

Human Dimensions Report on Wolf Conflicts in Sweden

By Ruben Bloemsma

Supervised by Sabrina Dressel and Göran Ericsson from the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU)

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1. Introduction

Wolves, an everlasting symbol of conflict in Western society. In Sweden bounty hunting on wolves started during the 17th century. The increased hunting pressure pushed them back from the south, and around 1920 they only occurred in the extreme north. At 1966 the wolf was a protected species in Sweden, at the same time the species was functionally extinct. By the 1970's the wolf also was gone from most of Finland which means that the nearest source population occurred in Russian Karelia. The wolves expanded a little in eastern Finland by the 1970's, and several wolves in northern Sweden were recorded by 1977, probably immigrants from Finland/Russia. In 1978 one record of breeding by wolves occurred in northern Sweden, but the pack was scattered and some members were killed during the following winter, the fate of potential survivors is unknown. Reports of tracks and sightings of two or three wolves in central Scandinavia came in 1978 and 1979. A few years later, in 1983 the first successful breeding in this area in almost one hundred years was recorded (Kardell & Dahlström 2013). After several breedings in the same territory, 1991 was the first year with simultaneous breeding in two different packs. There were 92-108 wolves in Scandinavia by the end of winter 2004, including 11 packs and 11 territorial pairs (Liberg 2006). By 2013 the wolf population in central Sweden and Norway was estimated to consist of 260-330 individuals of which approximately 90 % occurred in Sweden or in border territories (Kaczensky et al. 2013).

As is typical for areas in western affluent countries where wolves recently have re-established a population after a long period of absence (Reinhardt & Kluth 2007), in Sweden several conflicts have arisen since the repopulation of the wolf. I will introduce the main conflicts nowadays.

As can be seen in figure 1, the Swedish/Norwegian wolf population is established in central Sweden, just south of the reindeer herding area. The black dots represent reproduction areas, whereas the grey dots represent sporadic occurrence. The nearest source population, about 800km away, is the Russian/Finnish population. Considering that the current Swedish/Norwegian population is founded by 3 individuals, plus 2 males that successfully bred in 2008, one realizes that the Swedish wolves are highly inbred. Migration between the two populations is impeded by the fact that reindeer herders don't want wolves on their land because they threaten the reindeer (Kaczensky et al. 2013).

However according to the management policy only breeding wolves are not allowed in the reindeer areas, therefore poaching is considered to be the main reason for wolves not to migrate from the Russian/Finnish population to the Swedish/Norwegian one (Liberg et al. 2011).

Now, in the area where the wolves have their current territories hunters and farmers perceive several problems. Hunters that hunt with their dogs running out unprotected experience a loss of hunting dogs to wolves. They do get financial support but claim that it is not sufficient. Additionally wolves predate on game, therefore hunters perceive competition for their game (especially moose). Farmers nowadays leave their cattle mostly unprotected in the field, providing easy prey for wolves. The result: farmers experience a loss of cattle, for which they do get financial compensation but, just like hunters, farmers claim it is not enough, especially not for the emotional hurts (Kardell & Dahlström 2013; Kaczensky et al. 2013; Liberg 2006). So a lot of controversy around the wolf is happening right now, it needs to be protected but local people suffer from its presence.

