



Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions – Biodiversity protection and coexistence with large carnivores in Europe – challenges and opportunities for local and regional authorities

(Own-initiative opinion)

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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS (CoR),

1. highlights the importance of multi-level governance and of the principle of subsidiarity. EU action is an added value due to the trans-boundary aspect of large carnivore policy. Overall, the CoR calls for the involvement and active participation of local and regional authorities to be continued so that new ways can be found, whenever possible, for livestock, people and large carnivores to coexist sustainably and safely on land, in water and in the air, while enhancing biodiversity; proposes that the Member States' species protection measures should be based on the technical data and criteria of local authorities with management powers and responsibility for approving and applying decisions implementing the derogation regime, in line with Directive 92/43/EEC ⁽¹⁾ in the case of large carnivores;

2. highlights the importance of an objective EU policy on large carnivores to contribute to the EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2030 and to the European Green Deal. The CoR underlines the successes of EU legislation in protecting endangered species and improving nature and biodiversity with the connected benefits for our communities. Where significant challenges for coexistence between large carnivores and human activities are being faced, advocates for strong efforts at EU, national, regional and local level to address these challenges and promote harmonious coexistence; measures taken with regard to the protection of a species must always take account of economic, social and cultural requirements as well as regional specificities;

3. reiterates its assessment that the Habitats Directive is fit for purpose; remembers that under Article 16 exceptions are already possible and allow Member States, local and regional authorities for certain management plans or projects, if they are considered necessary for imperative reasons of overriding public interest (i.e. human health, public safety, etc.); emphasises that the protection status of certain species should be periodically reassessed against objective criteria on the basis of the Habitats Directive, taking account of the development of their populations, in order to allow them to coexist with other species and livestock, and to improve both biodiversity and traditional farm management in rural areas. This is without prejudice to the need to exercise caution when assessing and considering changing the protection level of species on the basis of progress of population levels. In case of challenges for coexistence with species covered by the Directive regardless of their level of protection, priority should be given to improvement of prevention measures, educational activities and of the flexibility measures already allowed by EU legislation, especially effective use of derogations; With regard to the use of derogations, the Commission must ensure that these derogations can be effectively implemented by the Member States, thereby prohibiting Member States from undermining the application of this system through national or local legal acts;

⁽¹⁾ Council Directive 92/43/EEC of 21 May 1992 on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora (OJ L 206, 22.7.1992, p. 7).

4. expresses concern at the increase in social conflict arising from the management of large carnivores and their negative impact on nature conservation and restoration policies and rural development, particularly in rural areas where conflicts of coexistence with certain species have increased due to their significant growth in terms of the number of specimens;
5. considers that large carnivores can play a crucial role in contributing to ecosystem restoration and maintaining ecosystem balance, especially by regulating the populations of other species. Large carnivores play a vital role in Europe's natural heritage and their return to parts of Europe where the species had previously been extirpated is a significant success in conservation; however this can also pose significant challenges that must not be overlooked;
6. calls for a genuine 'bottom-up' approach to measures that support the appropriate return of certain large carnivores to European territory, accompanied by targeted, applicable measures to protect livestock and grazing animals where possible and humans, especially in mountain regions, and explicitly encourages the exchange of best practices across borders;
7. strongly supports the work of the EU large carnivore platform and encourages dissemination of its work at local and regional level as well as building synergies with similar initiatives. The CoR values positively the pilot project creating regional large carnivore platforms and suggests extending them with adequate EU support and guidance to promote sharing of knowledge and of best practices; proposes, in particular, that the Commission should offer financial support to establish regional platforms, where there are serious conflicts between large carnivores and extensive livestock farming in order to promote coexistence, promoting the 'bottom-up' involvement of regions, local authorities and livestock farmers and evaluating the application of results as a measurable criterion for such funding;
8. suggests that regional platforms work by monitoring the actions of the different species attacking livestock farms in each region; proposes that the actions of large predators such as eagles and vultures in southern Europe also be monitored and prevented;
9. warns decision-makers not to overlook the fact that this issue is also closely linked to the importance of rural areas, their inhabitants and their farming; the need for the coexistence of both large carnivores and the traditional activity of extensive livestock farming requires that decision-makers be extremely cautious and rely on the most up-to-date technical reports in drawing up legislation, to ensure that flora and fauna are maintained and that human economic activity is maintained in rural and depopulated areas in Europe;
10. considers EU 100 % funding for measures to prevent, reduce or compensate damages to livestock or to crops, fruits and vegetables by large carnivores essential. The European Commission must ensure that sufficient resources are reserved under the next Multiannual Financial Framework, without red tape, to support rural communities, especially those in which population levels of large carnivores have a significant presence; the application of these compensation measures should under no circumstances lead to a reduction in aid for additional costs that farmers might receive as compensation for environmental services provided in extensive livestock farming areas and, where appropriate, compensation received for objective damage, as a result of the legal regime governing financial liability in the Member States or their regions;
11. calls for policymakers to engage in close, technical, cross-border dialogue with biodiversity experts, researchers, nature conservationists, farmers, stockbreeders, beekeepers, game management experts, animal protection organisations, as well as experts from hunting associations and the forest sector and others involved in these fields;
12. highlights the need to ensure an obligation to provide compensation for damages to livestock and domesticated animals in general caused by large carnivores, without unnecessary red tape. Compensation systems should be timely and should fully take into account the economic impact of damages, including side effects beyond the number of animals killed. Compensation mechanisms should be subject to a reliable and proportionate monitoring system linked to the proof of adequate efforts in terms of prevention measures, and be accessible for all farmers;

