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Ochrona wilka a gospodarka łowiecka w Polsce – konflikt nieunikniony?

Wolf protection and game management in Poland – an inevitable conflict?

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Kluczowym elementem efektywnej ochrony wilka jest akceptacja grup społecznych, dla których obecność tego drapieżnika ma istotne znaczenie. Są to głównie myśliwi, hodowcy zwierząt gospodarskich oraz lokalne samorządy i mieszkańcy terenów, na których wilki występują lub mogą się pojawić. Wszystkie te grupy powinny być traktowane z uwzględnieniem ich interesów i potrzeb w planowanych działaniach ochronnych dotyczących tego gatunku.

Obecność lub pojawienie się wilka ma różne konsekwencje dla wymienionych środowisk, jednak wspólnym mianownikiem jest ich wymiar ekonomiczny, którego nie można marginalizować. Dla myśliwych równie istotnym skutkiem obecności lub pojawienia się wilka jest zagrożenie kultywowania przez nich wielowiekowej tradycji polowania, co w konsekwencji sprowadza się do zagrożenia funkcjonowania całej gospodarki łowieckiej.

Aby zapewnić w długookresowej perspektywie niezagrożone trwanie populacji wilka w Polsce, należy zminimalizować lub całkowicie załagodzić istniejący konflikt pomiędzy ochroną wilka a podmiotami prowadzącymi gospodarkę łowiecką, będący głównie wynikiem radykalnych postaw ekologicznych organizacji pozarządowych i niektórych środowisk ochroniarskich. Zaprzestanie forsowania ścisłej ochrony wilka kosztem gospodarki łowieckiej, w połączeniu z określeniem celu ochrony wilka w poszczególnych obszarach jego występowania (docelowe zagęszczenia) i dopuszczeniem kontrolowania jego liczebności po osiągnięciu optymalnych zagęszczeń, spowoduje akceptację dla ochrony wilka podmiotów prowadzących gospodarkę łowiecką oraz samych myśliwych i aktywnie włączy ich w ten proces, gwarantując trwanie gatunku w przyszłości.

SUMMARY

Effective wolf protection is impossible without approval of milieus to which its occurrence is important. Those milieus are mostly represented by hunters, livestock breeders, local authorities and people living in areas where wolves do occur or may occur. All those groups have to be taken seriously, and their interests and needs have to be accounted for in the scheduled conservation measures related to the species in question.

The presence or visits of the wolf have different effects on the above groups, but there is one common denominator, i.e. the economical dimension, which must not be disregarded. In the case of game management, the economic importance consists in the reduced income from the sale of hunting trips and game carcasses compared to the situation when the wolf is absent (irrespective of the fact whether the lower sale results from more modest hunting plans or from the necessity to account for game losses caused by wolves). The amount of direct annual financial losses borne by hunting revier leaseholders or managers due to wolf occurrence may range from over 30 000 PLN to as much as over 100 000 PL per 100 km^2 of hunting revier.

From the hunters' perspective, the presence of wolves or their visits in a given revier pose a threat to cultivation of centuries-old tradition of hunting, which consequently threaten the whole game management. This threat results mainly from the attempts to reduce the number of hunted big game or even total hunting suspension in some parts of the wolf range. These attempts made by environmental NGOs are justified by the fact that the size of local wolf populations is limited by hunting for ungulates (in excess or at all). However, a significant increase in the number of deer, roe-deer and wild boar, i.e. animals constituting the basic wolf diet is observed throughout the country, also in the regions where wolf populations are stable. That means that the death rate of these species, caused by any possible factors, is lower than the birth rate, and consequently that hunting for deer, roe-deer and wild boar does not contribute to reduction in the large carnivore food base.

In order to preserve sustainable wolf populations in Poland, the conflict between those who work for wolf conservation and the entities dealing with game management has to be mitigated or totally resolved. The conflict is induce mainly by the radical attitude of non-governmental environmental organisations and some milieus of nature conservationists. The first step to resolve the conflict between wolf protection and game management is to make the conservationists aware of the following facts determined in the course of scientific research and everyday practice.

1. The proper game management, including ungulate hunting, does not pose any threat to wolves or other carnivores.

2. There are no factual or legal basis for submitting the annual hunting plans and long-term hunting breeding plans for environmental impact assessment with respect to protection of large carnivores, including the wolf. Applying the environmental impact assessment procedure to annual hunting plans would involve additional changes in the inventory schedules, approval of annual hunting plans, and thus most likely changes in the hunting season duration, which could make the complicated procedure of hunting planning even more difficult.

3. Assigning arbitrary levels for the number of hunted ungulates to provide adequate food resources for wolves is not justified and does not contribute to an increase in the number of carnivores.

4. When determining the target wolf population density in individual zones (regions) of their range, the extent of damage in forests, damage to crops and agricultural products caused by ungulates (basic food of wolf) should be accounted for. Without such analysis, the protection of wolf may lead to further conflicts with forestry and agriculture.

5. Wolves are not able to reduce the number of their prey.

6. Wolves do not contribute to the reduction of damage in forest and agricultural crops caused by ungulates. Their occurrence may lead to an increase in the extent of this kind of damage.

7. Information on the extent of wolf poaching, particularly by hunters, should be supported by specific evidence. If such data are missing, any reasoning related to the extent of poaching and its effects on wolf populations is unjustified.

On the other hand, certain rules of game management should also be subject to legal modification in order to meet the needs of wolves irrespective of the knowledge and the will of people responsible for game management.

1. Plans for big game hunting should be based on inventory results and an expected increase in Cervidae and wild boar populations with no hunting interference (and no longer on the number of animals prior to the hunting season). This requires an amendment to the Regulation of the Ministry of the Environment on annual hunting plans and long-term hunting breeding plans.

2. Determination of the number of deer and wild boars to be hunted based on the inventory data and the expected population growth should be performed for game breeding regions and not hunting reviers (plans for a hunting revier are correct for roe deer because of small home ranges of the species). The legal status of a co-ordinator of a game breeding region should be established. This requires an amendment to the Law on Hunting Act and the Regulation of the Minister of the Environment on annual hunting plans and long-term hunting breeding plans.

3. Comprehensive research on the determination of reliable, optimal densities of Cervidae and wild boar populations in individual regions and determination of target densities to ensure an acceptable level of damage in forests, on the one hand, and the functioning of large predators, particularly wolves, and game management, on the other hand.

Although not entirely sufficient, these measures will contribute to conflict mitigation. It appears that the limited and reasonable exploitation of the wolf populations may lead to conflict mitigation and will not interfere with the protection of the species. There are places in Poland where wolf density is already optimal or exceeds the optimal level, but there are also places suitable for wolves where they do not occur or occur only occasionally. Therefore, zonal differentiation in the method of wolf populations' management is well-founded. In the regions where density of wolves reaches the optimum, their population size should be controlled. This kind of solution would also compensate for economic losses and other restrictions suffered by game management entities due to the presence of wolf, and it would not pose any threat to the species population sustainability.