



The wolf in Italy: conflicts and challenges for conservation

Report by Io non ho paura del lupo APS

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Introduction

This document represents the point of view of our organization with respect to the current situation and issues today inherent to the presence of the wolf species (*Canis lupus*) in the Italian national context. It aims to provide a representation as comprehensive as possible, although necessarily brief and generic, with respect to management activities, coexistence and conservation issues, and future challenges that the species faces in Italy today. The objective of this document is therefore to inform the European Authority with respect to the current status of acceptance of the species and the related issues from the point of view of our organization, emphasizing how the time is not ripe today for the reduction of the wolf's protection status in Italy and Europe.

About us

The organization "Io non ho paura del lupo (*I'm not afraid of the wolf*) was founded in 2016 in the mountains of the northern Apennines thanks to a group of mountain dwellers including passionate wildlife conservationists, breeders, farmers and nature professionals. Since its founding, the organization has been engaged in several areas: **communication and dissemination** with the aim of creating culture and knowledge about the predator thus responding to the growing misinformation; **conflict mitigation actions with livestock activities** through direct support to livestock farmers; **monitoring and field research** through survey activities on the wolf species, also contributing in institutional projects; **events, ecotourism and other actions dedicated to small communities**. Today, the organization is active on a national scale and, in addition to its field activities, manages the most followed web platform in Italy dedicated to the wolf and its conservation.

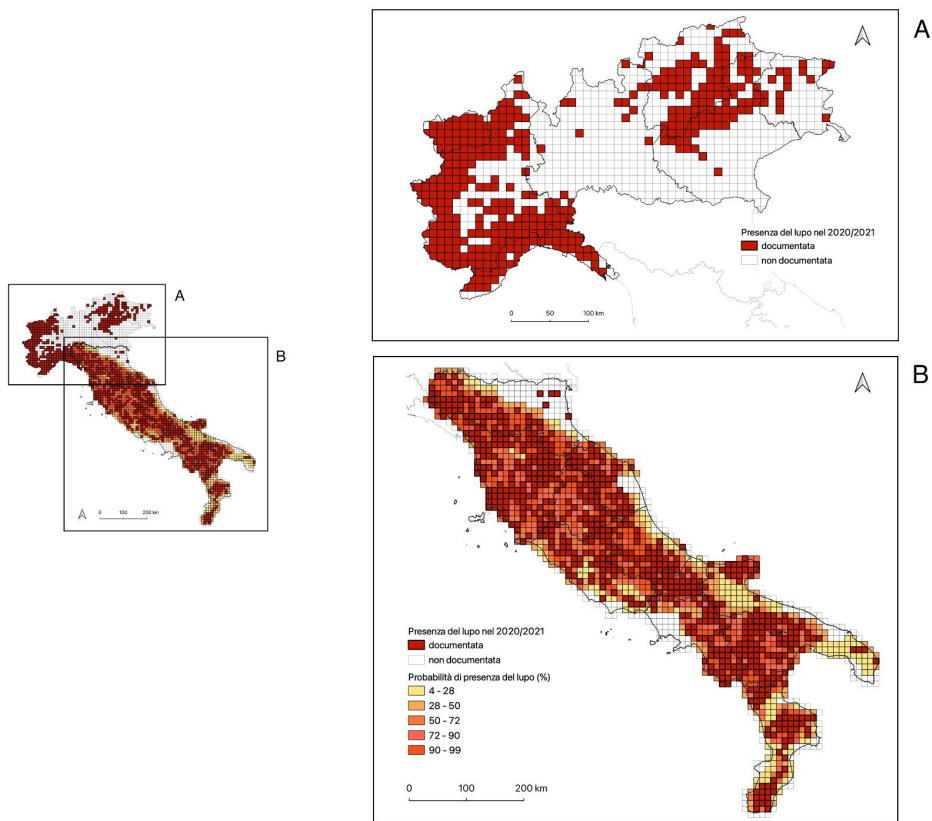
How many wolves are there in Italy?