13. holds the opinion that the perspective of gender balance would be important in this context to empower women in rural farming and biodiversity. Gender equality is a core European value and a fundamental principle of the European Union enshrined in the Treaties and in Article 23 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union; gender equality is a tool in combating the depopulation of Europe's rural areas;

14. considers that we need to create an environment that fosters gender balance, and promotes women's active participation and leadership in biodiversity conservation and sustainable agriculture. Therefore, it would be important to advocate for policies promoting gender equality in rural sectors, ensuring fair representation and participation of women in decision-making. Developing targeted educational programmes focusing on agricultural techniques and entrepreneurship is deemed essential to attract women in these fields; the goal of gender equality should play a prominent role in the target architecture of the post-2027 common agricultural policy;

15. acknowledges that coexisting with large carnivores can pose challenges to human life and safety in general and underscores the critical need to address these concerns. The CoR highlights the need to fully comprehend the challenges of local communities, acknowledging that the issue of safety goes beyond the number of attacks; considers it essential to promote education of local communities to avoid behaviours that could increase risks of attacks, such as inadequate food waste management. An efficient and timely system of derogations along with well-trained and equipped response teams are needed for handling dangerous situations. The CoR highlights the need to base safety policies on objective criteria, rejecting emotional positions that blow the danger represented by large carnivores out of proportion;

16. recalls that successful coexistence between humans and large carnivores, especially wolves has been demonstrated in various European regions, where effective preventive measures that can help to reduce damage, including the installation of various types of fences, acquisition of livestock guard dogs, and shepherding, have been implemented, but is aware of the limited implementation of preventive measures on certain extensive farms because of the farm management system applied, e.g. a semi-wild farming;

17. acknowledges that the monitoring of the conservation status of large carnivores and the application of the derogation system cannot be based on an impracticable sample-based calculation, but should instead be based on the best available information obtained using scientifically proven methodologies;

18. draws attention to the importance of preparing animal health systems, especially cross-border alert systems and cooperation, for the increasing risk of epidemics due to factors like climate change, habitat loss in general, and in regions with increasing populations of large carnivores also the increased interaction between wild animals, livestock and humans; highlights at the same time the contribution large carnivores may have in preventing zoonoses by preying on old and sick wild ungulates, thereby benefitting livestock and human health by reducing the reservoirs and transmissions of pathogens and diseases;

19. stresses that the Common Agricultural Policy should support biodiversity protection and animal welfare. The rural development funds in the EAFRD have untapped potential to support coexistence, particularly through investments and enhanced agro-environmental area payments for areas where the presence of large predators might prevent delivery of environmentally beneficial grazing practices;

20. considers that traditional livestock farming in mountainous areas is crucial for maintaining valuable ecosystems. Adhering to EU grassland guidelines is pivotal in preserving natural treasures like mountain pastures and grazelands;

21. observes that areas where populations of large carnivores are distributed and areas of livestock-related activities typically overlap in many cases, thus necessitating the implementation of appropriate measures to prevent conflicts, such as the implementation of preventive measures, where feasible, and the effective application of the derogation system laid down in the Directive;

22. stresses that, in the context of EU enlargement, it should be ensured that candidate countries get support in order to adhere to the EU standards of environmental protection and co-existence with large carnivores, while ensuring that the future Member States have access to accumulated good practices in an organised way as soon as possible;

23. stresses the importance of prioritising human life and safety when large carnivores enter populated areas and pose a potential threat to the people living there and their economic activity; recommends that local and regional authorities receive support to adeptly handle such situations, ensuring that urban planning includes provisions, also for the safe evacuation of carnivores when necessary; points to the need, in such situations, to apply the derogations timely where the preconditions are met;

