



The wolf is on its way

Thanks to the exodus from the European countryside and improved protection measures, the wolf is gaining ground. Alterra worked with 55 different parties to draw up a plan for protecting the wolf and its habitat and ensuring the peaceful cohabitation of people and this predator. TEXT MARION DE BOO ILLUSTRATIONS RHONALD BLOMMESTIJN AND SCHWANDT INFOGRAPHICS

The dark figures move too quickly to be seen / They are four-legged and they look really mean,' sang Dutch musician Drs. P in the nineteen seventies in a ballad set in the Russian forests. The wolf has gone west since then, advancing from Russia and eastern Poland at a speed of 100 kilometres per year and producing five new wolf packs every year.

In November a Wolf Plan (see box) was published, written by Alterra Wageningen UR at the behest of the Dutch ministry of Economic Affairs, the Dutch provinces and the wildlife fund Faunafonds in an effort to ensure the return of this mythical predator goes smoothly. Alterra collaborated closely with the Wolves in the Netherlands platform, an alliance of various nature organizations.

'The ministry asked for a plan which had

broad public support,' says ecologist Geert Groot Bruinderink of Alterra. 'So we consulted 55 stakeholders from the touring association ANWB to the Mammals Association.' There were discussions between livestock holders, hunters and nature conservationists about issues such as the question of when a wolf can be labelled a 'problem wolf', what should happen in such cases, which preventive measures are effective and who should foot the bill.

QUITE A COMMOTION

About 150 years since the last one was shot in South Limburg, the wolf is once again nearing the Dutch border. In July a dead wolf was found by the side of the road near the Dutch village of Luttelgeest, causing quite a commotion. 'When I saw the photos I felt the adrenaline coursing through my veins,'

says ecologist Leo Linnartz of Wolves in the Netherlands. Only months later did it transpire that it was probably just an ill-advised prank. The 18 month-old she-wolf probably had not come to the Netherlands under her own steam but had been shot elsewhere, with the still fresh remains of a young Elbe beaver in her stomach.

'Nevertheless, it would seem to be just a matter of time before roaming wolves cross the border into the Netherlands,' says Linnartz. 'In August 2011, a creature that looked exactly like a wolf was photographed near Duiven and in the spring of 2013 there were reports of wolf sightings in the east of Drenthe, after which one was photographed just across the border near Meppel.' Wolves are already living in many parts of northern, central and southern Europe from Norway to Spain. There have been two >

‘Wolves have really adapted to coexisting with humans’

packs near Hamburg, about 200 kilometres from the Dutch border, since 2012. In the whole of Germany there are now 23 wolf packs, mainly in the eastern region of Lausitz, which has been benefitting from a boom in wolf tourism since the end of the nineteen nineties. In Romania wolves have even moved into the cities. Sheep and goat farmers keep their flocks there, behind electric fences and guarded by specially trained guard dogs. Wolves are very afraid of electric fences and teach their young to keep away from them too. This provides a way of preventing wolves getting used to food supplies that are not meant for them. Linnartz thinks the wolves will come to the Netherlands of their own accord. ‘They need peace, space and food. In the Netherlands there are about 100,000 deer so there is a good chance of the wolf settling here and it may happen faster than we thought. The first to cross the border might well be a lone wolf. If it has a partner, there could be a pack here within five years.’ Large tracts of the northern and eastern Netherlands are suitable habitats for wolves, as are the Flevo polder, Brabant and Limburg. On the Veluwe moorlands alone there is room enough for at least five packs. The Netherlands probably has enough food and space to support between 10 and 20 wolf packs.

STRICTLY PROTECTED

The wolf is strictly protected by both the Bern Convention of 1979 and the European Habitats Directive. It is not just the wolf that is protected but also its habitat and any wolf-dog hybrids. Our attitude to wolves has changed somewhat in the course of history, explains Linnartz. ‘As wild hoofed animals disappeared from Europe and more and more domestic livestock was kept, the wolf came under fire with increasing ferocity. By about 1960 it was practically extinct in

Europe. And precisely around that time, our outlook on nature began to change. Urbanization and the raised standard of living gave nature a new value to us as a place of recreation. And birds of prey and predators were all part of the picture. The wolf also happens to play a key role in a healthy ecosystem. All kinds of scavengers help to consume his prey and he ensures a better balance between the populations of the various kinds of hoofed animals.’ In Germany the wolf has always been seen as an indigenous species because it never completely disappeared from eastern Germany – there were always a few strays crossing the German-Polish border. After the fall of the Berlin wall (1989), eastern Germany adopted the West German nature conservation laws and the wolf was suddenly redefined not as an eagerly hunted pest but as a strictly protected species. ‘And because the east German plateau is increasingly thinly populated there are fewer and fewer conflicts between humans and wolves,’ says Linnartz. In the Middle Ages when rabies still raged in Europe, wolf attacks on humans were common. But in the course of the last century the problem of rabies has been eradicated. Foxes were inoculated en masse by scattering meat impregnated with vaccine in the woods, and it is quite feasible to do the same for wolves.

