When the wolf comes

"A chimera shattered by reality"

by Marcel Züger, Switzerland*

Marcel Züger. (Picture ma)

Ninety-six wolves killed in five months – that is the result of the hunting regulation. "A massacre!" cry the conservationists. But the Department of Federal Council Albert Rösti and the cantons did the right thing: in the interests of animal-friendly grazing, as well as from a species protection perspective.

The wolf, scientifically known as *Canis lupus,* is a pop star. A dazzling object of psychological projection. Enraptured and adored by some. An animal *Jack the Ripper,* say others. Who is this wolf really?

Until recently, the wolf was considered a demanding, shy inhabitant of primeval forests and an indicator of an intact natural environment. Today, wolves simply live where we let them live. Whether in the Romanian suburbs or the agricultural steppes of northern Germany, in the cultural landscape of the Alps or in the forest of a national park, wolves settle where they can find enough to eat. They are not picky. Deer and roe deer are at the top of their menu in this country, but they prey on everything from buffalo to mice, birds, farm animals, cats and dogs. The main thing is meat. In times of need, they survive on berries and herbs.

Wolf or prosperity

Eight thousand years ago, people began farming and raising livestock in Central Europe. The first traces of alpine farming date back 7,000 years, and the remains of the oldest known alpine hut

Colourful hay meadow. (Picture ma)

in Switzerland are 3,000 years old. Wolves were undoubtedly a constant threat. Living with wolves meant killing them wherever possible. For thousands of years.

The ancient Swiss did this with Swiss perfection. In 1548, the chronicler *Johannes Stumpf* wrote: "These wolves are found in no country in Europe less than in the Alpine mountains of Helvetia. Then, coming from Lamparte [Lombardy; ed.] or other German-speaking countries, they are rare guests and are fiercely pursued by the rural population." Eagles, foxes and lynxes were also eliminated as so-called predators, while deer and roe deer were considered pests of agricultural crops.

Among other things, the immigrating wolves killed three seamstresses near Chur in 1511 and, 200 years later, a girl from Münstertal who was fetching water from the well in the evening. The people were quick to act. In the winter of 1801, a farmer from the Engadin killed a wolf with an axe when it ventured onto his farm. The coexistence between wolves and pastoral farming was never peaceful. Wolf hunting was an integral part of landscape management. Barbed meat, poison, nets, spears and wolf pits were used for this purpose, as were specially trained hunting dogs in neighbouring countries, entire trapping facilities called "wolf gardens" and, in more recent times, firearms. The death penalty for cattle theft did not only apply to wolves. In 1811, a man was executed in Chur for stealing a sheep. Cattle were valuable, and their loss threatened the livelihood of the entire family.

By the middle of the 19th century, wolves had been eliminated from Western Europe except for

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a few remaining populations. Nowhere else in the world was this achieved over such a large area. The same period saw the straightening of wild Alpine rivers and the drainage of large moors in the Swiss Plateau. Thus the risk of flooding was eliminated, fertile soil was gained, and malaria was eradicated. It was a mutually reinforcing process of industrialisation, increased agricultural yields and the containment of natural hazards. Public health improved and the foundations for later prosperity were laid. It is precisely this prosperity that allows us to enjoy deer, eagles and lynx today and even to discuss wolves. Only those who live in poverty or luxury have wolves.

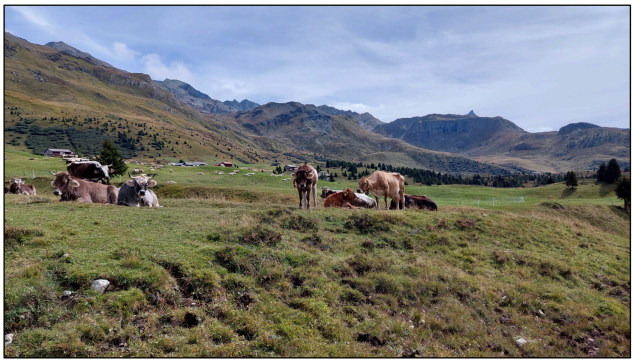
Interestingly, in large parts of Europe, the eradication of wolf populations has gone hand in hand with an increase in civil liberties. However, it remains unclear whether this is merely a coincidence or a causal relationship. After all, feudal lords had a certain interest in wolves. Wolf hunting was an enjoyable leisure activity. It also suited the lords of the manor when the serfs had to contend with wolves. This dampened the spirits of the rebellious and emphasised the importance of the protection afforded by the ruling class.

