



## Discussion: Illegal kills of protected wolves call for public reasoning

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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Illegal wolf kills happens around in Europe.
- The European wolf is protected under the EU Habitats Directive.
- Fake news and social media accelerate the local conflicts.
- This call for political accountability and a sufficient management.
- European governments should integrate facts and values not separate them.

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### ABSTRACT

Illegal wolf kills happens around in Europe despite the European wolf is protected under the EU Habitats Directive. The reason for this is conflicts with farmers and local hunters and in some instances also direct fear.

In April 2018, a wolf was killed in Denmark after 1st recolonization since the 18th century. This caused a heated debate and calls for better communication and management of the Danish and entire European wolf population. Here we discuss the challenges of illegal wolf kills and call for European governments to take action. We specifically encourage European governments to create facilitated spaces for public deliberation on wildlife management by integrating facts and values, not separating them.

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Illegal killing of protected species represent a challenge to nature conservation policies. Not only because of the mere loss of individuals of critical importance for the conservation status of the populations that the policies are aimed to protect, but also because the crime in itself undermine the authority of the institutional and legal framework fabric in place. Even more critically, if illegal killings directly or indirectly find

moral support by larger groups in society, the existing wildlife management regimes will start to lose their legitimacy (Pohja-Mykrä and Kurki, 2014).

Illegal killing of wolves (*Canis lupus*) is a widespread and well-known phenomenon in most wolf-habitats. Studies attribute illegal killing to be the most significant factor when it comes to human caused mortality of wolf populations in the western world (e.g. Liberg et al., 2012; Suutarinen and Kojola, 2017; Treves et al., 2017a,b). Depending on the spatial scale and geography, estimated mortality among wolves caused by illegal killing vary. In Wisconsin for example, the mortality rate was estimated to be 39–45% during the years 1979–2012 (Treves et al., 2017a). On top of this, it has been argued that illegal killing of wolves is underestimated by scientists (Treves et al., 2017b).

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The focus on illegal killing of wolves have primarily been on population-effects (e.g. Recio et al., 2018; Suutarinen and Kojola, 2018). However, studies have also looked into cultural dimensions and institutional structures in play (Andreassen et al., 2018; Lundmark et al., 2018; Krange and Skogen, 2011; Skogen and Thrane, 2007). Recognizing that illegal killing of wolves is difficult to prevent by traditional means of information and law enforcement, various economic compensation schemes have been developed. For example, countries like Sweden and Finland have experimented with stronger stakeholder representation within the institutional structures (Bisi et al., 2007; Hansen et al., 2016; Skogen, 2015; Lundmark and Matti, 2015; Treves et al., 2009). This in order to increase not only the legal, but also the sociopolitical legitimacy of existing wolf management regimes.

So far, the various studies and changes of institutional structures have had little impact. Our main argument in this Discussion paper is that the natural dimensions of a still more radicalized response to wildlife management cannot be separated from the cultural and sociopolitical aspects, and vice versa. Using Denmark as example, we will show how the wolf context and illegal killing of wolves represent the relationship between science and society.

Denmark is known to be a well-organised democratic society and a frontier country in the international endeavour for the environment. Being recognized as one of the most environmentally friendly countries in the world, Denmark face the same difficulties to protect its few grey wolves, which comprise the northernmost part of the Central European lowland population, as other countries with a much longer and more consistent wolf history (Biswas-Diener et al., 2010; Sonne and Alstrup, 2018). After its extinction from Denmark in the early 19th century (last specimen shot in 1813), this long-distance dispersing species have recolonised Denmark from Germany and Poland with the first verified observation in November 2012 (Sunde and Olsen, 2018). Since 2012, at least eight immigrants have been documented and the first (and so far only) pair gave birth to minimum eight pups in 2017 (Sunde and Olsen, 2018). The species is strictly protected under the EU Habitats Directive (Council Directive 92/43/EEC of 21 May 1992 on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora). It is therefore prohibited to hunt, disturb and prevent the local and regional expansion of this growing, but still vulnerable subpopulation (EU, 2016).

One-and-a-half year after the first wolf was verified, the Danish Nature Agency implemented a wolf management plan that had full political support in the Danish Wildlife Management Board (DWMB). The DWMB is an official advisory panel for the Minister of the Environment comprised by all major stakeholder organisations with interests in Wildlife Management: Hunters, farmers, land owners, nature protection associations etc. (Miljøministeriet, 2014). The plan provided full economic compensation for livestock assumed killed by wolves and subsidies for prevention means (e.g. wolf proof electric fences) in areas with permanent wolf presence. It explicitly addressed culling of problem-individuals as a management option, i.e. all three types of management tools disposable for management authorities to reduce large carnivore conflicts in Europe (livestock protection, economical compensation and lethal control: Linnell and Cretois, 2018). The plan also clearly states that only authorities only can decide when lethal control should be used as action, including removal of hybrids.

In the years 2012–16, compensations were paid for averagely 10 sheep per year with a per capita kill rate (5 kills wolf<sup>-1</sup> year<sup>-1</sup>) equaling the median for EU countries hosting wolves (Linnell and Cretois, 2018). To date there have been no documented incidence of wolves in Denmark behaving aggressively or unafraidly to humans, nor have there been any documented attacks on livestock grazing inside intact and correctly built 'wolf-proof' electric fences (albeit there have been several wolf attacks when 'wolf-proof' fences have been either mal-constructed, damaged or without electricity).