Wolves are generally timid and not dangerous to humans, as long as they do not become too familiar with them. Once a wolf has discovered that it is easy to find food around people, he becomes less timid and can become a ‘problem wolf’. According to Groot Bruinderink, in Germany the wolf has grown accustomed to humans remarkably fast. ‘They have really adapted to coexisting with humans. We hope the wolf will mainly hunt wild prey such as wild hoofed animals and perhaps moulting geese. But I saw an example in eastern Poland of wolves

taking a cow. So we do need to put preventive measures in place for livestock holders, as well as a system of compensation for damages.’

WOLF OFFICE

Groot Bruinderink thinks it is important to set up a central point where problems can be reported. ‘Farmers who lose a sheep, leisure seekers who think they have seen a wolf and drivers who run a wolf over at night should all be able to call on this service.’ The Wolf Office, its working title, will be a collaboration between experts in fields including ecology, damage assessment and communications. ‘We want to communicate that the wolf is on its way and is legally protected.’

In order to test these and other action points from the Wolf Plan in practice, a final meeting was held with hunters, livestock holders, nature conservationists and other concerned groups. Between them the participants determined who should do what and when, based on a set of protocols laid down in the Wolf Plan.

That the wolf deserves protection was not disputed by any of the participating organizations; their main aim was to get to understand the protocols and the rules and regulations on subsidies and compensation, in case their clients should suffer as a result of the coming of the wolf.

DAMAGE LIMITATION

According to Huub Dingsh of the sheep department of the Dutch Federation of Agriculture and Horticulture LTO Nederland, LTO respects the fact that the wolf is protected and has the right to live freely in the wild. ‘We cannot line up along the border to keep the wolf out. But that doesn’t mean you cannot fend off possible damage for a particular group of people. In order to increase public support for >

WOLVES IN WESTERN EUROPE IN 2013

Possible habitats in the Netherlands



The Netherlands

Germany

100 wolves

In 2000 there were adult wolves with young living in Germany again for the first time. Now their numbers have swelled to about 100 adult wolves.

In 1992, the wolf entered France from Italy. Now the total population is estimated at more than 200 wolves.

France

200 wolves

Italy

500-700 wolves

Since the nineteen nineties, the wolf has established itself again in northern Italy, having dwindled to a critically small population in the south. Now there are estimated to be 500 to 700 wolves in Italy.



'I would keep the fence around a sheep meadow deep in the woods electrified day and night'

THE HABITS OF THE WOLF

Diet

A wolf needs an average of 3 to 4 kilos of meat per day. Old, sick and weak animals or young and inexperienced ones are the easiest prey. The deer is the wolf's main prey in Germany. There are about 10,000 deer in the Netherlands.

Sheep/goats 

Wolves prefer wild prey, but they will seize easily accessible sheep and goats as well.

Natural prey



Eland

Bison



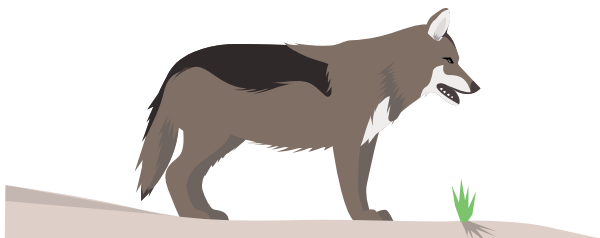
Deer

Wild Boar

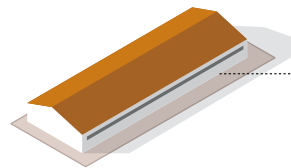
Rodents

Humans 

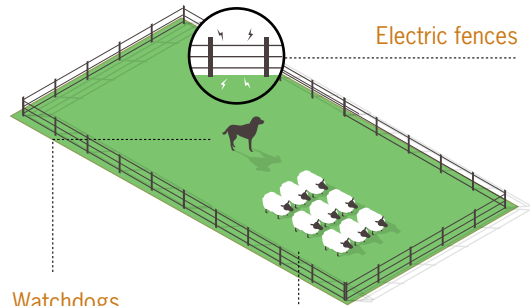
Humans are not among the wolf's normal prey. In fact wolves avoid contact with humans. But dangerous situations can arise if wolves are fed and get used to humans.



