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The big wolf hunt in the Swiss mountains

The wolf is under strict protection in Switzerland. Yet, last December and January, hunters shot about one sixth of the country's wolf population with official authorisation. It's a long story.



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In 1871, a shot rang out through the woods near Irgna (canton of Ticino) – and Switzerland's last known wolf was dead. That was the end of them; at least until 1995 when wolves returned to the Swiss Alps. They made themselves at home, formed packs and extended their living space. In November 2023, Switzerland had 30 packs or about 300 wolves. Most Swiss welcome the return of the predator. That was confirmed by the popular vote in 2020 on a new hunting law opposed by nature conservation organisations. One of its provisions had been the culling of the wolf population. The people said no. Although there was widespread agreement with shooting wolves who were attacking sheep and causing damage, killing the protected animal as a pre-emptive measure was deemed a step too far by a majority of the electorate.

However, 'proactive population control' has since been passed into law. In 2022, the parliament approved a revised hunting law allowing the culling of wolves as a pre-emptive measure. So, the paradigm shift that the people didn't want has nonetheless occurred. At the end of 2023, the Federal Council furthermore decided, in spectacular haste, to fast-track and implement specific provisions of the revised law. New Environment Minister Albert Rösti (SVP) spelled out what this meant in practice: from 1 December 2023 to 31 January 2024, the cantons with a wolf population were allowed to kill a total of 12 packs and partially cull six more. The other 12 packs were to be left untouched. The response was immediate, with 800 hunters in Valais requesting further instructions on how to proceed with the wolf hunt.

The courts throw a spanner in the works

The start of the hunt shook three nature conservation organisations out of their shock-induced paralysis. They launched objections to some of the pack culling authorisations granted by the Federal Council and met with a measure of success: on 3 January 2024, the Federal Administrative Court confirmed, halfway through the big wolf hunt, that the objections would postpone the cull. The hunt, or part of it at least, was suspended. The legal argument on which the ruling is based centres on irreversibility: if a wolf is shot, the wolf is dead; if the court subsequently decides the shooting was not legal, the wolf cannot be brought back to life. Death is final.

The interim ruling by the Federal Administrative Court applied the brake to the hasty measures adopted by the Federal Council. At time of publication, the court's final decision was still pending. Still, whatever the judges decide, one thing is for sure. During the December/January window, over 50 of Switzerland's 300 wolves were killed, or one sixth of the population. As the final ruling is awaited, the debate remains heated due to the new measures introduced by Environment Minister Rösti. Previously it had been up to the scientists and wildlife biologists to give guidance on these matters. They maintain that 20 packs must be left untouched to ensure the wolf's sur-

vival in Switzerland. Reinhard Schnidrig, who heads the wildlife conservation section at the Federal Office for the Environment has consistently held that position. He first told "Swiss Review" in 2015 that 20 packs were needed for survival of the species; 60 packs were ecologically sustainable; and "somewhere in between" lay "what is socio-economically feasible". Federal Councillor Rösti now finds that 12 packs are enough. The nature conservation organisations aren't the only ones scratching their heads wondering what lies behind this much lower threshold. Is the environment minister prepared to accept the extinction of this protected species in Switzerland? Going forward, is politics to be the sole arbiter of Swiss environmental questions instead of science? And, if so, how does that translate into managing the huge environmental challenges facing us: climate change and species extinction?

Urban versus rural Switzerland

Social tensions are also simmering following these recent events. Switzerland's urban population, which is detached from nature, is accused of having a romanticised view, seeing the wolf as evidence that a real Alpine wilderness is still out there, conveniently glossing over the fact that the urban Swiss are overexploiting the Alpine region for leisure purposes and changing its very nature. At the same time, sympathy is also thin on the ground for Switzerland's mountain folk, for whom letting sheep roam the Alps during summer is a cherished tradition. The Federal Administrative Court sees it thus: federal authorities have authorised the hunting of entire wolf packs in areas where measures to protect the sheep would have been entirely feasible but were not taken. Choosing to shoot the wolves instead when the federal government has earmarked millions of Swiss francs every year for the purpose of protecting flocks (2024: 7.7 million) is what is causing friction between urban and rural Switzerland.

This dispute also helps demonstrate why nature conservation in Switzerland is under pressure right now. It has to do with the urban-rural balance of power in the Federal Council. Albert Rösti's proximity to the farmers explains his wolf policy. His department is also riven by conflicting objectives: it is responsible for building roads, railways, dams and power plants – all potentially environmentally harmful constructions – but at the same time is also responsible for protecting the environment. These conflicting interests are a legacy: through the decades, Swiss environmental policy has primarily been about exploiting the natural environment, with conservation coming second. Whether conservation or exploitation has the upper hand depends on who leads the department. Rösti's predecessor, Simonetta Sommaruga, preferred the former; Rösti leans more towards the latter. Be that as it may, the last chapter of the wolf saga has yet to be written.

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An extended version of the article can be found at revue.ch