

Anja Dietmann (AD) in conversation with Birte Brechlin (BB)

AD We are pleased that you agreed to do this interview. Ms. Brechlin, can you introduce yourself and your field of expertise?

BB Thank you very much for the invitation. I am a biologist and work for NABU (Naturschutzbund Deutschland e.V.) as policy officer for Wolf- und Wildtierschutz (Wolf and Species Conservation). There, I am responsible for political work, cooperation with other associations (from nature conservation to agriculture) both nationally and internationally, for communication and positioning within the association itself and of course serve as the contact person for press and public relations.

AD What is NABU's mission?

BB Our slogan already says it, "NABU—for people and nature." That points to our aspiration to create nature protection with and for the people on-site. On the subject of wolves, NABU has evolved over the years and with new challenges. We do not stand for the romanticization of animals, but for objective communication and dialogue. We work together with livestock farmers, hunters, etc., promote herd protection solutions and research, and also advocate for long-term and acceptable solutions at the political level.

AD What led to the fact that wolves had been exterminated in the area of present-day Germany? What fears were there, and still are, of the animal?

BB Back then, too, the reasons were a complex mixture of actual threats and politically motivated acts. During the Middle Ages, the plague, bad harvests, and poverty made life difficult in many places. When, on top of that, their own livestock fell victim to wolves, the survival of the families was in danger. At that time, the church and the authorities were also trying to create simple images of *the enemy* to explain the supposed reasons for so much suffering (even though some of the suffering was due to unjust enrichment of named authorities). It was no coincidence that the witch hunts and the extermination of the wolves took place concurrently. But factors such as deforestation, droughts and long winters were also playing their part. Where there was less game, humans and wolves now faced each other as direct competitors for food. The background of the wolf persecution is of course much more complex and cannot be described in a nutshell, but it is certainly interesting to examine today's conditions against their historical background. The actual reasons for injustice and suffering were not solved by wolf persecution neither then, nor now.

AD How and when did the wolf come back to Germany as a so-called *returnee*?

BB In 2000, the first sedentary, reproducing pack in Germany after 150 years was found in the Lausitz region of Saxony. There have always been migrating wolves, because the animals are extremely mobile and can travel very long distances in search of free territories. Those migrating wolves, however, were almost always shot by decree. Thanks to international efforts, populations have recovered in many places in the last few decades. With the Washington Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora of 1973, wolves were defined as an animal species worthy of protection for the first time. The GDR signed as well, but continued to allow the year-round hunting of wolves. Since 1992, all EU member states have committed them-

selves to restoring and maintaining the status of endangered species and their habitats under the Habitats Directive. Since then, wolves have also been considered a strictly protected species in Germany and may therefore only be shot with exceptional permission. In the meantime, there are wolves again in almost all of Germany's federal states. For the monitoring year (from the 1st of May to the 31st of April) 2019/2020, 128 packs and 36 pairs were confirmed. The official information on wolves in Germany (e.g. where and how many there are) can be found at www.dbb-wolf.de.

AD Can you explain the meaning of *Car Trunk Wolf*?

BB The old and outdated rumor about alleged *Car Trunk Wolves* was spread by a hunting magazine. They were of the opinion that conservationists were secretly bringing wolves in their cars from Poland to Germany in order to artificially introduce them here. Some opponents of wolves still use this argument today to deny the animals their protected status as a native species. Ironically, it all started because a van that was stopped by the federal police was smuggling Steppenwolf bicycles.

AD What does it mean to *remove* a wolf?

BB In this context, the word *removed* means that an animal is taken from the wild, this can theoretically include relocation as well as lethal capture. In the case of the wolf, however, it mostly means that the animal is shot. (It wouldn't comply with animal welfare law to keep an animal that has been born in the wild in captivity.) Since *shooting* doesn't sound so sexy, the term *lethal removal* is often used, especially in the media.

AD In 2019 there was a debate over the regulations for shooting wolves. In this discussion, the right-extreme party AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) tried to stir up fears towards the animals. The Greens and the Left compared the AfD's image of wolves to the *Little Red Riding Hood* fairy tale. To what extent does the wolf actually pose a danger to humans? Do you see an analogy here to right wing politics, in regard to immigration policy? Maybe like a fear of the foreigner?

BB Wolves are usually completely harmless to humans. We do not fit into their prey pattern, nor do they see us as competitors. Nevertheless, we need to relearn some things about how to behave in nature and how (not) to interact with wildlife. Leaving rubbish and food scraps is not only polluting, but can also attract wild animals and/or teach them to associate the smell of humans with food. This can lead to unwanted behaviours where wolves might thereupon approach humans beyond their usual wariness. Since this could lead to potentially harmful behavior, these animals would have to be shot in the name of human safety. So, as in many cases the saying applies: "a fed wolf is a dead wolf." It is absolutely possible however, for recreation to occur in wolf-areas. In North America, there are very popular hiking routes through areas where not only elusive wolves live, but also black bears or even mountain lions. People still go hiking there by the thousands every year. The difference lies in the informed attitude of people. Good and clear information is crucial here.