24. underlines that, although widely used, implementing electric or other fences in fragmented landscapes that make it difficult or impossible in practice to implement preventive measures, especially in small-scale farming areas, or in protected natural areas where such infrastructure would limit connectivity for these and other fauna species, poses limitations, and therefore calls for greater diversification of preventive measures and for the local communities affected and at risk to coordinate exchanges of best practices, assuming that the introduction of preventive measures is not feasible or is ineffective for certain territories or farms;

25. suggests that the existing data on biodiversity, should be supplemented by Eurostat with data on large carnivores collected at NUTS 3 level and other data relevant to policy monitoring, thus providing the opportunity for the policy area to be based on updated verified data collected according to a harmonised methodology in all Member States;

26. considers it of the utmost importance that regions readjusting to coexistence with large carnivores receive special attention, especially that, in many cases, they are also faced with other geographical, economic and demographic challenges, and that both EU policy and Member State planning should take a holistic approach;

27. notes that extensive livestock farming is an essential pillar for certain territories in the EU, helping to maintain their grazing land in good condition, generating quality products, shaping the landscape, helping to control forest fires, regulating water cycles and soil quality, enhancing biodiversity and helping to preserve cultural heritage and territorial identity. This is, therefore, an activity that aims to integrate with and respect local ecological processes, as it must necessarily be adapted to them in order to maintain the production process;

28. stresses the importance of extensive livestock farming as part of the system and a key asset for the development, life and economy of our rural environment. In the face of the challenge of the depopulation of Europe's rural areas, we need to support the economic activities that keep people in rural areas;

29. notes that compensation and prevention programmes in many Member States impose administrative burdens on injured persons and farmers; suggests that EU-wide recommendations on property and personal compensation be developed and therefore urges public institutions to eliminate any unnecessary red tape, as this is the only way to ensure equal access to opportunities for people with low skills, often living in poverty and isolated areas; encourages therefore the dissemination of best practices, for instance, by taking into account the experiences from the pilot project creating regional large carnivore platforms;

30. considers that, since extensive and small scale livestock farming, especially in its traditional, environmentally friendly forms, contributes significantly to preserving and enriching biodiversity, it is necessary to take specific steps to address the significant labour and health and safety challenges associated with this activity. This includes problems caused by the presence of large carnivores, as well as continuous 24-hour work days, stress and lack of adequate rest. In this context, the CoR highlights the need to provide additional financial support to address these issues effectively;

31. suggests that Member States should receive additional resources to cover the full cost of preventive and compensation measures put in place to ensure harmonious coexistence;

32. welcomes the scientific research and innovation activities in many Member States to help prevent or to reduce conflicts and improve coexistence with large carnivores and the fact that in many cases smart farming and livestock tools such as drones, thermal imaging and IoT systems are helping to reduce or even prevent damage;

33. points out that in order to introduce smart and digital tools to prevent large carnivore attacks, comprehensive broadband deployment is needed in all areas of the European Union, especially in rural, remote and mountainous areas, which are the areas most affected by these attacks;

34. invites the Commission to ensure that Member States, in their biodiversity reporting due by 2025, consult with relevant local and regional authorities to ensure that local perspectives are included in their reporting, ensuring that the information available to the competent authorities in the management of large carnivores is incorporated and objective methodologies are included in the assessment of the conservation status of these taxa;

35. draws attention to the fact that conservation of large carnivores, and especially wolves is our common European priority, and therefore that data collection, assessment and policy planning for large carnivores across Member States could be further improved. It therefore recommends that the Commission should develop an appropriate methodology to enable Member States to measure the conservation status of large carnivores using harmonised criteria and thus develop policies that are realistic and consistent with the objective of their conservation and coexistence with human activities and in particular with livestock farming activities;

36. considers that, compared to the previous situation before 1992, the number and spatial distribution of large carnivores has increased to such an extent that they are present not only in their former habitats, but also in regions where they have not been present for centuries, or in some cases never existed, and therefore a quarter of the EU territory is now directly affected by coexistence with large carnivores, so it is time to examine whether current support and institutional arrangements are of the right scale and can respond effectively to significantly changed circumstances;

37. calls on the Commission to inform the Member States of the need to make progress in resolving disputes over the excessive spread of large carnivores by means of measures covered by European legislation, including, on a limited and selective basis, lethal control of specimens, applying the derogation system laid down in Article 16 of Directive 92/43/EEC in the case of species with conservation status at local level that makes it possible to ensure the neutral effect of this control;

38. assures the Commission and the Member States of its support if they apply rural proofing alongside the principles of multi-level governance and subsidiarity when designing policies and adapting development and support systems for large carnivores, especially in the context that large carnivores live almost exclusively in rural regions;

39. invites the Commission to consider attaching great importance to support for basic research, technological development and innovation in the field of large carnivore co-existence in policy-making, in order to make more efficient, accessible and affordable technology available to farmers and local and regional authorities;