Switzerland as a charming garden

Regulated pastoral farming could only develop once wolves had been largely eradicated. Only then could a landscape emerge that boasts a wealth of structures, interconnections, small-scale and diverse uses that is unique in the world. Switzerland became the charming garden described by *Jean-Jacques Rousseau* in the 18th century.

Small herds of livestock, haymaking from steep, remote meadows above the tree line and farming on small plots of land up to high altitudes were essential for the subsistence economy of the time. Making a living was exhausting and life in the mountains was dangerous due to avalanches. The system was operating at its absolute limit. It could not cope with the additional effort required to ward off predators.

Shepherds were everywhere. They were not responsible for protecting the livestock from predators. Their job was to keep the grazing livestock in the right place. The youngest, oldest and lame animals that could not work on the farm or in the fields were used for this purpose. They did not have the physical strength to defend themselves against wolves. There is therefore no tradition of passive herd protection measures in the history of Central Europe.



Cattle on the alp. (Picture ma)

Sustainability in practice

If it didn't already exist, it would have to be invented: alpine farming. It is sustainability in its purest form. Animal welfare is maximised. Grazing animals have access to pasture around the clock, the cattle are fed the most nutritious fodder and can eat at night in hot weather. Calving takes place in the open air. It couldn't be more natural.

For a long time, grazing livestock was herded by people because people were cheaper than fences. Later, the shepherds were largely replaced by electric fences. Grazing livestock can now be kept even better exactly where and when the weather, terrain, water and feed recommend it. The children go to school, there is a pension for the elderly and a disability pension for the disabled. A win-win situation for animals and humans.

Biodiversity has also benefited. A wild, unused Alpine region would be significantly poorer in species than the cultivated landscape. Numerous animal and plant species depend on the meadows, pastures, fields and small artificial water areas. It couldn't be any better: humans live and use the land, and nature benefits. A win-win situation.

Healthy, natural food is produced. It does not end up on the world market, but in the local region. Sustainability through short transport routes.

Alpine farming runs counter to social development. It forms a spiritual refuge that resists modernity. Not digitalisation and anonymisation but contact with the elements and with animals. Personal responsibility, physical work, self-efficacy – or failure. In no time. Not a "work-life balance" with a separation between work and "life", but rather life integrated into work and work in-

tegrated into life. Looking into a cow's eyes, watching the sun rise while mowing, the glistening dew on the grass, tired limbs after a hard day's work replace exercises in mindfulness and sleep training.

A hotspot for biodiversity

The Alpine region is a biodiversity hotspot of pan-European significance. The magazine "Hotspot" published by the *Swiss Federal Office for the Environment* (FOEN) wrote in its 27th issue: "The Alps are extremely important for biodiversity in Switzerland. [...] The *Swiss Biodiversity Monitoring* (BDM) programme has shown that the abundance of species in many organism groups is particularly high at alpine altitudes and that many species have their main distribution area here. Overall, the grasslands of the subalpine and alpine regions are around a quarter richer in plant species than the grasslands in the lowlands." Over 80 per cent of nationally significant moors, floodplains, dry meadows and pastures are in the Alpine region.

"Dry meadows and pastures" refer to species-rich flower meadows of the highest quality. There are few places, such as in the central Valais, where natural dry steppes remain forest-free without human intervention. All other areas require maintenance through mowing or grazing. Ninety-three per cent of their current area is in the Jura and the Alps, and 62 per cent are pasturable.

The importance of dry sites for species protection cannot be overstated. They are among the habitats with the most endangered species. Although there has been no species or insect decline in Switzerland for decades, there is a continuing shift. Undemanding habitat generalists and inhabitants of nutrient-rich sites and forests are increasing, as are large and medium-sized species, especially predators. Demanding habitat specialists and inhabitants of nutrient-poor sites and open land are under pressure, as are small species, especially prey species. The latter describes the ecological communities of dry habitats perfectly. The meadows and pastures of the Alpine region are highly important for over a thousand specialised animal and plant species. This means that if they disappear from mountain areas, they are very likely to disappear from Switzerland altogether.

The importance and threat to these habitats have been recognised, and dry sites are protected by federal law. It is prohibited to impair their quality or area. Protection is strict. Any intensification of use, development and other construction projects are prohibited, and even forestry and tourism must not contravene the protection measures. There are even restrictions on farming in the adjacent land.

Herd of goats. (Picture mz)

The extent of dry sites in Switzerland has declined by around 90 per cent since 1900, at least according to a model developed by the *Swiss Federal Institute for Forest, Snow and Landscape Research* (WSL). An evaluation for the canton of Graubünden based on this model has shown that around 5 per cent of the losses are due to intensified use. However, a whopping 95 per cent are due to abandonment of use or reforestation.

