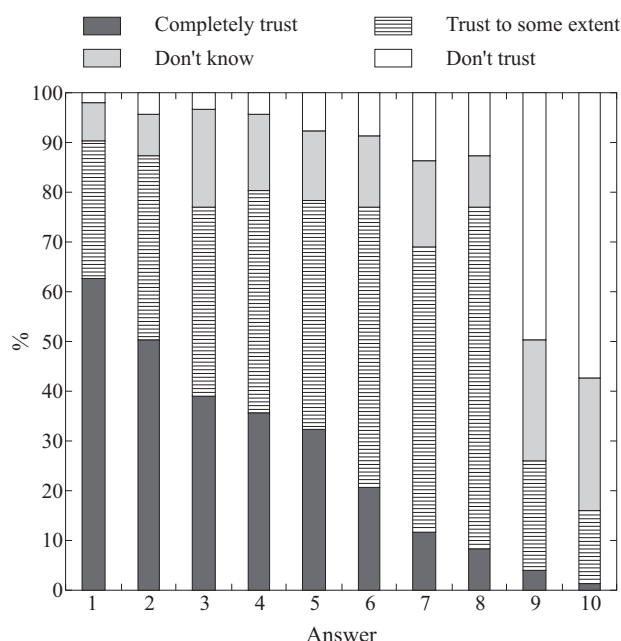


Figure 7. Answers to the question 'In your opinion how much you can trust the following when they discuss large carnivores?': 1. Scientists; 2. Experienced hunters; 3. Representatives of conservationist NGOs; 4. Employees of the State Forest Service; 5. People that you personally know; 6. People who live in areas where large carnivores exist; 7. Farmers; 8. Newspapers and TV; 9. Local politicians; 10. Members of parliament.

here. In his profound study, Rootsi (2005) gives 111 well-documented instances of human killings by wolves in Estonia in the 19th century and he also provides examples of similar occurrences from the neighbouring areas. It certainly has left its mark on the collective memory of the people.

Initial results confirm that extreme views are almost completely lacking and a rational attitude seems to prevail. To the majority of the respondents the present number of large predators appears to be ideal. By fortunate coincidence, this is also the opinion of experts. The Estonian National Action Plan for the wolf, bear and lynx sets a goal to maintain a wolf population of 100–200 individuals, as well as lynx and bear populations of at least 500 individuals (Lõhmus 2002). A relatively favourable attitude could be explained as follows:

- There are not many ways large carnivores can influence local economy in Estonia. It is well known and documented that the majority of conflicts wolves cause worldwide are due to their killing of livestock, especially sheep. Thus, Bjerke *et al.* (2001) have shown that the attitude of the Norwegians towards wolves is

more negative than that of the Swedes. There is every reason to suppose that this difference in attitudes can be attributed to the difference in the level of importance assigned to sheep breeding and agriculture in general, and in the economies of the two neighbouring countries. The objective of the Norwegian government is to secure the capacity for independent food production for times of potential political or economic crisis. So, the meat production of sheep, cattle and semi-domestic reindeer, as well as the harvest of wild game, are important areas of economic interest in rural areas (Zimmermann *et al.* 2001). In Estonia, sheep breeding, which has never been particularly popular, is currently only of marginal importance.

- It is allowed to hunt large carnivores in Estonia; even more, they are valuable game animals. We suppose that this contributes to the positive attitudes of hunters and, possibly, those of many country people.

- The fact that large carnivores have always lived in Estonia may be another contributing factor. It has been shown that Estonians in comparison with Lithuanians are more tolerant to the close presence of bears and lynx (common in Estonia, but absent or rare in Lithuania). At the same time, the differences about the acceptance of wolves (common in both countries) were much less pronounced (Balčiauskas *et al.* 2005). Conflicts tend to occur in areas where large predators, primarily wolves, have reappeared after a long period of absence or where they have been introduced with human assistance. A good example would be a tense situation in society after the re-appearance of wolves in Mercatour National Park in France (Campion-Vincent 2005). However, it must be stressed that survey results reflect only the current situation. We agree with the opinion of many researchers, e.g. of Schwartz *et al.* 2003, that throughout history, human values towards large carnivores have been inversely proportional to their abundance. We have every reason to believe that a decade ago, when there were approximately 700 wolves living in Estonia, we would have received very different answers.

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ESTIJOS GYVENTOJŲ POŽIŪRIS Į STAMBIUOSIUS PLĖŠRŪNUS

T. Randveer

SANTRAUKA

Planuojant stambiųjų plėšrūnų kontrolę, specialistams privalu įvertinti šalies gyventojų požiūrį į šiuos gyvūnus. Trijų Baltijos šalių, Lenkijos ir Norvegijos gyventojai dalyvavo pagal vieningą metodiką parengtoje apklausoje. Estijoje anketas užpildė 1700 respondentų. Kartu su klausimais apie respondento asmeninius duomenis (lytį, amžių, išsilavinimą ir t. t.) anketoje buvo pateikti dar 22 klausimai apie gyventojų: požiūrį į stambiųjų plėšrūnų populiacijos dydį, paplitimo pobūdį ir jiems priimtina atstumą iki šių gyvūnų; asmeninę patirtį, susijusią su stambiaisiais plėšrūnais; pasitikėjimą įvairiomis institucijomis klausimuose, susijusiuose su stambiaisiais plėšrūnais ir bendrąsias vertybes bei požiūrį į gamtą. Apklausos rezultatai patvirtino, kad stambiųjų plėšrūnų baimė ir neapykanta estams nėra būdinga. Respondentai beveik nesiūlė kraštutinių poveikio plėšrūnams priemonių, vyraavo racionalus požiūris. Daugelio apklaustųjų nuomone, dabartinis stambiųjų plėšrūnų skaitlingumas jiems yra priimtinas.

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