Husbandry practices in Germany have existed for over a century without the presence of wolves. Now, we need to re-adapt. Protection of domestic and farm animals must be tailored in wolf territories. This needs to happen with the involvement of the

stakeholders and needs to be financed by the state. States where wolves and bears have never been extinct show that a co-existence is very well possible. As already mentioned, the issue of the wolf was and is primarily a political one. Hardly any other animal carries so much historical and cultural baggage. It is nothing new that the AfD likes to use the same vocabulary for its wolf policy as it does for its refugee policy, and that this is oriented towards that of the time of the national socialist party in Germany. What I find scary is how successful they are with it. I can't remember any single animal species ever making it onto an election manifesto. However, I wouldn't be surprised if wolves also ended up as an issue in the next federal election, and not only by the AfD. The strategy itself is promising, however grotesque it may be. Other parties are also already using the wolf issue to win votes, for example the SPD (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands) in Lower Saxony. There, too, I see false statements and promises that will evidently not solve the problem.

In an increasingly chaotic world, clear images of the enemy and supposedly simple solutions are very attractive, as they promise order and clarity. The real challenges we face as a society are usually lost in the process and no good has been done to anyone.

AD What protection does the wolf currently need in Germany? What is still missing?

BB The legal protection of wolves is sufficient as it is. They fall under specific wildlife conservation rules and may therefore neither be disturbed nor killed. There are exceptional cases for wolves that have repeatedly overcome herd protections. This is also reasonable, because once wolves have learned to disregard this protection, they can potentially cause major damage to livestock in the future. The crucial point of whether wolves will survive in our society in the long term or not is *acceptance*. Public relations that inform people about how to behave in wolf areas and thus make them lose their fears is one part of it. Another is how to deal with grazing livestock. Pasturing livestock farmers are the group most directly affected by the presence of wolves. They are forced to adapt to the new situation. Wolf-repellent measures such as electrified fences, shepherding or even guard dogs not only cost a lot of money to purchase, but also involve a lot of work. In addition, traditional livestock farming (including pasturing and transhumance) has been in increasingly bad shape for decades, as it has been extremely neglected by agricultural policies for a long time.

AD Could you go into more detail about the current situation of grazing livestock farmers here? What are the ways to establish a peaceful coexistence of livestock and wolves?

BB The situation of sheep and goat farmers especially is quite disastrous economically. They provide invaluable services for the preservation of the cultivated landscapes and biodiversity, but are hardly adequately rewarded for this. Agricultural policies, which still link their financial support primarily to land ownership, have failed for decades and increasingly fail to support the development of this (and other) types of grazing livestock. Even without the additional burden of wolf depredations, these farms usually operate on the verge of their possibilities. If we want to create acceptance for wolves in society—and we have to, because this is the most important factor for the long-term survival of the animals—we have to include all the people involved. It is therefore essential that (especially extensive) grazing be allowed to regain its economic stability and recognition. In addition, additional expenditure and fencing material for wolf-repellent herd protection must be financed by the states. The EU has already released a 100% funding for this in 2018, but it is up to the countries (and in Germany, the federal states) to implement it, and many are quite slow with their efforts. There are already many best-practice examples from neighboring countries and also from our own, e.g. in Brandenburg, which show that wolf-repellent herd protection is the most decisive means against wolf depredations. Studies also show that wolf culling does not improve the situation. The way to sustainable coexistence must therefore go through (as extensive as possible) herd protection. Problems are mainly to be found where wolves have only recently become present and/or where politicians are reluctant to implement herd protection and instead indulge in the game of polemics and populism. So, here again, the story is a political one.

There are solutions for the peaceful coexistence of grazing animals and wolves and these solutions are constantly being developed further. But it also depends on the willingness and the opportunity of the people to actually implement them. On the subject of wolves, the positions are sometimes extremely entrenched. Extreme nature conservationists play just as much a role as angry shepherds or mood-setting politicians. Influential lobbyists, such as the Bauernverband (Farmers' Association), also have their hands in the game at national and EU level and block possible approaches to sustainable solutions in agriculture. Many in media like to heat up the situation with emotional reports to increase their audience. This is an explosive combination that will get us nowhere. We need objective dialogue and sensible solutions. Both already exist, but the solutions are repeatedly threatened by political attempts. Hardly any discussion about a single animal species is as sensitive and multi-faceted as the one about wolves.