

Wolves of the World

Agree to Defer? Wolves in Bulgaria

Text and photos by Chris Senior

The faces around the table are tense, and body language reveals the participants' discomfort. Discussion is heated, but just when agreement seems close, compromise slips away and argument resumes. And what is the subject of all the wrangling? The future of the wolf. No surprises there!

This is democracy in action or at least that is the aim. Diverse stakeholders have come together to craft a national wolf management process for Bulgaria, a plan required by the European Union (EU), which Bulgaria joined in 2007. Both the EU and the Large Carnivore Initiative for Europe (LCIE), a working group within the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), are supporters of this workshop. Despite my direct

involvement with wolf conservation in Bulgaria since 2006, I'm attending strictly as an observer, which is tough because I'm anything but neutral!

Professor Alistair Bath of Memorial University, Newfoundland, Canada, joins the participants. He has worked on similar plans for top-level species both here and in other countries, acting as facilitator in the process. But "Professor Alistair" is not having an easy time of it today.

International Wolf readers know well that wolves stir strong emotions. This is true the world over even where wolves have avoided eradication by humans as is the case with Bulgaria. Although views are polarized here, wolves and humans have coexisted for centuries. Even early in the 20th century wolves were abundant with

plentiful prey to support high numbers of individuals and packs. Livestock protected by Karakachan guarding dogs grazed within wolf territories.

Then under the Socialist regime, wildlife species were arbitrarily divided into "good" and "bad." Those classified as "bad" were marked for extermination. Add to this a 1950s rabies control program with widespread use of poison and the situation quickly worsened. By the 1970s Bulgarian wolf numbers had plummeted to an estimated 150 individuals, and wolves were officially declared endangered by 1975.

Previous workshops have produced some positive results. Over the next two days, discussion centers on varied topics for the proposed management plan: prevention of damage to livestock, wolf diet, a "no hunting" period during the year, compensation payments for damages, problem wolves and effective monitoring. The phrase "problem wolf" immediately sparks debate with one participant adamant that *all* wolves are problematic. This will not be easy at all.

Wolf numbers in Bulgaria have increased since the 1970s, but wolf conservationists think that because of the census methods used, the official tally of around 2,000 individuals is a massive overestimation. Coupled with this, less wild prey has resulted in more livestock depredation, creating the perception that wolves are increasing more rapidly than may be the case. Government policy, frequently negative toward wolves, has caused setbacks for this keystone species. Additionally, hunting is a common pastime, and shooting a wolf is said to be the greatest challenge, though with no guarantee of success. Even Bulgaria's president, Georgi Parvanov, likes to hunt, and his



Professor Alistair Bath of Memorial University, Newfoundland, Canada.



Web site shows an image of him beside a freshly killed wolf.

However, with the diverse parties represented here, including government agency officials, scientific researchers, animal experts, hunting associations, foresters and private non-profits, there is a chance to show a high level of scientific wolf knowledge and maybe lay a few myths to rest. Dedicated conservation organizations such as the Balkani Wildlife Society (balkani.org) have conducted intensive research, and we are given a presentation with precise diet data. Comprehensive scat analysis in two study areas shows livestock can form a significant part of wolves' diet. Whether the wolves have done the killing is, of course, harder to determine. However, much has been learned, and there is always more to know concerning this amazingly adaptive predator—and much to debate.

Professor Alistair tries to keep the process moving, acknowledging the value of all viewpoints when person-

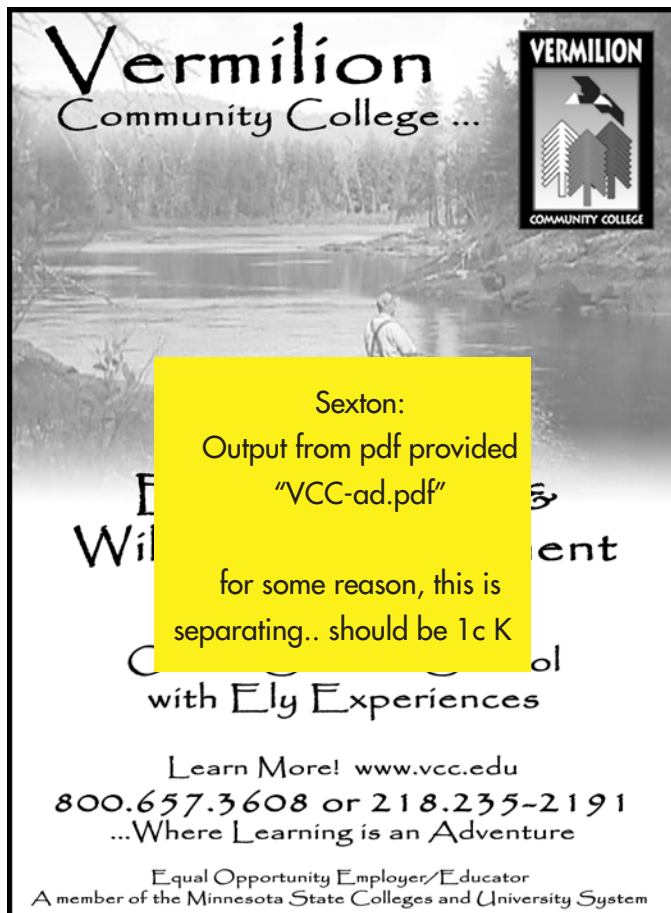
alities try to dominate and helping people reach some agreement on various topics under discussion. This process is not about manipulating or bullying people toward the elusive goal: a completed management plan. Rather, it is about creating an atmosphere in which all views can be heard and consensus reached. At one tense moment, Alistair stops a heated debate to remind everyone of the need for “principles not positions.” Those who have come only to argue their own position will gain nothing; adhering to one's basic principles while seeking compromise is paramount.

