

Position statement from the Large Carnivore Initiative for Europe on the 2010 and 2011 Swedish wolf hunts.

Version 1: December 2010.

Version 2: 3rd February 2011

Background: In the winters of 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 Sweden has authorized quota limited culls of wolves by hunters. This action has been very controversial. Because of the frequent citation of various principles and documents which the LCIE has produced over the years we have felt a need to provide a comment on the issue. This statement was first discussed in a meeting in May 2010, the first version was finalized in December and this second version was produced in February 2011. This second draft is a response to feedback that we have received on the first draft which made us realize that there was a need for some more background information and the clarification of some sections that could be misunderstood.

Sweden's wolf population: Wolves became functionally and genetically extinct throughout the Scandinavian peninsula in the late 1960's / 1970's. The present population results from a natural recolonisation of wolves from the neighbouring Finnish / Russian population in the early 1980's . This recovery was based on 3 founders until the last 2-3 years when a number of new immigrants have successfully colonized and begun contributing genetically to the population. Nevertheless, the population is built on an extremely narrow genetic base and inbreeding coefficients are very high. Potential effects of inbreeding depression have already been documented in this population. Based on general scientific literature, the data collected from the field, and models produced by Swedish scientists it is apparent that the long term viability of the population depends both on the expansion of the genetic base and on the size of the population.

Sweden – habitat and conflict: Much of modern day Sweden represents high quality wolf habitat, with a low human population density, relatively little habitat fragmentation and plentiful wild prey. However, this is still an arena for a high degree of conflict. The presence of resident wolf packs is widely regarded as being incompatible with the presence of Sami (an ethnic minority) reindeer herding in northern Sweden. Conflicts with sheep farming in central and southern Sweden do occur, but Sweden has a very organized proactive mitigation system with electric fences being widely promoted and adopted. In addition, sheep farmers receive compensation for losses. Throughout Scandinavia the return of wolves has been associated with a high degree of conflict with local hunters who perceive wolves as competitors for valued game species and experience wolf predation on their hunting dogs. To understand the significance of this conflict it is crucial to be aware of the social and cultural importance of recreational hunting within the rural communities of Scandinavia, and indeed all Nordic and Baltic countries. Both hunters and non-hunters also express fear for their personal safety from the threat of direct wolf attack or the transmission of zoonosis. The wolf issue has become highly symbolic for a wide range of

other conflicts between rural and urban areas, which has often resulted in illegal killing of wolves. Social science research has also revealed how the presence of wolves and the way they are managed clashes with some of the fundamental values of rural people. The result is that wolf recovery has become very controversial in Sweden, as in many other European countries. To understand the degree of controversy it is important to realize that the social conflicts described above are often far more serious in terms of hindering conservation than the economic and material conflicts associated with livestock depredation. They also require very different mitigation actions.

The state of knowledge: Sweden's wolves are among the best studied in the world. A national monitoring system based on intensive snow-tracking, the use of radio-collaring, and non-invasive DNA methods ensures an accurate annual estimate of the size of the population and an estimate of the number of reproductions. The DNA work implies that the identity, relatedness and inbreeding coefficients of many of the detected wolves are known. This monitoring is complemented by research on wolf demography, predator-prey relationships and human dimensions. Research and monitoring is closely coordinated across the border with Norway¹.

Sweden's actions: Sweden's original wolf action plan (from 2000, revised in 2003) called for an evaluation of wolf management when the population reached a stage goal of 20 reproductions. This stage has now been reached and the situation of the wolf has been evaluated. An extensive process of scientific review and public consultation was completed on which a series of actions were proposed to simultaneously address the two greatest threats to the future growth of the wolf population – acceptance by certain segments of the rural society and low levels of genetic variation. In an attempt to increase the acceptance for wolves among the rural population and improve the genetic status of the population the Swedish government has adopted a double-pronged plan for the next few years. On one hand they decided to temporarily stop the growth of the population by allowing hunters to shoot a limited number of wolves in a closely monitored cull. The use of hunters as agents for the cull was both a practical measure and a deliberate attempt to reduce conflict by empowering rural residents to influence their own situation. The rationale of temporarily limiting population growth has been to demonstrate to a skeptical public (1) that the government is willing to allow an active management of wolves, (2) that it is possible to control the population in keeping with public expectations for wildlife populations and (3) to try and give the public time to get used to the return of wolves. The second prong of the strategy is to ensure that fresh genetic material is introduced into the population. Potential approaches include the assisted introduction of new animals (translocation of adults or cross fostering of pups either from the wild or captivity) or genes (artificial insemination) or management steps taken to increase the chances of natural immigrants passing through the reindeer husbandry area to reach the breeding population in the south. The potential ways

¹ <http://skandulv.nina.no/> and <http://www.viltskadecenter.se/>

in which fresh genes could be introduced and the potential source populations are currently being evaluated. The overall policy is presented by Sweden as an attempt to provide a better platform for achieving long term viability by both broadening the population's genetic base and attempting to improve the long term acceptance of a larger number of wolves among the rural public. In other words, even though Sweden is temporarily stopping population growth the motivation is to improve the underlying conditions for a future growth of the population.

LCIE position: The LCIE does not oppose the hunting of large carnivores per se (see our earlier position statement from 2002²) for either recreational or management purposes provided that it is conducted in a scientifically sound, humane, well monitored³, and sustainable manner. In many ecological, social and cultural contexts we believe that hunting may sometimes even be beneficial to promote the local acceptance of large carnivores among rural communities, and there will always be a need for some use of lethal control in large carnivore management in response to a range of situations. In other words, the LCIE position is that full protection is just one of many context dependent tools that can be used in the goal to conserve viable carnivore populations and is not a goal in itself.

