

Wolves in search of habitats

The wolf is a symbol of unspoiled wilderness. And yet there are now around 10 wolves in the densely populated Netherlands. They are welcomed by some and feared by others. 'The return of the wolf forces us to have a rethink.'

TEXT MARION DE BOO PHOTO KARL VAN GINDERDEUREN / BUITENBEELD





In 10 days this spring, a lone young wolf near the Dutch village of Heusden killed 61 sheep and wounded as many again. The TV news showed images of lambs bleeding, at their last gasp. 'He even chases cows and horses,' declared local livestock farmer and farmers' representative Mari van Drunen in the Dutch daily paper *De Telegraaf*. 'Farmers are taking their children to school by car now, and carry a pitchfork when they go outside after dark.' 'We would rather not have these wolves here,' agrees Saskia Duives-Cahuzak, chair of the sheep farmers' branch of the Netherlands Agricultural and Horticultural Association (LTO) and a member of Gelderland province's wolf committee. 'But

'The wolf population won't get out of hand here'

you can't keep them away, so we are trying to come up with solutions in consultation with all parties.' In France and in some parts of Germany, every sheep farmer is given a livestock guardian dog by the government. But Duives-Cahuzak doesn't think this is the answer. 'Those dogs can also chase holiday-makers. There are 17 million people in the Netherlands and now that everyone is going on holiday in their own country because of the coronavirus, the whole country is out on bicycles. And those dogs are expensive: about 5000 euros to buy and 1000 euros a year to keep. And one dog is not even enough: you need at least three per flock.' Experience with wolf-proof fencing has been more promising. On the advice of the

wolf committee, in August Gelderland province established a subsidy for erecting electric fences. 'But they only fund the extra component that you need to make the fence wolf-proof,' says Duives-Cahuzak. 'It takes a lot of labour too and we don't get any compensation for that. And what about large areas such as heaths and dykes? It's not easy to fence those off. It's so easy to say, "just put up some netting and protect your sheep," but if the interests of livestock farmers are not taken into account, support for the wolf will soon dwindle.'

Clearly, the wolf is back in the Netherlands after a 150-year absence. Its arrival was expected and it is welcomed by some and feared by others. At present, support for the wolf is increasing steadily in the Netherlands, according to results of an opinion poll done by the provincial governments that was published in June. Fifty seven per cent of the Dutch feel positive about the return of the wolf and 65 per cent consider it a harmless animal. Three quarters of the Dutch population would see an encounter with a wild wolf as an exciting experience, and nearly half would love to come across a wolf in the wild. But 18 percent feel the wolf is unwelcome because of lack of space, its predation on livestock, and the possibility that it will be a nuisance and cause dangerous situations.

FOUR NEW CUBS

Lone German wolves have been taking a look across the border since 2011. In 2019, a pair took up residence in the North Veluwe area of countryside. Last year, they had five young and this year the wildlife cameras showed four new cubs. 'Half the cubs do not survive the first year,' says the Wageningen animal ecologist Hugh Jansman. He follows the movements of established and roaming wolves using genetic analysis of traces of DNA from droppings: are they really a wolf's and if so, from which pack? This year to date, eight different wolves have >

‘Wolves will move on from farmland where there are only sheep’

been identified, most of them in the north and east of the country. Their distribution can be followed through quarterly bulletins on the website of BJI12, the 12 Dutch provinces’ implementing organization for keeping the countryside thriving. Even dead wolves are examined to find out the cause of death as well as their age, sex, condition, stomach contents, reproduction status and any infections present such as rabies. ‘Up to now, all the wolves that have been run over have been perfectly healthy,’ concludes Jansman.

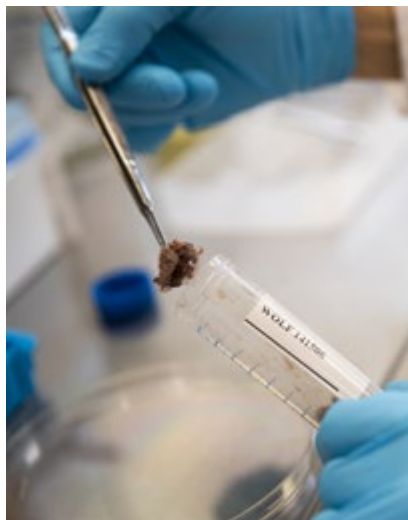
European legislation forbids the capture or shooting of wolves. Jansman: ‘In the long term, that wouldn’t have any effect anyway. The wolves in the Netherlands are part of larger, West European populations. They will just keep coming. In Germany the first pack established itself near the Polish border around the year 2000. Now there are already about 1000 wolves in Germany and their numbers keep on increasing. In view of that unstoppable advance, there is also no point putting a fence all along the Dutch border to keep out roaming wolves.’