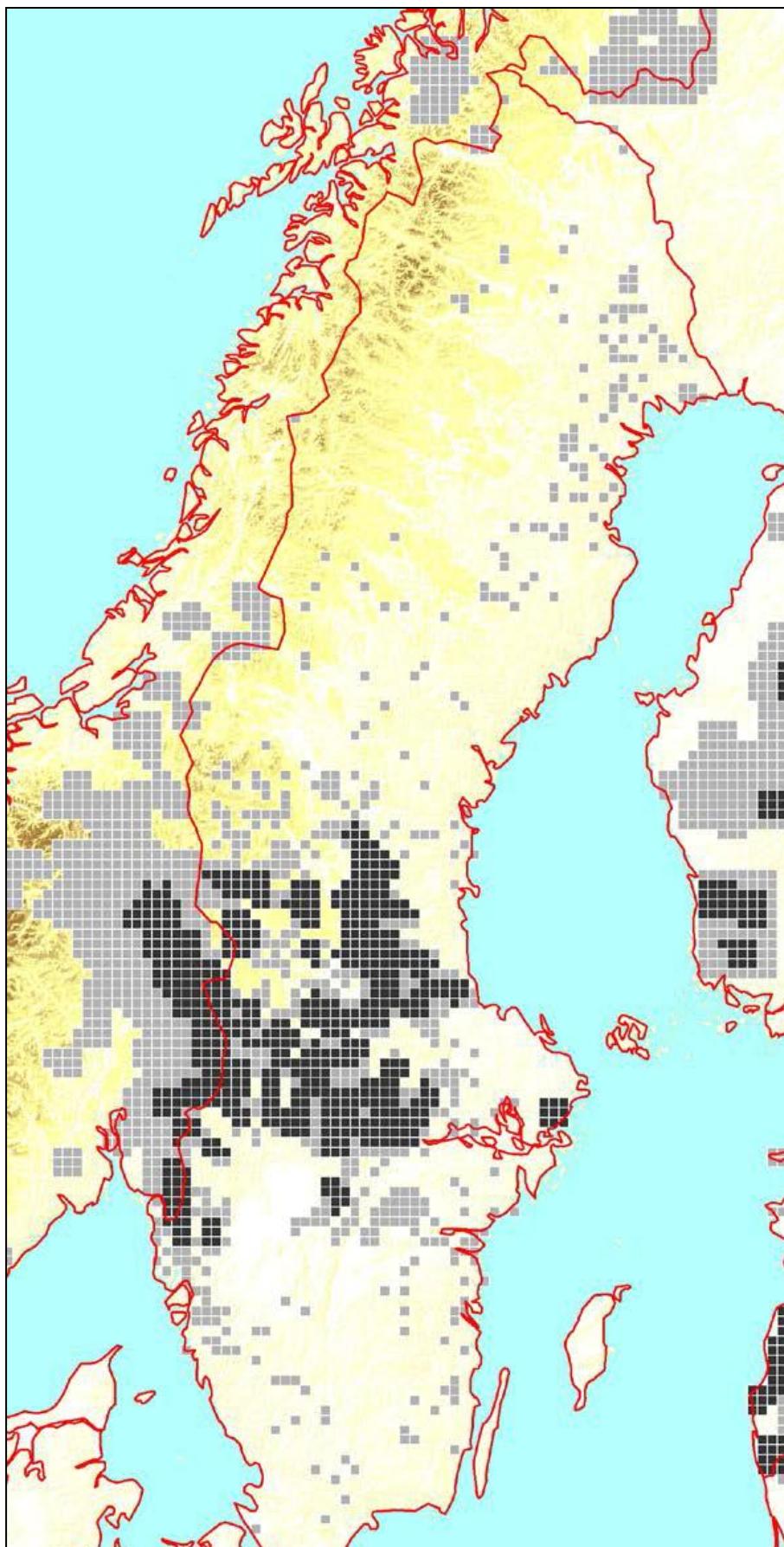


Figure 1. The establishment of wolves in Sweden. The black dots represent reproduction areas, and the grey dots represent sporadic occurrences (Kaczensky et al. 2013).

2. Problem definition

Having said all this, what exactly are the problems in Sweden around the wolf? The genetic depression and attacks on livestock have been well studied (Raikkonen et al. 2013; Flagstad et al. 2002; Karlsson & Sjöström 2011). However, these studies weren't able to actually solve the problems. I don't believe that the studies were wrong, but I do believe that they didn't study the complete conflict. I believe that the conflicts within and between humans are the one and only threat that the wolves face at the moment. However, only few human dimensions professionals have conducted studies on the wolf conflicts in Sweden (Dressel et al. 2014). Therefore this study will dig deeper in the human dimension conflicts concerning the re-establishment of wolves in Sweden. In order to analytically explore the situation the following sub questions will be answered:

1. What are the main stakeholder groups, concerning the current wolf population and its management, and where do they stand for?
2. What impact does the current wolf population and its management have on the main stakeholder groups?
3. How do the main stakeholder groups react to these impacts and what will the effect be on the future wolf population and its management?

