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Large predators in protected areas – risk or chance

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Abstract

Large predators already have returned or are returning to Central Europe. Conflicts between man and these species are preassigned. In this paper I try to describe the possible role of protected areas helping to solve these conflicts and to enable a coexistence of man and wolf, bear and lynx in a cultivated landscape.

Keywords

large predators, human dimensions, human/wolf conflict

Introduction

Bear, wolf and lynx have returned to the Alps. Whereas lynx has been native in the Alps for a longer time, bears use the Alps only sporadic and primarily on their edges (KACZENSKY et al. 2013). In contrast after more than 150 years the wolf has come back more or less comprehensive. Starting in the Abruzzo Mountains the wolf has discovered the Alps from the west and in the meantime there is a connection to the Balkan population also. Population have continuously increased since the 1990-ties and it is obvious that distribution as well as population in the Alps will increase further during the next decade (SCHNIDRIG et al. 2016).

Especially from bears attacks on life stock are already known. Larger conflicts are apprehended by wolves and are the same in the Alps as in other parts of its range all over the world (SKOGEN et al. 2017):

- fear of people being attacked by wolves.
- attacks on life stock.
- negative consequences for hunting game.

Central Europe primarily consists of cultivated landscapes created and preserved by man. This is one of the main arguments against the return resp. the remain of wolves in Central Europe. Certainly protected areas may try to conserve the last existing natural landscapes resp. try to conserve extensive cultural landscapes too. Therefore it would contradict the aims of the areas if the establishment of wolves, as original part of the ecosystem, is not allowed in these natural landscapes. On the other hand the wolf also was part of the extensive cultivated landscape resp. managing the wolf was part of the cultural heritage which guarantees the preservation of these landscapes. It is also known that protected areas in general are too small to inhabit a viable wolf population. In best case there is only room for one pack, whereas establishing or remaining of a wolf population is only possible in a large area (SCHNIDRIG et al. 2016). But do have protected areas, which are sometimes a crystallization point for the return of the large predators, an important role in the harmonic coexistence of large predators and man?

Possible roles of protected areas

Even in protected areas measures to protect life stock are necessary because one of the largest problems are attacks on life stock especially by wolves. These attacks are also possible in protected areas and if there are no appropriate actions wolves there can learn, that life stock is an easy prey. Further on they use this knowledge outside protected areas and avoid protective measures as guard dogs or fences. In this respect the protection of life stock in protected areas is as important as outside of these refuges. Consider it as a chance that the management of protected areas has to develop protective measures against large predators too. These experiences are important for further actions on a larger scale.

Model regions

Knowledge, skills and basis for the protection of life stock was lost in some areas e.g. breeding of guard dogs. In protected areas these skills could be revitalized and developed. 150 years ago when the wolf disappeared from Central Europe the utilization of the landscape was quite different from today. Today the landscape not only provides us with food and primary products it is also very important for recreation. Structure of agricultural services and keeping of farm animals have changed essentially too. Therefore the traditional methods of protecting life stock has to be developed to guarantee the newly originated function of landscape resp. it has to be proven that for the effective protection of life stock even a structural change in agriculture is necessary. As an example guard dogs are known as aggressive towards wolf and man and the general opinion is, that only an aggressive guard dog is able to protect its flock. In former times guard dogs had to be aggressive towards man to defend the sheep against stealers. Hopefully the time of sheep stealers is gone and modern guard dogs have to ignore hikers at least. This is possible because guard dogs are only skeptical against people, they are not aggressive towards man in principle (SCHOKE 2003). For a modern guard dog these skills have to be developed or there has to be a selection of these dogs to avoid conflicts between protection of life stock and touristic interests. It is possible to discover and test a lot of these measures especially in protected areas.

Solution of conflicts

Comparing conflicts in different parts of the wolves range always show the same pattern. Primarily conflicts between wolf and life stock breeders enlarge and become conflicts between wolf and hunters. In the end there is a general discussion about problems of the society in principle. Conflicts about wolves are more than the fear of being attacked or losing life stock, mostly it addresses problems of the society in principle (SKOGEN et al. 2017).
Protected areas often have to act in the field of conflict between man and nature. On one hand they should protect nature, on the other hand they have to deal with people living in the area. Affected by protective measures these people guarantee the existence of the characteristic landscape in these protected areas too. Therefore protected areas have had to acquire competences in solving conflicts between nature and people and these competences can also be used to solve the conflicts between large predators and man.

Transfer of knowledge and skills

Protected areas act in a network where appropriate concepts, materials and experiences can be exchanged. This can be an important action for an effective management of conflicts between large predators and man.

Conclusion

Some of the large predators are back in Central Europe and some like the wolf will return for sure. Connected conflicts are preassigned. It is necessary to develop measures to ensure the coexistence between large predators and man otherwise these conflicts will escalate. In this respect the network of protected areas can play an important role because in some cases concepts have been developed already and experiences were made. These experiences have to be exchanged on a large scale to make a coexistence between large predators and man possible.

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