

# Wolves of the World

## WOLVES OF EUROPE

### Will Wolves Return to Austria?

by Heinz Dungler

Austria's spectacular alpine wilderness is traditional wolf country. Many old names in Austria show the historic presence of wolves, but by 1882, hunting, trapping and poison had eliminated the breeding population. While single animals are occasionally sighted, no viable packs exist in the country.

However, there is new hope for natural wolf recovery in Austria. Over the past 10 years, the number of wolf observations has increased, and sooner or later, a wolf pack could become established. Protected areas such as national parks could support wolf packs, and wolf numbers could be monitored. Two other conditions make it possible for wolves to thrive in Austria. The first is the new methods of wildlife management in

the European Union countries, definitely a positive step for long-term wolf recovery. Equally important is the changing human attitude toward wildlife in general and wolves in particular.

Wolves are faring well in neighboring countries, which could be potential sources of wolf recolonization. Wolves roam the Carpathian Mountains in Slovakia. Hungary, Croatia, Slovenia and Italy have wolf populations from which dispersers could travel into Austria. The closest viable population is no farther than 200 kilometers from the border. The "green belt" wilderness areas on the old border between western and eastern Europe are possible routes for far-traveling wolves.

Studies show the importance of Austria for the genetic fitness of central European wolves. The Carpathian, Balkan and Southwest Alpine–Appeninic populations come together in Austria, thus making possible the exchange of genetic material.

Whether wolf recovery will be successful depends on the attitude of the Austrian people. Public discussion will increase between wolf supporters and those opposed to wolves such as farmers and hunters. Livestock has to be protected, and new hunting regulations will create new challenges for hunters. The economic value of wolves can only be demonstrated by increasing numbers of nature tourists and environmental education participants.

Recovery and protection of wolves in Austria need progressive concepts and support from both the public and from government agencies. The Austrian Federal Ministry of Environment is preparing a project that will frame conditions for possible recovery. I have been chosen to lead this challenging project. In summer 2005, International Wolf Center founder Dr. L. David Mech invited me to study wolf research and education methods in northern Minnesota. I was able to go out into the wolf range of the Superior National Forest and the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness with Dr. Michael E. Nelson, wildlife research biologist at the Kawishiwi Field Laboratory in Ely. I also visited the International Wolf Center, where I met with Assistant Director of Education Jim Williams.

We hope that Austria will be successful in its efforts to restore wolves and that they will find a new home and a welcome in some of their traditional ranges.

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