

Who is the Big Bad Wolf?

Exploring social dimensions of human-wildlife relationships

A political ecology of wolf conservation in Switzerland

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The recovery of the wolf in many European countries will induce increasing conflicts, as its growing population will always be more in contact with humans. The relationship between humans and wolves is often associated with conflicts strongly linked with livestock pasturing. However, as conflicts are often more intense than expected considering the magnitude of their economic impact, many authors have suggested that these conflicts are not of human-wildlife nature but rather between humans.

These conflicts between humans, such as conflicting agendas, practices, ideologies and values of different stakeholders, may negatively impact conservation actions and the peaceful coexistence of humans with the predator.

Conflicts with wildlife are also a sensitive concern in Switzerland's rural areas, where mountain pasturing is a traditional farming practice. I have thus conducted semi-structured interviews with Swiss farmers, in the region of the western prealps, in order to better grasp their concerns and attitudes towards the wolf and the resulting conflicts.

I suggest thus that farmers' concerns and conflicts with the wolf are not of a tangible nature, such as livestock losses, but rather of a social nature due to a paradigm change in nature conservation impacting the agricultural field, its practices and roles. This study reveals that changes in the land use management towards more environmental goals have led to legal, social and economic changes of the agricultural field. These changes have resulted in an increased economic vulnerability of farmers, as well as modifications in their practices, roles and identity. All these changes contribute to the negative perception of the wolf recovery and to conflict.

My study takes a political ecology approach and shows the social nature of human-wolf relationships, the necessity to understand the broader politico-socio-economical context in human-wildlife conflicts, and the challenge farmers are facing in a changing society.

Graefe