

Position statement from the Large Carnivore Initiative for Europe
on the 2010 Swedish wolf hunt.

December 2010.

Background: In the winter of 2009-2010 Sweden authorized a quota limited cull 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.

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 2, and then 3, founders up 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 a very narrow genetic base and inbreeding coefficients are very high. Effects of inbreeding depression have already been documented in this population. Based on general scientific literature, the data collected from the fields 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 also an arena for a high degree of conflict. Wolf establishment is widely regarded as being incompatible with the presence of Sami reindeer herding in northern Sweden. Conflicts with sheep farming 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. In central and southern Sweden 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 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. In addition, there are regular episodes of wolf depredation on domestic livestock and pets. The result is that wolf recovery has become very controversial in Sweden, as in many other European countries.

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 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 the detected wolves is known. This monitoring is complemented by research on wolf demography, predator-prey relationships and social science research. Research and monitoring is closely coordinated across the border with Norway.

Sweden's actions: In an attempt to reduce some of the conflicts and improve the genetic status of the population the Swedish government has adopted a double-pronged plan. On one hand they decided to temporarily slow or limit the further 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. It was also an attempt to "normalize" the status of the wolf so it could be viewed in the same way as a "normal" game species and therefore try and reduce some of the negative symbolism which has become attached to it due to its strict protection. 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 either through facilitating natural immigration or by assisted introduction if there is insufficient natural immigration. The potential ways in which fresh genes could be introduced and the potential source populations are currently being evaluated. In other words, the overall policy is an attempt to both provide a better platform for achieving long term viability by broadening the population's genetic base and addressing conflicts by allowing a hunt and temporarily limiting growth.

LCIE position: The LCIE does not oppose the hunting of large carnivores per se (see our earlier position statement) for either recreational or management purposes provided that it is conducted in a scientifically sound, humane, well monitored, and sustainable manner. In many ecological, social and cultural contexts (for example in the Nordic countries) we believe that hunting may 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 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.

The overall size of the Swedish quota and the manner in which the hunt was conducted does not appear to violate any of our general guidelines and is unlikely to seriously

jeopardize the potential for the viability of the population or its further development towards reaching a more favourable conservation status. The harvest was carefully modeled using state of the art statistical tools and accordingly the quota that was set was conservative.

Although the LCIE has no legal mandate to interpret the Swedish actions with respect to the Habitats Directive we can comment on the Swedish case with respect to “Guidelines for Population Level Management Plans” that we developed for the European Commission in 2008. Accordingly it is not necessarily a problem that the hunt was permitted before Favourable Conservation Status has been reached, or that the hunt was conducted by normal hunters, or that the derogation was issued to prevent conflict in a general manner rather than in a targeted reaction to a specific conflict location. However, this does depend on a general understanding that conflict with hunting interests and broad social / rural conflicts be regarded as legitimate conflicts if the derogation is justified under our reading of Article 16(b and c). Wolf conservation is controversial in many contexts and if allowing such a limited hunt can be shown to increase the acceptance of rural communities for the presence of the wolf then it must be considered as being justified. The conflict with sheep farmers is not a major part of the justification for this hunt because Sweden have made major investments in installing protective measures, mainly electric fences, to proactively mitigate this conflict.

With respect to derogations made under Article 16(e) the organization of the hunt appears to be within the frames outlined. In short, our view is that the hunt as conducted in 2010 could have been justified under several derogation criteria.

The only detail that is open to critique is the lack of a formalized management plan coordinated between Norway and Sweden. As a matter of principle (following the publication of the “Guidelines for Population Level Management Plans” which have been endorsed by both the Habitats Committee and the Bern Convention) such a formal structure should be in place before management can formally refer to the hunt being targeted on the total biological population rather than the portion of it that resides within national borders. Furthermore, 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.

However, it is important to point out that our position on this specific derogation is based on three sets of conditions.

Firstly, it must be remembered that Swedish wolves are very intensively monitored and researched such that it is possible to predict the impacts of such 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. Few other European wolf populations are in such a situation.

Secondly, our position is conditional on the hunt being conducted within the fully integrated context in which it was presented. This refers to the understanding that the temporary freeze on population growth is continued to be seen as a temporary state. 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 also on its size and distribution pattern. It is also strongly conditional on the fact that plans for genetic reinforcement of the population are carried out.

Thirdly, we consider it important to document that such a hunt actually increases rural acceptance for wolf presence and reduces conflicts (be they material, economic or social). It would also be desirable to document that it reduces poaching events or at least the willingness of hunters to poach, although we realize the logistical difficulties of studying this aspect. Documenting these linkages which are often assumed should be a priority.

In conclusion, the LCIE find that acceptance of the 2010 Swedish wolf hunt is conditional on a number of factors that few other countries can claim to have met. 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, and that it needs to be conducted within the frames of robust scientific knowledge.