Historically, the wolf has always been present in Italy with its own subspecies (*Canis lupus italicus*) although in the last three centuries it has been the victim of a strong direct persecution by man: at the end of the 1970s the species was on the brink of extinction there were only an estimated one hundred remaining specimens in some remote areas of the Central Apennines. Since the 1980s, thanks to various legislative initiatives, the abandonment of mountain areas by humans and the increase in forest areas, an element that has also favored the return and expansion of its natural prey, the wolf has spontaneously re-colonized the entire Italian Peninsula, from mountainous areas to coastal and lowland areas, and is now present throughout the country, excluding islands. Between 2020 and 2021, the first National Wolf Monitoring took place in Italy, coordinated by ISPRA, the National Institute for Environmental Protection and Research, under a mandate from the Ministry of Environment and Energy Security. Over the entire national territory, simultaneously and according to standardized protocols, a data collection was carried out to estimate the abundance and distribution of the species from which the wolf population estimate at the national scale was calculated, which was found to be about 3,307 individuals¹. Regarding distribution, the minimum range of wolf presence in the Alpine regions in 2020-2021 was estimated at 41,600 square kilometers². In the peninsular regions, the total distribution range was found to be 108,534 square km³. Thus, the wolf occupies a large part of the country, and in the peninsular regions it has colonized almost all suitable environments.

¹ [La Morgia V., Marucco F., Aragno P., Salvatori V., Gervasi V., De Angelis D., Fabbri E., Caniglia R., Velli E., Avanzinelli E., Boiani M.V., Genovesi P., 2022. Stima della distribuzione e consistenza del lupo a scala nazionale 2020/2021. Relazione tecnica realizzata nell'ambito della convenzione ISPRA-Ministero della Transizione Ecologica "Attività di monitoraggio nazionale nell'ambito del Piano di Azione del lupo".](#)

² [Marucco F., E. Avanzinelli, M. V. Boiani, A. Menzano, S. Perrone, P. Dupont, R. Bischof, C. Milleret, A. von Hardenberg, K. Pilgrim, O. Friard, F. Bisi, G. Bombieri, S. Calderola, S. Caroli, C. Chioso, U. Fattori, P. Ferrari, L. Pedrotti, D. Righetti, M. Tomasella, E. Truc, P. Aragno, V. La Morgia, P. Genovesi \(2022\). La popolazione di lupo nelle regioni alpine Italiane 2020-2021. Relazione tecnica dell'Attività di monitoraggio nazionale nell'ambito del Piano di Azione del lupo ai sensi della Convenzione ISPRA-MITE e nell'ambito del Progetto LIFE 18 NAT/IT/000972 WOLFALPS EU.](#)

³ [Aragno P., Salvatori V., Caniglia R., De Angelis D., Fabbri E., Gervasi V., La Morgia V., Marucco F., Mucci N., Velli E., Genovesi P., 2022. La popolazione di lupo nelle regioni dell'Italia peninsulare 2020/2021. Relazione tecnica realizzata nell'ambito della convenzione ISPRA-Ministero della Transizione Ecologica "Attività di monitoraggio nazionale nell'ambito del Piano di Azione del lupo".](#)



Today, almost three years after the first national monitoring, there is no updated data with respect to wolf population size on a national scale and monitoring, as well as wildlife management, remains the responsibility of individual Regions. Some of these are periodically active in monitoring, especially in the Alpine environment thanks to the presence of projects such as LIFE WolfAlps EU (which will end at the end of 2024) while for other Regions there is no updated data with respect to the presence of wolves in their territory. These issues, together with the lack of a standardized and shared monitoring protocol, do not allow to have the most current and reliable snapshot with respect to the presence of the species in Italy.