For much of the time this works. Topics with agreed-upon points are posted on large sheets of paper in clear view. The smaller pieces of paper are glued firmly down with an outline drawn around them—not quite set in stone but perhaps the modern equivalent, and I have images in my mind of people trying to sneak back into the room at night to make subtle

changes for their own gain, perhaps meeting other groups intent upon the same deed!

The subject of wolf monitoring proves especially contentious. Until May 2010 a bounty was payable in Bulgaria for wolves killed. One positive aspect of this (depending on one's viewpoint of course) was the data provided concerning the wolf's location and the possibility of a DNA sample. Lively discussion arises over effective methods to monitor the population. As protracted debate ensues someone suggests that “compensation” might be paid for submitting a wolf carcass. Someone else interjects a comment about detecting wolf populations hybridizing with dogs. Many dogs run loose in the countryside, and the question is posed: If a male wolf is killed when the breeding female is in season, will she then breed with a dog instead?

Each discussion point seems to have almost as many sides as there are



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people in the room, and it is frustrating to watch some people clearly not listening to the viewpoints of others. Proof that frustration is high comes when the subject of livestock guarding dogs is discussed, and someone asks why the group is even considering this issue when the object of the debate is to determine “whether there are sufficient wolves to allow hunting.”

One statistic commanding attention is the report that hunters killed 1,000 wolves between 2006 and 2009. Since poaching is a problem, the true mortality figure is probably higher. Can a viable population be sustained at this rate? Who can say for sure? An accurate estimate of the likely population through-out Bulgaria is as elusive as the wolf itself. Balkani reports an estimated 600-700 wolves in Bulgaria, not the 2,000 officially cited by the government. But research is ongoing regarding this crucial number, so any concept of a “sustainable harvest” is largely meaningless. Harvest. It sounds like a field of wheat rather than a keystone species. I comment on this to others and find I am not the only one sadly amused by the term.

The debate shifts focus to the issue of a “protection period” when wolves will not be hunted. Two key issues are presented. First, should such a period



Comprehensive scat analysis in two study areas shows livestock can form a significant part of wolves' diet.

apply to the entire country, or should the state-run “hunting areas” covering some 14 percent of the country be excluded? Second, how long should such a period be? Those responsible for the hunting areas are not in favor of any protection at all within these areas because figures demonstrate only a few wolves are shot there during the proposed spring protection period. Hence, they insist a protection period would not make much practical difference. The opposing view is that since the number of wolves killed is small, this is not a big compromise to ask for, and there is no reason not to have wolves protected throughout the entire country in spring. Deadlock.

Debate goes on for two hours. Professor Alistair points out that the rest of the EU nations have a country-wide “no exceptions” protection period. However, this fails to end the arguing. Finally, a subgroup is appointed to wrestle with this matter at a future date.

From this point, the frustration all around is evident. I sense that people

are perturbed not only with the others present but also with themselves, especially since Professor Alistair had hoped to make this workshop the last where he would be needed as facilitator. By now group members are not even sure whether they can ask him to return. The need for his skill is evident, but when he asks directly whether they want him to come back, guilt at the lack of progress causes people to hesitate. Or maybe, I think, they are just too tired now to make any decisions at all.

So the workshop is over. There has been progress, let us not forget this even with the faltering ending. But democracy is a slow process, and people often have the mistaken view that it means all participants get what they want. But if they succeed even half the time, they are doing well! That is the nature of it. And compromise over the wolf is not an easy thing, whichever side you are on. That much is clear.

I do not even think that anyone in the room actually outright hates

the wolf. People just perceive wolves differently: a trophy to be hunted; a creature to be researched and protected along with its habitat; a nuisance to be controlled; an essential ecological umbrella species; a resource to be “harvested” and a symbol of wildness. The lines between these views may have been blurred a little over the last two days, but there is still so far to go. That much I think we could agree upon. ■

Chris Senior lives in the north of England and works as an environmental GIS specialist, photographer and Web site developer. He also loves travel, particularly wolf-related trips, and apart from frequent trips to the Bulgarian project, he has visited the Canadian tundra to see wild arctic wolves and spent five weeks helping look after captive wolves in Poland. He has many photos, which can be seen at www.pbase.com/pawsforthought and a few tales to tell also!



One statistic commanding attention is the report that hunters killed 1,000 wolves between 2006 and 2009.



Author's note: Thanks must go to my friends, Elena and Sider Sedefcheva, for looking after me in Bulgaria. Between them they keep rare-breed Karakachan goats, sheep and horses; have brought the Karakachan livestock guarding dog back from the brink of extinction; built the massive Large Carnivore Education Centre (LCEC) and host school groups there; work on wolf and other large carnivore conservation and research; campaign on green issues and still find time to look after two amazing kids. Their dedication amazes me constantly.

If you would like to know more, head for www.visitcarnivorebg.org where you can see the new Web site progressing. There are photos and information about the project and the opportunity to make donations as well. It always surprises me how much is accomplished with relatively little money, and every euro or dollar can truly benefit the tremendous conservation efforts of the team there.

A special thank you also to Vencislav Gradinarov, whose tireless interpreting skills made it possible for me to make sense of the proceedings.