2.1. What are the main stakeholder groups, concerning the current wolf population and its management, and where do they stand for?

Urban residents

Sweden is an increasing urbanized country, that is: people are moving from rural areas to urban areas (Berg et al. 2007). This makes the gap between Swedish residents and nature wider, and wider. Thus environmental problems are not on the daily agenda of Swedish urban residents. Therefore they don't think a lot about it, don't directly experience them, and don't form strong attitudes towards them (Lin 2012). The wolf however, is a species that urban residents are familiar with because of its long history of media efforts to present the wolf as the devil (Kardell & Dahlström 2013). So initially urban residents will most likely feel fear when the subject wolf arises. But as media changes over time, nowadays wolves are also presented as beautiful creatures that shape ecosystems to their perfect shape. But as these attitudes didn't arise from direct experience, they are weak (Heberlein 2012). A biology student may for example love wolves, read about them, watch movies, hang wolf posters in his/her room, and claim that he/she has a strong positive attitude towards conserving wolves in Sweden. But as soon as that student will live with for example a hunter family in Värmland, train a hunting dog, see wolves in their backyard every week, hear experiences of and loose his/her own trained hunting dog to wolves, he/she might change from a weak positive attitude towards a strong negative attitude. This change in attitude is not because she didn't know that people in her neighbourhood talk a lot about negative experiences with wolves, or that hunting dogs get killed, this attitude change is because now she feels what it is like to live with wolves as a hunter with the current wolf management plan. What I'm trying to clarify is that urban residents may have attitudes towards wolves, but they are susceptible to change by either direct experiences

or strong influences from the media or extreme stakeholder groups like hunters, farmers, and conservationists (Lin 2012). Also, as Swedish urban residents don't have the wolf conflict on their everyday agenda, they won't express their attitudes loudly towards other stakeholders.

Environmentalists

This year's wolf hunt was opposed by several NGO's and agencies, including the Swedish association for nature conversation, WWF, Swedish carnivore association, nordulv, and wolf association Sweden (Sabrina Dressel Pers. Comm.). These agencies basically form the stakeholder group environmentalists. I am aware that not every NGO or agency within this stakeholder group has exactly the same goals, but as all of them advocate for the conservation of a viable wolf population in Sweden, I aggregate them as one stakeholder group to simplify the content.

In proportion to the Swedish total population, the environmentalists consist of few members. Nevertheless, they basically are the leaders in advocating for wolf recovery and conservation. Environmentalists are driven by both a scientific understanding and an intrinsic value of morality and aesthetics (Lin 2012).

Farmers

Farmers live in rural areas, experiencing wolf encounters and attacks on their livestock. The government compensates their loss of livestock economically and finances preventative schemes to reduce attacks on livestock. However, farmers claim that the compensation does not cover all the losses, especially emotional hurts. Therefore, in general, farmers in Sweden oppose wolf conservation (Lin 2012).

Hunters

Hunters have a long history of competing directly with wolves for common game and their personal life. Knowledge from hunters is passed on from generations or directly from contact with wolves. They are the least afraid of wolves because they have knowledge of how to handle wolf encounters. Hunters do agree with wolf conservation but at limited levels. They believe that wolves kill their hunting dogs and compete for game, mainly moose. Unlike the farmers, hunters don't receive compensation from the government for their loss of game, and they believe that the compensation for their killed hunting dogs is insufficient (Lin 2012).

Reindeer herders (Sami people)

The Sami people live in northern Sweden, where there live the least Swedish citizens. The Sami area is from a biological point of view the most suitable part of Sweden for wolves to live. However since the Sami people earn their living by reindeer herding, and wolves attack reindeer, the Sami people don't want wolves on their land. Thus wolves are not allowed to breed in Sami areas, creating a gap between the Finnish/Russian and Swedish/Norwegian wolf population (Lin 2012).