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Management and conservation plan

Today Italy, despite being the European country with the highest number of wolves in the country, does not have its own wolf management and conservation plan. The only one available, more than 20 years old, is outdated and cannot be used today to meet current conservation and management needs. The adoption of a new plan has been under discussion for more than four years within the State-Regions Conference, the Italian collegial body aimed at institutional collaboration between the State and Local Authorities, but its approval is hostage to different political visions that cannot agree with respect to the line to be followed and the rigor of initiatives dedicated to control and culling. In July 2023, the Presidents of the Legislative Assemblies of the Regions and Autonomous Provinces

approved the agenda on the request for the update of the Plan for the Conservation and Management of the Wolf in Italy. The request, addressed to state authorities and other competent bodies, is to proceed with urgency to complete the path for updating the National Plan for the Conservation and Management of the Wolf in Italy, in order to adapt the framework of interventions to the needs that have arisen and to clarify the prerequisites for capture and withdrawal actions. From our point of view, without a serious and shared management plan it remains impossible today to endorse any management choice for wolf conservation in Italy. In-depth study and total understanding of the issues affecting the species and initiatives aimed at its conservation remain a priority today. Finally, it is important to emphasize how necessary it would be for the European Community to take an active part in stimulating member countries for adoption of management plans for the wolf species, consistent with the technical and scientific guidelines necessary to ensure serious conservation of the species, in a path shared among member countries.

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Impact on livestock activities

The return of the wolf to territories from which it has been absent for decades is a great success in terms of conservation of the species, however, it has inevitably caused, in several areas of the country, problems related to the impact of the wolf on livestock activities. Regions, autonomous provinces and some parks now compensate for damage to productive activities caused by wild species, including wolves. As part of the National Wolf Monitoring, a study was conducted on damages compensated by Administrations in the period between 2015 and 2019, which considered only cases of documented and ascertained killing of livestock. In total, data were collected on 17,989 established predation events. The sums granted as compensation during the 2015-2019 period totaled € 9,006,997 for an average of € 1,801,367 annually.⁴ Two distinct types of impact emerged from the study: a large majority of livestock farms subject to sporadic wolf damage and with quantitatively small losses, and a second type, on the other hand, consisting of a minority of farms that record frequent attacks, repeated chronically from year to year and with significant numerical losses. This type of damage can often be related to the failure to use preventive measures and their diffusion among livestock companies. A case in point is the Autonomous Provinces of Trento and Bolzano, two of the areas in Italy today where the conflict is marked and where, as in the case of the Autonomous Province of Trento, a positive opinion was recently issued by ISPRA, the National Institute for Environmental Protection and Research with respect to the culling of two wolves belonging to a pack responsible for repeated attacks in an alpine pasture. This is the first derogation authorization issued in Italy, although to date (September 20, 2023) no culls have been carried out. In the document compiled by ISPRA dedicated to these two Autonomous Provinces, an increase in the overall impact exerted by the wolf on the livestock sector over the years, both in terms of predation events, the number of animals killed and the number of farms damaged, is highlighted, along with the progressive return of the wolf from areas where it was absent. In the Autonomous Province of Trento in particular, a strong

⁴ Gervasi V., Zingaro M., Aragno P., Genovesi P., Salvatori V., 2022. Stima dell'impatto del lupo sulle attività zootecniche in Italia. Analisi del periodo 2015 – 2019. Relazione tecnica realizzata nell'ambito della convenzione ISPRA-Ministero della Transizione Ecologica per "Attività di monitoraggio nazionale nell'ambito del Piano di Azione del lupo".

