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Interview with Prof. Willi Zimmermann, lecturer in forestry and nature conservation policy at the Federal Institute of Technology (ETH), Zurich

Room for the wolf, lynx and bear

What is your dream of Switzerland: an oasis for beasts of prey?

Switzerland is too small and – particularly in the Mittelland – too densely populated for this idyll. I could imagine wild animals being rehabilitated in the higher regions. I have a lot of sympathy for wolves, lynxes and bears in our country. So far the rehabilitation experiment with the lynx has proved highly positive. Added to this is the very high acceptance of all carnivores in the Ticino, where according to our survey over 70% of respondents would willingly tolerate three named species of predatory animal. The population's favourable attitude to wild predators may be due to the remoteness and wildness of many Ticino valleys, the disproportionately high amount of forested land (equivalent to around 50% of the surface area), carefully targeted information campaigns by environmental organisations, or even mythological (Romulus and Remus!) and cultural factors.

Is the wolf a danger to people?

Sensation-seeking stories of wolves posing a threat to the population are relatively rare, and their veracity is not fully proven. I have no qualms about wolves returning to Switzerland. But that doesn't deny the fact that the wolf, like the lynx, can and will cause harm to domestic and wild animals. However, the damage that wolves cause to flocks of sheep is minor compared with the number of animals which die from natural accidents. Many sheep suffer falls in upland pastures, succumb to illness or viruses, or are chased and pestered to death by stray dogs.

But can the wolf be permitted to attack sheep?

The wolf will hardly obey any law to the contrary! It is equally justifiable to ask whether Nature can support the numbers of sheep, goats and cattle currently inhabiting our Alps. Their grazing habits and the tread of their hooves cause a great deal of damage and threaten the sensitive ecosystem. In recognition of this fact, a process of natural and landscape preservation has been initiated which entails a revision of the alpine cultivation system. This



(Photo: mediacolors/R. Le Guen)

The lynx enjoys a high level of acceptance among the Swiss population.

discussion must also address the question of animal control.

Nevertheless, do you sympathise with the complaints of cattle farmers and hunters?

Complaints about wolves mainly stem from sheep farmers in the Valais, who have influenced as well as distorted opinion in this canton where sheep farming is now largely a hobby occupation and a status symbol. With the growing trend towards raising thoroughbreds, sheep-farming has also acquired social cachet and economic importance. Incredible prices are paid in the Valais for thoroughbred sheep with a good pedigree. Given such collector prices, any loss is bound to hurt. Since the numerous part-time sheep-farmers also pull a respectable political punch, it's hard to find any politicians willing to speak in the wolf's favour. Sheep-farmers in the Ticino have nowhere near such political clout.

The interviewee

Willi Zimmermann is a lawyer and professor at the Federal Institute of Technology. His speciality is the relationship between forests, Nature and society, and he has conducted a survey on the rehabilitation of wild animals in Switzerland.

Which regions of Switzerland would be suitable habitats for the wolf, lynx and bear?

The lynx lives primarily in the lower Alps. This explains the particular opposition to this animal by residents of the Bernese Oberland, the lower Fribourg Alps and the Jura. The wolf and the bear prefer remote alpine regions, so their main potential habitats would be mountainous cantons like the Valais, Grisons or Ticino. It was also here that these animals were eradicated at the beginning of this century.

Why did wild beasts of prey disappear?

Hunters and, above all, poachers killed them off. Hunters nowadays regulate the stocks of chamois and deer instead of wolves. Their main concern is to ensure a sufficiently large stock of game. Just how great their interest is in the overriding ecological aspects and in carnivores is uncertain. By and large, they have left this field of combat to the sheep-farmers.

Does Switzerland need wild animals?

That is too absolute a question. But wild animals can be an economic as well as an ecological enhancement. Their value to Man in terms of experience and education is high. Every year thousands of Swiss make a pilgrimage to Canada to watch bears. They could do this just as well in Switzerland: the Swiss National Park attracts over 100,000 visitors a year, most of whom are drawn by the extraordinary wild life. Moreover, wild animals ensure a balanced fauna and are interesting for research purposes.

Can wild animals actually be kept back at our national borders?

Of course we cannot prevent them entering Switzerland, for example from Northern Italy's Stelvio National Park or the mountains of Piedmont. All in all, more international co-operation is called for. There are already positive signs of such collaboration, for example the Espace Mont-Blanc project and the idea of combining Stelvio with our National Park.

Is the alternative the eradication of all European carnivores?

On the basis of existing international agreements alone we must not allow these animals to die out. There is a move to create a network of natural habitats in Europe. If Switzerland opposed such a move, this would be akin to creating a natural barrier in the higher Alps. No-one is interested in that.

Interview: Alice Baumann