Protection for livestock



Keeping livestock in barns at night



Electric fences

Watchdogs

Preserving the herd structure of sheep and goats

Territory

Wolf territories (in central Europe) are about 200 km² in size. Packs usually consist of 2 to 10 animals.

At about two years old, wolves leave the pack and go roaming in search of their own habitat and an unrelated partner.

Wolves are strong swimmers. They can cover hundreds of kilometres, and rivers, motorways and heavily used areas are no obstacle to them.



the wolf, the Faunafonds will have to offer good compensation arrangements as well as contribute to the costs of preventive measures. Currently a Frisian farmer with 20 hectares only needs ditches to keep his stock in the meadows. Will he soon have to fence off all that land to keep out the wolf? The livestock farmers and the government do not yet see eye to eye on this.'

Electric fences work well to scare wolves off. Research is needed on what other preventive measures are effective in the Netherlands. Leo Linnartz: 'Wolves only hunt at night in areas where they could come across people. In areas that are not very accessible to people they also sometimes hunt by day. For example, I would expect that wolves would hunt by day in the Oostvaardersplassen, just as they do in Yellowstone. So sheep in a built-up area only have to be kept behind electric fences by night, but with a sheep meadow deep in the woods where nobody comes I would keep I would keep the fence electrified day and night.'

The electric fence needs to hang low enough to prevent wolves creeping under it and the voltage needs to be high enough – higher than the voltage needed to keep sheep in. Then the wolves soon give up, and

teach their young to do so too.

As many as 5000 Dutch sheep are killed by dogs and occasionally by foxes every year. If the culprit is a fox, the farmer is out of luck but if it is a dog then the owner is liable.

Damage done by a wolf is generally easy to spot. The wolf kills its victim instantly with a bite to the neck, and deep holes made by its fangs are visible. Beyond that, the animal is still unscathed. A dog that kills a sheep has much less power and bites it numerous times, leaving a lot of bruising and tearing out tufts of wool.

If the wolf becomes an attacker in future, the livestock farmer can initially call on the Faunafonds for help. 'As long as the wolf is not permanently established in the Netherlands, you cannot expect livestock farmers to install far-reaching preventive measures,' says Groot Bruinderink.

'Together with the sector we should research which measures are cost-effective. Fencing off a kilometres-long, narrow dike with electrified wire to protect a handful of sheep is probably not cost-effective.'

LLAMA AS BODYGUARD

There are other possible preventive measures. Linnartz: 'A researcher in America claims to have had good results using re-

cordings of howling wolves. That way you claim an area as the territory of a particular pack, as it were, and other packs will stay away. But after a while the wolves will realize that it's fake. Livestock holders also make use of guard llamas and guard donkeys. When a predator approaches, the sheep huddle together so as to feel safer but they don't defend themselves and the wolf can just pick off its victim. Llamas, donkeys and horses respond differently by nature – they protect the herd, especially the young. They do that when they are in the same meadow as sheep too.'

If they are to survive for very long as a species in the Netherlands, wolves will need to be able to make contact with French, German and Belgian populations. They are unlikely to be very bothered by the barriers to this; they cross motorways, swim rivers and use bridges and tunnels. Recent developments have shown that in spite of road deaths, European populations are expanding fast. 'The crucial thing for a healthy population is for populations to continue to be able to mix in future so that the gene pool doesn't get too small,' says Groot Bruinderink. ■

www.wageningenur.nl/wolves

ALTERRA DRAWS UP WOLF PLAN

The Wolf Plan which Alterra Wageningen UR presented in November divides the tasks in order to make sure the return of the predators goes smoothly. The ministry of Economic Affairs is adding the wolf, an internationally protected species, to the list under the Flora and Fauna law and is responsible for spreading information on its protected status. Illegal hunting of the wolf carries severe penalties. Feeding wolves is prohibited. The provinces are drawing up rules on how to deal with 'problem wolves'. A government-funded Wolf Office will be respon-

sible for monitoring the advance of the wolf. Joint protection plans at population level will be drawn up together with neighbouring countries. The Faunafonds will keep livestock farmers informed about preventive measures, assess possible damage by wolves and offer compensation for losses incurred. The Wolf Plan emphasizes the importance of good communication to make clear that wolves are protected and also that there is nothing to be scared of. Wolves are scared of people and keep out of their way.