

Wolves of the World

WOLVES IN SWITZERLAND

Wolves Still Protected After Close Vote

by Neil Hutt

Singer/actress Julie Andrews immortalized the “sound of music” in the alpine meadows of Austria, but another distinctive melody now reverberates in the soaring mountains of neighboring Switzerland. The hills and pastoral uplands of this breathtaking country are not exactly alive with the haunting howls of wolves. But over the past several years, a few wolves

have crossed the border from Italy into the Swiss Alps, bringing with them a song that is, depending on one’s point of view, either soul-stirring music or the portent of doom.

These wolves have been loners, dispersers searching for mates and territories with sufficient prey to sustain a family. At least eight are known to have emigrated from Italy. Some have been hit by cars, and others have been killed outright by people opposed to wolves. No packs have settled in and reproduced as far as anyone knows. In time, they may—but only if they are accorded legal protection and treated with tolerance, particularly by sheepherders.

Through a European multinational agreement under the Bern Convention, wolves are protected in Switzerland. But since December 2001, the Swiss Council of States has debated a motion to remove these controversial predators from the list of endangered species. Some members of the council argue that Switzerland’s dense population and dependence on tourism make accommodating top predators impossible. Many sheep raisers are also opposed to wolves living in the country. If their numbers increase significantly, problems could arise over livestock losses. Wolf supporters counter that wolves could provide an attraction for tourists. They also point out that compensation for livestock depredation could cease if the wolf loses its protected status.

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Mike Poyas,
Wild Thing
Photography

According to a recent poll conducted in Switzerland by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), three out of four people support the presence of wolves in Switzerland. Surprisingly, acceptance of wolves among respondents in rural areas was only slightly lower than in urban areas. Out of 1,017 people polled by the WWF, 75 percent were in favor of allowing wolves to live in the Swiss Alps. The WWF poll indicated that approval was high for providing government subsidies to farmers for livestock damages inflicted by wolves.

On June 2, 2003, the Swiss National Council concluded the long controversy by narrowly rejecting (84 to 77) the motion to remove legal protection for the wolf. Had the motion carried, it would have had impact beyond the borders of Switzerland since such a decision would have broken the country's obligation under the Bern Convention to protect the wolf. The National Council agreed to implement the Swiss Wolf Concept, which requires the Swiss cantons to pay compensation for livestock depredations and to shoot wolves that cause damage to sheep and cattle.

The author acknowledges the following sources of information:

-  WolfNews.org, "Swiss People Like Wolves," <http://www.dogparksnow.org/articles/2003-01-international.html>.
-  The Large Carnivore Initiative for Europe (LCIE), "Switzerland Rejects Anti-Wolf Motion," June 8, 2003, <http://www.large-carnivores-lcie.org/news96.htm>.
-  Environment News Service, "Wolf Remains on Endangered Species List," <http://ens-news.com/ens/jun2003/2003-06-12-19.asp>.

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WOLVES IN JAPAN

Wolves: Vanquished or Victimized?

by Kevin Short



Rick McIntyre

Without the wolves to thin them out, deer populations in Japan have skyrocketed, causing untold damage to crops and even ruining entire ecosystems.

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Few people would think of Japan as a land of wolves. Today, the only wild members of the dog family found there are the tanuki, or raccoon dog, and two local subspecies of the red fox. Also, tales involving wolves are rare among Japanese fairy tales. There are no Japanese equivalents to "Little Red Riding Hood" and "The Three Little Pigs," stories in which wolves are portrayed as fierce and dangerous monsters.

Yet, surprisingly, until a little more than 100 years ago wolves were common all over the main Japanese islands. One type, the Nihon-okami or Japanese wolf, was found on the islands of Honshu, Shikoku and Kyushu. Another, larger and heavier type, the Ezo-okami or Ezo wolf, lived on the northern island of Hokkaido.

Zoologists currently disagree on the taxonomic status of the Japanese

wolf. Most researchers classify it as an endemic subspecies of *Canis lupus*, the gray wolf, or timber wolf, once found across the temperate and subarctic zones of both Eurasia and North America. A few scientists, however, think of it as a completely different species, *Canis hodophilax*.

Actually, this debate is academic. Whether it was an endemic species or subspecies, the Japanese wolf was clearly smaller than its relatives on the Asian mainland, with proportionately shorter legs and ears. The Ezo wolf, however, was closer in size to the continental types.

One problem with classifying the Japanese wolf is that the animals were virtually extinct by the beginning of the 20th century. The last wolf ever seen was a young male trapped in Nara Prefecture in 1905.

Surprisingly, this specimen wound up not in Japan but in the British Museum in London. At that time, a zoological collecting expedition from the London Museum was at work in



the Japanese mountains, and word got out that they were paying high sums for rare animals. The trapper that had caught the wolf, after long and hard negotiations, finally gave up his prize and sold the carcass to the scientists for 8 yen and 50 sen hard cash, at that time a considerable sum of money.

In addition to the British Museum, there is one more stuffed specimen in the Netherlands, and three in Japan. These five specimens, and a scattered collection of skulls and pelts, are all that is left of the Japanese wolf.

The Japanese wolves disappeared before detailed ecological studies

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could be implemented. From reports and observations, however, they appear to have traveled in small packs and preyed primarily on shika deer (*Cervus nippon*).

The mountain villagers called the wolves *yama-inu*, literally “mountain-dog,” and for the most part seemed to get along with them quite well. In fact, in some areas the villagers actually worshiped wolf spirits as local protective deities.

One area where this belief in wolf spirits was widespread is the Chichibu Mountains of western Saitama Prefecture. Here the wolf spirits were believed to protect the crops from hares, deer and other raiders. This belief is most likely founded in an ancient understanding

and appreciation of the wolves' vital ecological role in controlling the populations of herbivores.

Wolf deities are still enshrined at many Shinto shrines in the Chichibu Mountains, especially the famous Mitsumine Shrine. The wolf deity from this shrine is also believed to protect homes from thieves and intruders, and as a result, the shrine has been a popular pilgrimage spot since the 17th century.

Japanese wolves began getting in trouble during the Edo period (1603–1868). During these years the Japanese started breeding horses in large numbers, and the wolves soon found that these domesticated animals made good prey, especially in areas where deer were becoming scarce. Hunting pressure grew in provinces where horse breeding flourished, and in some parts of the country wolf bounties were established.

Another major factor in the decline of Japanese wolves was probably disease. Rabies and later distemper were brought to Japan by dogs on European trading ships. These diseases then spread to domestic dogs, and from them to wolves.

By the turn of the century the wolves had already disappeared from most prefectures. Ironically, without the wolves to thin them out, deer populations have skyrocketed, causing untold damage to crops and even ruining entire ecosystems. Some ecologists now recommend reintroducing wolves from South Korea to help control the deer.

Some people still refuse to believe that the Japanese wolf is extinct. Every few years the news media goes ballistic over reported sightings of wolves deep in the mountains of Kyushu or the Kii Peninsula.

Most experts, however, dismiss these sightings as hoaxes or feral dogs. Nowadays, the only sure place to see Japanese wolves is on carvings and plaques at mountain shrines. ■