polarization of the impact on farms was evident, with a large majority suffering limited damage and a minority characterized by chronic attacks, often associated with significant losses. As for the Autonomous Province of Bolzano, the degree of spread of livestock protection systems seems to be, on the whole, still rather limited, as evidenced by the fact that almost all wolf attacks recorded in the eight years under consideration occurred in the total absence of protection measures.⁵ In the Autonomous Province of Trento, there is evidence of a fair diffusion of electrified fences among huts with a prevalence of sheep and goat livestock, while huts with a prevalence of cattle livestock were found to be mostly without them. The spread of protection dogs is still rather limited. The data referring to the inspections carried out following predations showed that often, although preventive measures are present, they are not used or are used incorrectly. The technical report "*Wolf predation on domestic livestock in the province of Trento: analysis of dynamics and prevention strategies*" analyzed the cases of wolf predation on livestock recorded between 2013 and 2022. In the province of Trento, 576 wolf predation on livestock occurred between 2013 and 2022, with a total of 2256 animals compromised (including dead, injured, and missing animals). Most of the predations occurred in the complete absence of preventive measures (62%) and, where they were present, they were not always protecting the preyed upon livestock at the time the attack occurred.⁶ It follows that in 81% of the cases the predated livestock were not defended in any way. In this very fragmented picture, it is exceedingly difficult to retrieve data on the use of preventive measures and the adoption throughout the country, as they are not available for all Italian regions. Therefore, it appears conceivable that for the near future, initiatives aimed at harm reduction through the use of preventive measures should be more carefully encouraged and developed, with a focus on new technologies and nonlethal deterrence initiatives.

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Poaching and anthropogenic mortality

Until the summer of 2023, no wolf culls have ever been officially authorized in Italy as an exception to the current directives, yet there are several elements, from our personal point of view, that allow us to hypothesize how for several decades the wolf in Italy has been the victim of a real illegal control of the species by poachers and criminals. The acts of poaching that are uncovered are, unfortunately, only the tip of the iceberg of a very extensive phenomenon, of which it is difficult to estimate the real numbers and which in the vast majority of cases goes unpunished. There are, in fact, really still too few cases in which investigations succeed in uncovering the identity of the perpetrators and securing their due convictions. It is also conceivable that this practice will grow with the spread of the species and the associated misinformation.

⁵[ISPRA Istituto superiore per la protezione e la ricerca ambientale - Abbattimento di lupi nel territorio della Provincia di Bolzano. Richiesta di parere per il prelievo di massimo 2 esemplari appartenenti alla specie *Canis lupus* – Comune di Selva dei Molini e comuni limitrofi ai sensi della LP n. 11/2018.](#)

⁶[Bombieri G., Roseo F., Bragalanti N., Zanghellini P., Zeni M., Groff C., Pedrini P. 2023. Predazioni da lupo sul bestiame domestico in provincia di Trento: analisi delle dinamiche e delle strategie di prevenzione. Relazione tecnica MUSE-PAT.](#)

By way of example, we give some emblematic cases:

- In July 2023, a wolf, first wounded in the hind limbs from behind and then finished off with a blow to the head, was later hanged from the Florence-Pisa-Livorno overpass within the municipality of Cascina, Pisa province;
- In May 2023 in the territory of Cocullo, in the Province of L'Aquila, in an area located outside the protected areas, but in the important ecological corridor that connects the Abruzzo, Lazio and Molise National Park and the Sirente Velino Regional Natural Park, a total of nine wolves' carcasses were found, all dead as a result of poisoning;
- In February 2023, the carcass of a wolf illegally shot was found in the locality of Castel Penede in Nago Torbole (TN);
- In September 2022, the severed head of a young wolf was found hanging from a road sign in Era, a small hamlet of Samolaco (SO) with a sign bearing the following words: "Professors talk, ignorant people shoot."
- In November 2019, a young wolf was killed with 7 wild boar buckshot using broken ammunition, which is used illegally for hunting wild boar, within the Castel di Guido State Nature Reserve;
- In December 2017, a skinned wolf hanging upside down was found at a bus stop in the municipality of Coriano (RN). Those responsible for this act were identified and subjected to judicial investigation.
- In April 2017, a wolf was found in the province of Livorno, Italy, first killed by strangulation with a ligature and then skinned and later hung from a road sign with a sign that read "No to culling - Yes to prevention."
- In February 2015 in Sanza, in the province of Salerno, the carcass of a wolf, killed with gunshots, was found in the main square of the town and deposited in the flowerbed in Piazza XXIV Maggio at the foot of the town's symbolic Deer, accompanied by a sign bearing explicit threats to the State Forestry Corps;
- In January 2014, a wolf was found slashed and then hung upside down on an overpass overlooking the Aurelia highway, almost on the border between Tarquinia and Montalto di Castro, in the province of Viterbo.