The Swedish Government

The Swedish Government is responsible for deciding upon wolf management plans. In turn the Swedish environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) is the main institution for implementing large carnivore management in Sweden. It finances research programmes and on their website annual reports on the wolf situation and other investigations can be found.

As the Swedish government consists of politicians, they don't have direct interest relating to the wolf, except to get maximum support from the vast arrange of its voters by demonstrating its political achievements, including maintaining a decent international reputation. Therefore the

government will try to include all groups of stakeholders as well as the public opinion from outside the country. Aside from that the Swedish Government has several responsibilities concerning the wolf, including the accomplishment of the National Law and the European Union Habitats Directive. The latter one includes reaching a Favourable Conservation Status (FCS), on which some discussions are going on (Lin 2012).

2.2. What impact does the current wolf population and its management have on the main stakeholder groups?

The current wolf population has breeding sites in the counties of Örebro, Värmland, Dalarna, Västmanland, and Gävleborg (Kaczensky et al. 2013). Only few urban residents live in these counties, compared to the larger cities in Sweden. Sometimes wolves are wandering on Reindeer herding grounds, but according to the wolf policy they are not allowed to breed there (Kaczensky et al. 2013). Therefore Sami people experience only few direct conflicts with wolves currently. Rural farmers and hunters however are the ones that experience the presence of the wolf the most nowadays. Thus direct impact of the current wolf population is greatest on the hunters and farmers in these counties.

However as the wolf is a very hot topic at the moment, the media spreads every event throughout the whole country. This gives urban citizens chances to make their own opinion, of which the majority is positive for wolf conservation (Lin 2012). I believe that is because the wolf doesn't affect the urban citizen directly, and they get the opinion that the wolf is a beautiful animal, and is important in for certain ecosystems. Therefore the majority of urban residents who do have strong enough attitudes to turn it into behaviour will support the environmentalists. The environmentalists are mostly happy because the wolf is back in Sweden, but they have their worries about the viability of the population in the future (Lin 2012; Heberlein & Ericsson 2005). So environmentalists try to overcome the anti wolf organisations by claiming that hunters and farmers don't have enough knowledge about wolves to understand that it is important to conserve them (Sjölander-Lindqvist 2009). One realizes that the pressure put on hunters and farmers is enormous. But why all this pressure?

As centralisation of political power has recently increased towards the urban areas, rural citizens experience a loss of political influence (Berg et al. 2007). That is, they have less power over their own land and property. Local stores and companies get less clients because people start to move to cities. One can imagine that life in rural areas has become harder than it used to be. Nowadays there is another factor that makes the rural life harder: wolves. And again wolf policy and management is not in the hands of the rural people, which gives them even less power over their property. I can understand that all these factors create rebellion against the return of the wolf, for it's another part of their living which is being controlled by people far away. Thus the pressure felt by hunters and farmers arises from a perceived threat, a threat to lose power over their own property, cultures, and lifestyle (Sjölander-Lindqvist 2009). I believe that this threat is not created only by the return of the wolf, but was already quietly present before. What does one when he feels threatened? One does everything he can to eliminate the threat. For example, both farmers and hunters claim that the financial compensation for the lost cattle or hunting dogs is not enough (Lin 2012). I wonder how the amount of compensation is defined and how much influence the hunters and farmers have had in that. As maybe the only reason why they claim that it is not enough, is because they were not able

to set the amount themselves. A lack of control and power might explain why the majority of the hunters and farmers are so fierce and let their voice being heard so loudly to the Swedish Government.

Knowing all this, I question whether farmers and hunters really oppose wolf conservation because they dislike wolves, or if it's actually because of how it is managed. Which gets me to the current wolf management. The decision maker in wolf management is the Swedish Government, which is located in Stockholm (Kaczensky et al. 2013). As Sweden is a democracy (Regeringskansliet 2014), the Swedish Government wants to attract and please as many voters as possible. Therefore it wants to satisfy all the stakeholder groups as much as possible. About the wolf policy, hunters and farmers have a very strong attitude and participate actively in persuading the Swedish government to listen to their view of how the wolf should be managed (Lin 2012).