Based on our scientific opinion, our general experience, and our vision for large carnivore conservation, the LCIE does not see technical reason to criticize either the overall size of the Swedish quota, the manner in which the hunt was conducted, or the rationale behind it. Although the Swedish managers are seeking to temporarily halt the growth of the population (and therefore its development towards favourable conservation status), we believe that this is unlikely to seriously jeopardize the potential for the population to grow towards a future state that satisfies the desire for long term viability and favourable conservation status once this temporary freeze is lifted. On the contrary, if they succeed with their plan it could improve the population's potential to grow and to be accepted. The harvest was carefully modeled using state of the art statistical tools that incorporate many of the uncertainties, and accordingly the quotas that have been set are likely to keep the population at the desired level without leading to an uncontrolled reduction in the population. This is reinforced by the fact that the population is subject to constant monitoring through a robust program and the annual quotas have been set in an adaptive manner that can adjust to changes in population status.

However, there are a number of conditions on which our position is based and there are some areas of concern.

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<http://www.lcie.org/Docs/LCIE%20IUCN/COE%20LCIE%20position%20statement%20on%20LC%20hunting%202002.pdf>

³ http://www.lcie.org/Docs/LCIE%20IUCN/LCIE_PSS_monitoring.pdf

1) The first issue is the lack of a formalized management plan coordinating actions between Norway and Sweden. As a matter of principle such a formal structure should be in place before management can formally refer to the hunt being targeted on the total biological population (shared between Norway and Sweden) rather than the portion of it that resides within national borders. The counting of packs straddling the border is important in this context where clarification is needed.

2) There is the need to consider wolf hunting within the context of total mortality. The modeling exercises that lie behind the harvest planning include research based parameter estimates for several causes of “background” or non-hunting mortality. It has been pointed out that there has been a lot of documented mortality from anthropogenic causes (vehicle collisions, research related mortality, lethal control conducted by the state) in the last year. It would be reassuring and increase transparency if the managers could explicitly state a total “quota” for all human-caused mortality each year– so that the public can see how the hunting quota is adjusted to take into account other known mortality events. This is particularly important for all issues where wolf killing is deliberate such as under one of the various derogations and documented cases of poaching.

3) The fact that the temporary goal is expressed in the number of individuals, while most monitoring and management is based on the census of packs (reproductive units) is a source of potential confusion and it would be easier to follow developments if the units of objectives and assessment could be harmonized.

4) Our position is totally conditional on the hunt being conducted within the fully integrated context in which it was presented. This refers to our understanding that the temporary freeze on population growth is continued to be seen as a temporary state. The present population size and genetic status cannot be considered to be at Favourable Conservation Status. A detailed specification of the duration of this freeze is important. If the present population size becomes a long term goal then it will require a major revision of our position as the long term viability of the population depends both on its size and genetic variation. To alleviate such concerns about this stage goal becoming a long term goal it would have been very useful if Sweden could define its long term goals for wolf recovery, including statements of favourable reference population and favourable reference range.

5) Our position is also strongly conditional on the fact that plans for genetic reinforcement of the population are carried out. While we understand the complexity of genetic reinforcement and the need to plan it carefully, it would be desirable to see a formalized action plan where the opening for further quotas is conditional on the reinforcement activities actually being implemented. It is unfortunate that plans for the genetic reinforcement lag behind the implementation of the hunt.

6) Because the hunt is mainly justified on the basis of a social conflict, we consider it important to document if such a hunt actually increases rural acceptance for wolf presence.

It would also be desirable to document that it reduces poaching events or at least the willingness of hunters to poach. We realize the logistical difficulties of studying this aspect. However, because the media and interest groups can tend to sensationalize controversial issues like wolf hunting it is important that such documentation is based on robust social science research methods.

In conclusion, the LCIE is open to consider the Swedish wolf hunt as a temporary trial to test possible approaches to improving the population's potential to reach a more favourable status in the near future. However, our acceptance of the 2010 and 2011 Swedish wolf hunts is conditional on a number of factors, and we have identified some areas where clarification and improvements are necessary. We stress, however, that few other European countries can claim to have met the Swedish standards. In particular, we want to underline the fact that the goal of 20 reproductions is a temporary one and is absolutely not an indication of favourable conservation status that other EU countries should decide to adopt. Swedish wolves are very intensively monitored and researched such that it is possible to predict the impacts of the implemented actions in detail and also follow up the actions to determine their effect. The wildlife management structure operating in Sweden is sufficient to permit effective adaptive management, and the manner in which the hunt was organized and conducted should minimize the possibility of the system being abused. The implication is that this is not a general model for wolf management that can be directly and unconditionally transferred across Europe. Rather it underlines our belief that wolf management needs to be adapted to local ecological, economic and social contexts. In our vision there should be no compromise in the goal to foster wolf conservation across Europe, but that countries need to be able to use a diversity of means to achieve these goals and that in some cases there may be a need to test out new and innovative approaches.

The LCIE also believe that conservation should be conducted within the frames of robust scientific knowledge. This commitment to a science-based approach provides a way of guiding bureaucratic discretion and harmonizing the need for context dependence and flexibility, with the need to be predictable, consistent and fair when operationalising international legislation across Europe.

The Large Carnivore Initiative for Europe is a Specialist Group of the IUCN's Species Survival Commission.

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