The study published in 2021 titled "*Men and wolves: Anthropogenic causes are an important driver of wolf mortality in human-dominated landscapes in Italy*" highlights how human-caused causes such as poaching and vehicle impacts are among the main causes of wolf mortality in Italy. This publication analyzed the situation regarding wolf mortality in parts of Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna, two of the Italian regions where there has been a large population of wolves for several decades, identifying the prevailing causes of mortality. The paper highlights how 212 wolf carcasses were recovered between October 2005 and February 2021, of which 179 (84.4 percent) died of anthropogenic causes: 104 due to collisions with vehicles and 75 with signs consistent with illegal human-caused persecution, and specifically 45 died from poisoning with toxic substances, 24 from gunshot wounds, 4 struck by blunt objects, and 2 hanged. Only 21 of the 212 wolves examined (9.9%) died of natural causes.⁷ Regarding the alpine context, from 1999 to April 2017, thus in 18 years of sampling, 153 dead wolves have been recovered in the Piedmont region. The main causes of death recorded from 1998-1999 to 2016-2017 were, in descending order of frequency: collisions with motor vehicles and trains (54.2%, n=83 wolves), illegal killing (23.8%, n=36 wolves), natural causes (11.1%, n=17 wolves), and undetermined causes (11.1%, n=17 wolves).⁸ From these two examples, and in comparison with the sad news events that have been going on for several years now, it is clear how much work is still needed in order to develop conservation actions to reduce anthropogenic mortality of the wolf species. These actions, which must be accompanied by a strict legal protection status and a tightening of penalties towards those who commit acts of poaching, must also take into account the social perception that the species has on the Italian population today.

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Management issues

In recent years in Italy, there have been single and circumscribed incidents involving “bold wolves” or wolves displaying confident attitudes toward people. These cases all share a management slowness that on some occasions has prohibited the institution itself from being able to intervene in an acceptable time frame. The cause is to be found in the length of bureaucratic processes and/or excessive delay in intervening with respect to cases that would require more attention and for which institutional technical structures are sometimes unprepared. The most striking case is the one concerning the “wolf of Vasto.” This is a specimen believed to be responsible for a series of attacks, the first of which had occurred on August 7, 2022, and hypothetically also responsible for the subsequent ones, a total of 11, fortunately not serious, against people. Its capture was not authorized until June 2023, 10 months after the first attack, and as of today (September 20, 2023), as far as is known, the specimen is still free in the territory. Another case concerns one that occurred from March 2020: a female wolf for several months had frequented the built-up area of the city of Potenza, feeding on food

⁷ [Musto C., Cerri J., Galaverni M., Caniglia R., Fabbri E., Apollonio M., Mucci N., Bonilauri P., Maioli G., Fontana M. C., Gelmini L., Prosperi A., Rossi A., Garbarino C., Fiorentini L., Aiuti F., Berzi D., Meriardi G., Deloqui M., 2021. Men and wolves: Anthropogenic causes are an important driver of wolf mortality in human-dominated landscapes in Italy](#)

⁸ [Marucco F. e Avanzinelli E. \(2017\). Lo Status del lupo in Regione Piemonte. In: Marucco et al. \(2017\). Lo Status della popolazione di lupo sulle Alpi Italiane e Slovene 2014-2016 Relazione tecnica. Progetto LIFE 12 NAT/IT/00080 WOLFALPS – Azione A4.](#)

left outside the houses. Captured in December of that year, equipped with a GPS radio collar, she had then been released in a place far from built-up areas, although after a short time she had returned to the urban areas of Potenza, and during the spring of 2021 she had been seen mating with a stray dog. Subsequently captured and sterilized, she was released in the Gallipoli Cognato Regional Park. As can be seen from these episodes, which are just one example compared to several cases that have occurred in Italy in recent years, institutional management and authorization processes remain inadequate with respect to the urgency of these individual cases involving the wolf species. Timeliness of action is now an absolutely essential condition in these circumstances and the institution does not seem prepared today to manage these rare cases on which it is often necessary to intervene also with respect to the perception that they may generate on the population. In fact, it is clear that there is a significant gap at the regional level in the willingness and ability to field a timely response. What is needed, therefore, from our point of view, is an improvement in management procedures and the creation of appropriate technical and scientific structures that can support territorial realities in the management of these cases.