Allowing dry sites to become overgrown because that is the "right" thing to do in terms of nature conservation is not a sensible option. It would spell the end of species and biotope protection. Why should the forestry service be prevented from building a new access road through protected areas for safety reasons, why should farmers not be allowed to spread manure to obtain more nutritious hay for their livestock, why should municipalities not be able to expand their building zones? If the preservation of rare species were clearly irrelevant, all restrictions on building would be obsolete.

The end of the cultural landscape

Dry sites are mostly so-called marginal land: remote, steep, undeveloped, poor. Not only is cultivation difficult, but it also produces little and poor-quality fodder. Structural diversity and nutrient poverty are twofold reasons for the high level of biodiversity. However, they are also twofold reasons for intensifying cultivation – which is prohibited – or abandoning it altogether. Extensive cultivation is therefore subsidised with public funds.

The protection of dry meadows and pastures is a success story. About five years ago, the national inventory was revised. The area covered was considerably larger than twenty years earlier. This is not a matter of course. A cow cannot simply eat more if the feed is of poor quality. High-yield cows would literally starve to death in front of a full feed trough. Completely new forms of farming had to be established, in many cases by reintroducing old breeds.

Performance breeding had led to the virtual disappearance of typical old Swiss farm animals in the 1980s because they were not productive enough. Breeds such as Hinterwälder cattle, Peacock goats, Engadine sheep and others were saved from extinction by special breeding programmes. The promotion of these old breeds and the management of extensive meadows and pastures go hand in hand. The old breeds are needed to graze the steep slopes because they are light and sure-footed. The poor hay from the dry meadows can only be utilised by undemanding animals.

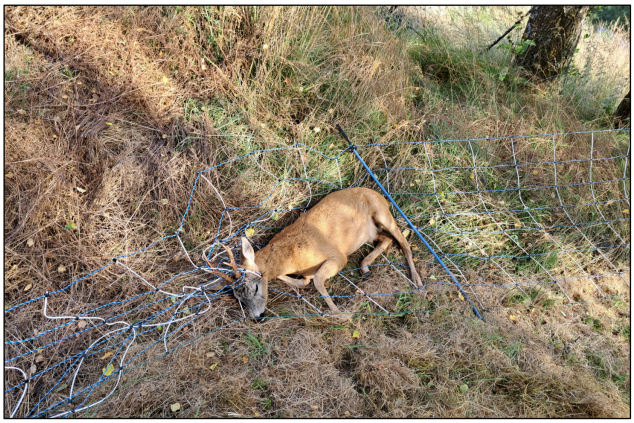
Mountain farming, with its intricate connections, is a grown, complex, organic network. Even if the presence of wolves only cuts a few threads, it can bring the whole structure to break down. Forty years of nature conservation work and centuries of hard-won traditional practices are at risk of collapsing.

This has not gone unnoticed by ecologists. In March 2024, a committee of university professors and active conservationists from Germany, Austria and Switzerland issued the *Maienfeld Declaration:*

> "By continuing its current wolf policy, which is based on outdated information and a lack of overall perspective, Europe is in the process of destroying its globally unique grassland cultural landscapes, which have developed over centuries. The European system of protected areas will suffer great damage if grazing traditions and other extensive forms of land use such as mountain meadow mowing are lost. Without an adjustment of the wolf policy, the increasing endangerment of strictly protected species is inevitable, and Europe will be guilty of large-scale deterioration of threatened habitats."

Expensive but futile herd protection

Herd protection measures are intended to resolve the above dilemma. A few years ago, electric fences 90 centimetres high were considered wolf-proof. Or the presence of humans, a single dog or donkeys would be enough to keep wolves away. Only sheep and goats were considered to be at risk.



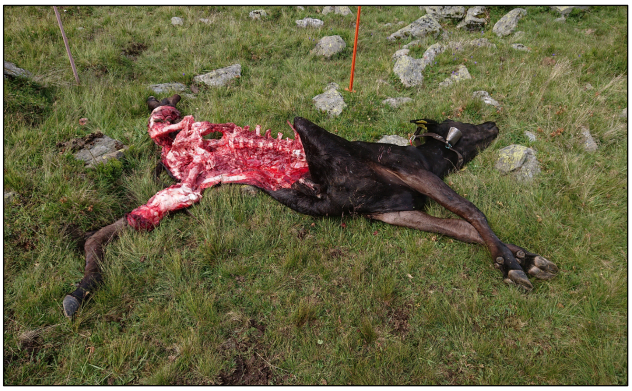
Roe deer entangled in fence. (Picture Nico Leibundgut)