40. stresses that it is also open to territorial impact assessment of the current legal framework and future policies on large carnivores, in cooperation with the Commission;

41. draws attention to the fact that, in the absence of adequate social acceptance, conflicts over large carnivores can jeopardise coexistence, and therefore considers it of the utmost importance to use appropriate communication channels that address the diverse needs of individuals, ensuring accessibility for all. This includes the imperative to develop policies using objective data that are appropriate for the actual situation of the region, disseminate information, share good practices, advices and provide assistance for enhanced inclusivity, taking into account the specific situation of the linguistic minority concerned, where appropriate;

42. highlights the need for effective training of livestock guarding and herding dogs to protect humans and to reduce dangers to other animals; suggests also developing welfare practices for these dogs and recommends the development of care guidelines for elderly dogs;

43. highlights the economic opportunities brought by the presence of large carnivores connected with sustainable tourism, research and local product branding and promotes dissemination of best practices;
44. considers that, in some cases, the increased spread of large carnivores is in our common interest, although in other cases this increase in numbers of large carnivores is causing problems for the common interest in rural habitats. The negative externalities associated with this cannot be borne only by the communities directly affected, and therefore calls for solidarity of urban regions and citizens in general who do not yet have large carnivores near their homes;
45. welcomes the efforts of the European Parliament to ensure that EU law on biodiversity and large carnivores is also brought more closely into line with the international legal obligations of Member States;
46. suggests that the Commission involve relevant findings of other EU institutions while planning the post-2027 period, to assess how more targeted funding could be provided from EU Funds to the protection of biodiversity and co-existence with large carnivores, if necessary setting up tailored means of support;
47. supports involvement of local stakeholders, including public authorities, researchers, nature conservationists, NGOs, hunters, gamekeepers, foresters and livestock farmers in knowledge transfers and in dissemination of best practices, including those from LIFE projects and good examples of Natura 2000 management;
48. considers that the presence of species such as the wolf and the bear in human environments requires an effort to achieve coexistence between certain economic uses and the conservation of the wolf itself, so that the impact caused by its predation on extensive livestock farming can be reduced. To preserve its population, there is a need to promote measures that adequately reduce and compensate for damage to extensive livestock farming;
49. underlines the importance of dealing with all species of large carnivores. The public debate is often focused only on bears and wolves. Eurasian lynxes, Iberian lynxes, golden jackals and wolverines, eagles, vultures, bearded vultures and other predatory birds have specific challenges and present specific conflicts, in some cases associated with specific regional areas, such as wolverine predation on semi-domestic reindeers in Sweden and Finland;
50. expresses concerns about the presence of wolf-dog hybrids that present problems for biodiversity and might create damages to human activities. Measures to prevent hybridisation should be promoted, especially control of stray and free-ranging dogs. Hybrids should continue not to be included among EU protected species, but measures should be taken to prevent wolves from being intentionally or mistakenly killed as wolf-dog hybrids;
51. supports and flags up projects that are being developed and tested in some mountain regions which are home to a large number of grazing animals during the summer months. These projects combine various aspects, including the promotion of the history, culture and traditions of mountain grazing. Not only do these specific projects promote local features, they also combine the use of traditional prevention systems with the testing of technological tools that use artificial intelligence;
52. highlights the importance of providing financial support for farmers' staff, especially in the case of extensive farms using open or semi-open grazing. This is because the presence of large carnivores makes it necessary to monitor the animals on the grazeland constantly, day and night, as well as encouraging the use of rotational grazing, which is more effective than continuous grazing. There is evidence that, especially on these types of farms, attacks by large carnivores occur chiefly at night. The last few mountain grazing seasons have revealed a natural change in the grazing system; with the arrival of large carnivores, the balance shaped over the last century has changed dramatically. In many mountain pastures, animals are tending to avoid grazing in the more remote areas near woods and instead staying close to buildings because they are afraid of sudden attacks by large carnivores. This is leading to changes in the forage: the increase in weeds and subsequent expansion of wooded areas is undermining biodiversity;

53. calls on the Commission to consider more targeted funding, supporting projects (currently predominantly funded by local and regional authorities) implemented in rural mountain areas where extensive farms using open or semi-open grazing techniques are common. Very often it is difficult or impossible to use traditional prevention systems on this type of farm. At the same time, this farming method maintains and protects biodiversity, the landscape and local traditions;

54. points out that the perception of green and digital challenges has been one of the causes of the current protests in the sector. There is a need to share the concerns of farmers and livestock breeders and to come up with solutions that involve them and allay their feeling that their concerns are being neglected.

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The President
of the European Committee of the Regions
Vasco ALVES CORDEIRO