DOGS OFF THE LEAD

So the interprovincial wolf plan of 2018 focuses on things like information-spreading and damage prevention. All livestock farmers in the Netherlands are compensated for damage caused directly by wolves – for dead animals and veterinary costs. When a wolf is suspected, Wageningen analyses the DNA from fluids from the wounds of bitten sheep. Jansman: ‘About 5000 sheep are

bitten to death every year, but 95 to 99 per cent turn out to be the victims of dogs let off the lead.’ In 2019, 165 sheep were bitten to death by wolves. About 10,700 euros was paid out in compensation for damage by wolves, which is 0.04 per cent of all the compensation for fauna damage (25 million euros).

Jansman expects conflicts will go on occurring: ‘A roaming wolf in search of a territory of its own doesn’t know that large areas of the Netherlands are unsuitable for it. Wolves will move on from farmland with only sheep, because it’s too risky for them. And in nature areas, established packs won’t tolerate new packs. So the wolf population



In Wageningen, a DNA sample is taken from sheep’s wool to find out if a wolf did the damage.

won’t get out of hand here. Wolves are very territorial and defend their territory fiercely against intruders of their own species. Out of all wolves, 68 per cent get killed sooner or later by another wolf, and that is how the population keeps itself under control.’

DEER POPULATION

Does the Netherlands have room for the wolf? ‘Definitely,’ says Jansman. ‘The wolf is protected by law and can find enough to eat here. Nowadays we hardly ever get the severe winters that keep populations of deer and wild boar down. On the Veluwe, where wolves have been established for two years now, the number of incidents involving sheep can be counted on the fingers of one hand.’

Tensions arise, says Jansman, when roaming wolves turn up in farming areas. Young wolves become sexually active in their third year. Some of them then leave the pack in search of new habitats. ‘It is those young, inexperienced loners that can’t catch big game on their own and go for easy prey like an unsuspecting and unprotected sheep in the meadow,’ says Jansman. ‘Usually they then make a quick escape, covering about 40 to 50 kilometres a day. But if an animal like that hangs around, it causes a big reaction. And that will go on happening, because wolves don’t encounter many barriers. They cross motorways, swim across rivers and make use of tunnels and bridges. They could turn up anywhere, even in the Westland area or Zeeland.’

SELECTIVE HUNTING

According to Jansman, wolves are highly intelligent. Working as a pack, they hunt wild animals that are far bigger and heavier than they are. ‘Wolves have an unerring instinct for the weak spots in the health of their prey. Their favourite food is the red deer. Some wolves killed a deer near my house here on the Veluwe. The deer had 20 deer botflies in its throat. All those fat

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PHOTO: RUIJD PLOEG

A sheep farmer installs an electric fence to keep wolves at a distance.

larvae cause breathing difficulties, so a wolf can easily catch the deer. Wolves hunt very selectively, helping to keep the wildlife healthy.

Once it is established, a pack of wolves mainly eats wildlife. Researchers in former East Germany analysed 6500 wolf droppings. The menu had included roe deer (53 per cent), wild boar (18 per cent), red deer (15 per cent), fallow deer and smaller prey such as hares. Livestock accounted for only 1.1 per cent of the diet. Duives-Cahuzak of LTO Netherlands is not reassured by this. She is afraid that in the Netherlands, the wolf will eat far more livestock. 'Our farming is much more small-scale, and farms border nature areas everywhere.'

German livestock farmers no longer get compensation for wolf damage if they haven't taken steps to prevent it themselves. They usually work with an effective combination of electric fences and livestock

guardian dogs. Wolves hate electric shocks so they steer clear of electric fencing.

Jansman: 'You don't really need a dog – an electric fence on its own works just as well. And aggressive dogs cause problems in areas with a lot of holidaymakers.'

FARMERS UNDER THREAT

'All over Europe you can see that most of the people opposing the wolf are livestock farmers who feel their survival is under threat,' says the Wageningen environmental anthropologist Robert Fletcher. 'They feel livestock farming is no longer highly valued, and that the EU would prefer to see it disappear to make way for nature. They feel threatened and the wolf is symbolic of that conflict.'

Fletcher coordinates the international research project Conviva, which studies ways of encouraging people to live peacefully side by side with large predators such as the wolf

in Finland, the jaguar in Brazil, the grizzly bear in Canada and the lion in Tanzania. 'These are all top predators that play a key role in the ecosystem and appeal to our imagination, but which are also often involved in conflicts with people. We research the common patterns you can identify in these conflicts, and which measures are effective for co-existing peacefully with these large predators.' For example, the researchers try to find out why the Finns, who have co-existed with bears for centuries, have such a difficult relationship with the wolf. Hugh Jansman: 'The wolf holds up a mirror to us, showing us how distanced we humans have become from nature. Mediterranean farmers have always had to deal with large predators, but our farmers haven't been used to that for 150 years now. The return of the wolf forces us to have a rethink.' ■

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