A heated and still more irreconcilable public debate has played out in Danish public and social media for the last six years among wolf

supporters, wolf opponents, fearful citizens, farmers, hunters and politicians. This has happened despite a strong legal protection, modest livestock depredation levels compared to other EU countries and a management plan that addresses how problems should be dealt with and compensated. It has occurred especially so since late 2017 following consecutive attacks on sheep grazing within the territory of the breeding pair. Although researchers have been active to inform with facts, this has not been sufficient to keep the debate from escalating.

Concurrently with the heated debate, the possibility of illegal killings has been addressed albeit not substantiated by hard evidence. The first four immigrants to Denmark (2012–15) that did not die of natural reasons, all disappeared by the end of 2017 (Sunde and Olsen, 2018). Through all years, rumours and claims have been circulating that wolves are shot illegally, and April 16 2018 the illegal killing of a young female wolf was caught on footage in Ulfborg, Jutland (Sonne and Alstrup, 2018; The Guardian, 2018). The wolf (identified as one of at least six pups from the 2017-litter, surviving to 2018) was shot by a local landowner holding an MSc in Forest and Nature Management.

In court, the legal defence of the landowner claimed the wolf behaved unafraidly to humans; and was shot "as an act of self-defence" on distance from a 4-wheel drive vehicle. The footage of the wolf's behaviour up to the kill gave no support for that claim according to internationally reputed wolf experts consulted on this question. The landowner further justified his action as an altruistic effort for the local community because he had the opportunity to intervene in a situation where authorities had failed. On behalf of the landowner, the defence further questioned that the shot animal was a genuine wolf and not a hybrid of wolf × dog as proposed should be the case with all apparent wolves in Denmark (TV2, 2019).

In reality, the 13 wolves from Denmark that so far have been genotyped, all demonstrate to be part of the so-called Central European Lowland population (Sunde and Olsen, 2018; Olsen et al., 2018) established in the late 1990ies by immigrants from the Baltic population (Chapron et al., 2014). The Central European lowland population has been one of the most closely genetically monitored wolf populations in the World (Czarnomska et al., 2013). To illustrate this, the shot specimen's pedigree tree was mapped three generations back (Olsen et al., 2018).

The illegal killing illuminates dynamics of dissent and vigilantism including the role of public media and politicians. In the Danish situation, prominent politicians and other opinion formers have publicly questioned the legitimacy of the present wolf management regime by unsubstantiated claims. For example, MPs (Member of Parliament), including a former Minister of Defence has in several interviews questioned if wolves made it into Denmark without the support of humans (Radio24Syv, 2018; EkstraBladet, 2013). At a public meeting in the local area of the wolf pack on April 9 2018, Denmark's at the time minister of the environment juxtaposed the narrative that the wolves illegally were brought into the country, with the scientific explanation (Hansen, 2018).

Further, in the wake of the illegal kill April 16 2018, prominent opinion formers, including MPs and former Secretary of Foreign affairs, indirectly justified vigilantism which made the Danish National Wildlife Council publicly expressed concerns against such justifications by local as well as national politician (Miljøstyrelsen, 2018; Altinet, 2018).

The wolf context in general and illegal killing in particular exceeds its own context. As illustrated by the Danish case it represents a trajectory of political populism at the expense of modern democratic principles of reasoning based on deliberation and knowledge. The case demonstrate the acceptance of political disagreements to be excluded from the traditional democratic procedures by systematically distorted communication, 'myths', 'fake news', 'barstool biology' and growing distrust towards science and researchers (Habermas, 1998; von Essen, 2017). Communicative distortion is reinforced by social media and various internet forums functioning as echo chambers for reproduction of distrust (Williams et al., 2015). Based on the experiences from Scandinavia we will argue, a kind of public despair and fatigue have emerged

in relation to the wolf-issue, also within the scientific community, and locally there is an almost non-existing social control and self-policing on illegal killing of wolves (Peterson et al., 2018; von Essen and Hansen, 2018).

Opinion formers and public media obviously hold a strong responsibility to uphold reason and keep public deliberation on track while the scientific community also have to reflect on its responsibility. As mentioned in the introduction the first step is to recognize that science is not performed in an isolated space, but in a living world in all its complexity. Secondly, we have to keep in mind the historical lesson that reason separated from the everyday of life of people often leaves the floor to populism with all its totalitarian consequences (Jau, 2016).

With this in mind the described Danish wolf case become a representation of a much bigger socio-political issue and the question is then, how the scientific community can contribute to a better integration of the everyday life of people and the production of scientific knowledge. Not by giving in to myth and problems of fear and conflicting interests and perceptions of nature, nor by patronizing citizens, but by confronting these up front by 1) the means of facts and reasoning, and 2) by the exploration of possible solutions to an apparent dystopic situation by scientific methods. In case of the wolf-issue, this ought to be solvable with a combined natural and social scientific effort. However, it require researchers to interact and include also with those parts of society who experience themselves to be excluded or marginalised from processes of decision-making and Modern knowledge production.

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