The technical feasibility of such measures is very limited, especially in mountainous areas, where rolling stones or running game animals regularly knock down fences, and snow can fall even in summer. The fences must be checked at least twice a day on steep terrain to detect defects in good time. Wolves have been filmed jumping over fences up to 1.4 metres high, and even higher ones have been proven to have been cleared. Despite the presence of shouting and stone-throwing shepherds, sheep are simply dragged away. Livestock guard dogs are outwitted or killed. Donkeys are eaten. Where night-time security measures have been massively expanded, wolves attack during the day. Wolves feed on sheep and goats, but also horses, cattle and defensive suckling cows, even when they are in closed groups. Not every wolf behaves this way, but every wolf has the potential to do so. Herd protection is an endless re-equipment race, or rather, the end of the race can be seen in zoos: four-metre-high concrete-encased fences with anti-climb protection and electric wires.

From a nature conservation perspective, something else is more important: herd protection measures run counter to the goals of protected habitats and species. Millions are spent on wildlife bridges and small animal passages; expensive, but sensible and effective. At the same time, in the name of nature conservation, the landscape is to be cluttered with fences. Animals are prevented from spreading or get caught in the electric fences, especially deer, roe deer, chamois, owls, hares and hedgehogs. Small animals such as snakes, frogs and songbirds that could slip through the fence netting are killed by electric shocks.

From April to July, and often all year round in nature reserves, dogs must usually be kept on a leash. And now they are bringing the wildest dog breeds to the most valuable areas during the most sensitive time of year. There, they can kill small animals directly, or their constant presence will cause areas to be abandoned by snow hares and black grouse, for example. The counterarguments are already being prepared: climate change and agriculture will certainly be blamed for any decline in the population of these sensitive animals.

Compensation for livestock killed by wild animals costs a few hundred thousand Swiss francs per year. The lion's share of this is accounted for by herd protection measures and management costs incurred by the state authorities. It is difficult to determine the total costs. Estimates range from fifteen to twenty million Swiss francs per year. The uncovered costs for the additional work incurred by farmers are likely to be similar. There are currently 37 known packs living in Switzerland and across the border. Each wolf pack therefore costs around one million Swiss francs per year.



Slaughtered cattle, Sedrun. (Picture ma)

Paternalistic nature conservation

Wolves fundamentally challenge everything that is working well: the maintenance of the remaining species-rich meadows and pastures, small-scale farming structures, the preservation of species-appropriate forms of livestock farming, and the cultivation of marginal land, particularly where it is most important for the preservation of biodiversity.

Nature conservation has its roots in liberal-conservative circles but has become a left-wing green lifestyle and business model. With a barrage of polished rhetoric, emotionalism, do-goodism and self-righteousness, an illusion has been created that is both enthusiastic and steeped in moralism. This chimera is now being shattered by reality. Nowhere is this more evident than with the wolf, but it affects the whole paternalistic nature conservation movement. The impact looks set to be severe. Painful and salutary.

Reason is returning, and one European country after another is increasing wolf culls. Switzerland is leading the way. "Thanks to direct democracy", as everyone says. Self-determination, personal responsibility. Just like on the alp. Just like 500 years ago.

Source: Weltwoche Nr. 7/2025, 13 February 2025 – "Sonderheft Grün"

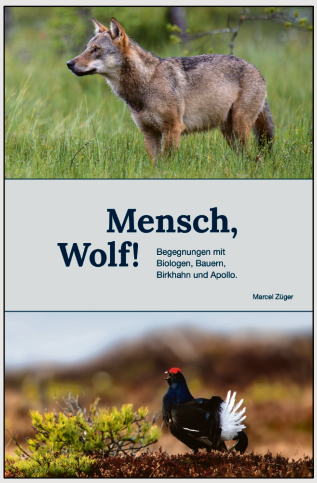
(Translation «Swiss Standpoint»)

New release

"Mensch, Wolf! Begegnungen mit Bauern, Hirten, Birkhuhn und Apollo"

The Alpine region is a biodiversity hotspot of European significance. What is often referred to as "untouched nature" is actually a cultural landscape created by humans.

This book accompanies people who care for this landscape. Follow in the footsteps of black grouse, Apollo butterflies, fire lilies, deer and others who benefit from it. It tells of the lives and work of people in the past and present. And it shows what the return of wolves means for the habitats of the Alpine cultural landscape.



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