In 2009 the Swedish Parliament had decided to attempt to manage the population at their current size. This was done through hunting specific individuals that had taken livestock or pets repeatedly. Which could only be done after application at the county board, except for direct attacks. Also there was some additional strictly controlled hunting in areas with reproducing wolves. The goal was a temporary constant wolf population until evaluation in 2012. In order to persuade hunters to support plans to import unrelated wolves from Finland or Russia and make the population more genetically diverse, the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency allowed two wolf hunts in the years 2010 and 2011. In total 47 wolves were killed, but the translocation of wolves didn't happen because of fears for diseases. Also, Sweden faced the European Union Court on charges of not following the letter of the European Habitat Directive. The latter happened because shooting individuals in a population that is already highly inbred and shut off for migration impedes the road to a favourable conservation status of the wolf in Sweden. In 2013 the Swedish Government responded to these charges of not following the letter of the European Habitat Directive by claiming that shooting the most inbred wolves, would at a stroke decrease the inbreeding coefficient of the population (Kaczensky et al. 2013; Chapron 2014). However this was deliberately wrong, and only another trick to please the European Commission (Chapron 2014).

As further hunts didn't happen because of opposition from the environmentalists and the European Union, the Swedish Government came up with a new trick. In 2012 they asked Chapron (2014) to give them within 30 days a population viability analysis of the wolves. This is a demographic measure of how close the population is to extinction, and crucially, is a separate measure from FCS, which relates to recovery. To avoid misinterpretation of his work, he made sure to write on multiple occasions in the report that it could not be used to estimate FCS. Several reviewers of the report also stressed this point. Yet the government still misused his report to claim that the wolf population in Sweden had reached FCS, as a cover to permit further hunting. And indeed, in the beginning of 2015 another wolf hunt occurred.

Summarized the current wolf population and its management directly affect hunters and farmers in the wolf areas the most. Hunters and farmers feel increased pressure against their cultures, property and lifestyle, which results in a strong negative attitude towards wolf conservation in Sweden. In return the environmentalists try to increase their pressure as well. The Swedish Government listens to the stakeholder groups with the most pressure, and try to please the European Commission also (Chapron 2014). Thus basically there is a "war" going on between these stakeholder groups, a war full of cheap tricks where no one can trust another.

2.3. How do the main stakeholder groups react to these impacts and what will the effect be on the future wolf population and its management?

As I mentioned above, I believe that the negative attitudes among hunters and farmers mostly arise from their loss of control and power. So hunters and farmers will continue to struggle for more power and control. I think that the more influence they have in wolf management, the more they will accept wolf conservation in Sweden. The Environmentalists believe that hunters and farmers don't have enough knowledge about the wolf to accept it (Sjölander-Lindqvist 2009). So they will keep on conducting research and trying to convince the other stakeholder groups how important it is to conserve the wolf. The attitudes of the urban residents will remain weak, and might grow even weaker as they will become used to the media impact, and the wolf issue moves further away from them.

As long as all the stakeholder groups keep acting the way they act now, I believe the wolf population is not going to last long. Change is necessary. The stakeholder groups need to be willing to accept and understand each other. I mean, we're all human, there is no need to fight if we can solve the problem by other means. That is by willing to understand the other and show your weakness to them, this will increase trust and cooperation.

A practical start might be to make everything transparent. Environmentalists who not only show results that support their goal, but also show the other results from any kind of project. Hunters who acknowledge that they don't dislike the wolf itself so much, but that they feel threatened by an increasing loss of control and power over their own property etc. The same goes for farmers. The Urban residents is such a huge diverse stakeholder group, and don't have this issue on their daily agenda, so whatever their actions are I don't know how to handle that. That is also a thing, to acknowledge that one does not know something for sure, seems to be really hard for the different stakeholder groups.

3. Conclusion

My concluding message is that the communication between the stakeholder groups needs to improve in order to manage the Swedish wolf properly and reach the favourable conservation status together. With communication improvement I do not mean improving the methods of communication, I mean the content of the messages that are send between people, and the way they are received. When all stakeholder groups try to understand each other and are honest about themselves, co-management is much easier to implement because the co managers can actually trust each other.

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