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Social acceptance and perception

The wolf has always been loaded with a symbolism that goes far beyond simply considering the species as a wild animal. To this day, while it represents instinct, freedom, courage, tenacity, sociability and protection, it also embodies the fears and shadows of the mind. On a symbolic level then, the wolf is still loved and feared at the same time, on the one hand fascinating and on the other terrifying. Nowadays in Italy and Europe the situation from a certain point of view has not changed much compared to the past and the wolf remains the wild animal with the highest level of misinformation against it. In Italy today, the mass media publish and report alarming news on a daily basis, deliberately using somber, sensationalist-sounding language that emphasizes the goriest aspects of the wolf's predatory behavior. There are countless examples that evoke fear in readers, and often these are not accompanied by proper fact-checking or technical advice to help readers understand the behavior of the species. This misinformation, accompanied by the countless fake-news, often fostered by genuine movements specializing in a real personal war on the wolf, can thoroughly undermine the accepted status and relative conservation of the wolf in Italy and Europe. It is therefore necessary, before any review of the species' protection status, to investigate, understand and evaluate possible actions to counter this cultural drift affecting the species. Therefore, it remains essential that the European Authority also take charge of working for the future conservation of the species through cultural and sociological actions.

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Conclusions

Today, wolf populations in some parts of Europe are expanding, returning to areas where the wolf had been persecuted and exterminated in the last century, while in other parts of Europe wolf populations

are kept at unacceptably low levels to hinder its natural expansion. Growing ecological awareness and current protection regulations, both on a national and European scale, have undoubtedly encouraged its return. However, the return of the wolf to European forests and landscapes is far from complete. According to the Large Carnivore Initiative for Europe, the current positive trend can easily be reversed, because the main conservation problems have not been solved and many of them have not yet even been addressed.⁹ Today, the initiatives put in place in Italy and by the governments of many other member states to prevent damage to the livestock sector and promote coexistence are not sufficient. In addition, population monitoring systems in different countries are not standardized or are plagued by delays, often giving a distorted picture of the real conservation status of the wolf. In addition, many countries such as Italy still lack wolf conservation and management plans, which, for political reasons, have not been approved or put into practice. Poaching and anthropogenic mortality are another serious threat affecting wolf conservation. Our organization appeals to the European Institution for the wolf's protection status to remain as it is, but at the same time calls for a decisive change of pace in the work to promote and defend coexistence with large predators. Incentivizing various actions, such as shared monitoring protocols at the European level, since these animals know no borders, increasing the use of nonlethal preventive measures and ensuring that they are properly implemented and adapted to the specific context, as well as supporting acceptance and tolerance of wolves through education and information. This, in turn, is essential for increasing the resilience of ecosystems to climate change and natural crises. In conclusion, we would like to mention the recent passage of the "Nature Restoration Law," which commits European member states to restore 20 percent of land and marine areas by 2030 to halt biodiversity loss and counter the climate crisis. In light of these commitments, it would be counterproductive to advocate scaling back the level of wolf protection. Instead, the focus should be on collaboration among stakeholders to find nonlethal solutions to achieve positive coexistence with the wolf as a key species in our European ecosystems.

Borgo Val di Taro (PR) 20/09/2023

Io non ho paura del lupo APS

Daniele Ecotti, President

www.iononhopauradellupo.it

⁹ [Boitani, L., Kaczensky, P., Alvares, F., Andr n, H., Balys, V., Blanco, J. C., ... & Patk , L. \(2022, November\). Assessment of the conservation status of the Wolf \(Canis lupus\) in Europe. In Prepared for the Berne Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats and the Council of Europe.](#)