

Encounters with Wolves: Dynamics and Futures

Veranstalter: Department of European Ethnology, University of Würzburg; Department of Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies, University of Zurich; Sorbian Institute, Bautzen

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This conference was initiated by MICHAELA FENSKE (Würzburg) and her team of the German Research Foundation project 'The Return of Wolves: Cultural-anthropological studies dealing with the process of wolf management in the Federal Republic of Germany'. She considered her project and the conference as being driven by two recent theoretical developments. First, she named the turn towards multispecies ethnography or a 'more-than-human' anthropology that has successfully decentred human perspectives and acknowledged the contributions of other-than-humans to co-create the world alongside humans. Secondly, she follows Ulrich Beck in his diagnosis of late modernity as a time of rapid transformation and metamorphosis. The conference theme of dynamics and futures in relation to the return of wolves thus refers to the question: what does it mean to live (together) in a rapidly changing world? BERNHARD TSCHOFEN (Zurich), who co-organized the conference and leads the Swiss National Science Foundation project 'Wolves – Knowledge and Practice: Ethnographies of Wildlife Management in Switzerland' follows a similar agenda when looking at the return of the wolves to Switzerland as a cultural process from an anthropological perspective, with a focus on experiences and encounters with wolves in multispecies landscapes.

The Sorbian Institute, located in Bautzen, hosted the conference. Representing the Institute, SUSANNE HOSE (Bautzen) pointed out that the wolf's core area in Lusatia (Lausitz) is within the settlement area of the Sorbian minority in that region. And although the wolf has been extinct there for about 200 years, wolf representations feature prominently in

Sorbian culture. But living-together with wolves is both a new and unusual experience for Sorbs and Hose sees the need to study how the relationship between Sorbs and wolves are currently in transformation.

The main aim of the conference was to exchange experiences on living-together with wolves on international and interdisciplinary levels. Scholars from European Ethnology, Cultural Anthropology, Cultural and Environmental History, Human-Animal Studies and Communication Science met to discuss their findings from countries such as Germany, Switzerland, Norway, Finland, Poland and Albania.

Although the conference was mainly conceived as an exchange between researchers and as an attempt to move beyond narratives of conflict to imagine positive future scenarios of humans and wolves living-together, its location in the heart of wolf conflicts guaranteed that discussions were often controversial and challenging. Local anti-wolf campaigners engaged with the (academic) presenters and lively debates characterized not only the in-conference discussions but also the conference dinner and the excursion. Thereby, the conference itself and the variety of perspectives represented there became a field site in itself for the researchers from Würzburg who were able to witness the dynamics of wolf discourse *in situ*.

The conference presentations were framed by the two big wolf research projects from Würzburg and Zurich, with the former opening the conference and the latter closing it. Outlining their project's research agenda, IRINA ARNOLD and MARLIS HEYER (Würzburg) argued for 'multispecies politics in motion' that acknowledges various temporalities and contested knowledges, practices, narratives and affects. To illustrate their approach, they presented three examples from their field sites in Saxony and Lower Saxony and showed how actors dealt differently with wolves and game laws (to shoot or to protect?), 'wolf-free zones' and issues of wolf hybridization (are Germany's wolves actually dog hybrids?). Then, the two presenters proposed to consider wolves as active participants in the multispecies political fields. Yet arguably, it remains to be seen whether public

debates will do so, too, and what the benefits of acknowledging them as actors might be.

EMILIA WIECZORKOWSKA (Katowice) gave an account of the wolf situation in Poland where the population has risen from about 80 individuals in the 1970s to about 2000 now. Despite this increase, she argued that wolves still remain rather hidden for most people and damages to livestock are low. Nevertheless, the general attitude towards wolves is negative which she attributes more to folklore than to real negative encounters with wolves. In her research, she thus traces the wolf in the fields of Polish folklore (such as the 'supper for wolves' at Christmas Eve), religious and other spiritual practices (as those in the 'wolf month' February in honour of the protector from and of wolves, the Holy Mother of Candles), and geographical names, surnames and proverbs.

In her paper on the history of human-wolf relationships in Finland, HETA LÄHDESMÄKI (Turku) contrasts two contradicting narratives. The dominant public narrative seems to be that Finland had a past of conflict between wolves and humans until the late 19th century. Shared cultural memories of wolves killing livestock and even preying on humans are still told today. This narrative continues with the idea of Finland as a 'wolf-free' country in the 20th century, a result of 'winning the war' against wolves through modern (weapon) technology. This narrative contrasts with popular hunting narratives that suggest a continuous presence of wolves. And indeed, research suggests that there has been a continuous immigration of wolves from Russia which has led to a questioning of the 'Finnishness' of the current wolf population. So although there are multi-voiced memories of living with wolves, they are all negative. What is missing according to the presenter is positive voices that tell about the possibilities of living together; narratives as they are told by the Sami minority or by ecologists and writers. So far, the narratives are too anthropocentric. The wolves' voice is also needed for writing and remembering more-than-human histories.

In an approach inspired by STS theories and the work of Foucault, HÅKON B. STOKLAND (Trondheim) discussed wolf manage-

ment practices in Norway. The main conflict there is centred on practices of herding livestock. With the absence of large predators for most of the 20th century, sheep were allowed to roam freely without being attended. With the wolves return shepherding practices would have to change dramatically. Norway decided to restrain the habitat of wolves instead and compensates with a rigorous monitoring and tracking system that controls the lives of wolves. Subsequently, a 'wolf zone' was established in order to implement an efficient management regime with the goal of complete transparency regarding wolf numbers and rigorous disciplinary practices (hunting) regarding their whereabouts. As a consequence, Norway is largely a wolf-free country apart from the wolf zone and potential conflicts are geographically (de)limited.

MICHAEL GIBBERT (Lugano) discussed various approaches to wolf management in the Swiss canton of Grisons. How to deal with so-called *Problemwölfe*? On a national level, the National Council discusses when a wolf becomes a problem, what kind of protection wolves need and whether wolves should be declared a 'huntable' species. On a regional level, the Great Council of Grisons turns these questions into one of regional identity: does the wolf actually belong to Grisons like other wild animals such as the capricorn? Meanwhile, the local population has a variety of options whatever the outcome of these political debates, both non-lethal options (fences, dogs, scaring wolves with rubber buckshot) and lethal options (the local shortened shotgun called *lupara*).

In contrast to many other European countries, ALEKSANDËR TRAJÇE's (Roehampton) ethnographic study in Albania, where wolves have never been extinct showed a situation where locals are in command of tackling any wolf problems by themselves. Humans (shepherds, farmers, foresters) and wolves live in close proximity and their relationship is considered a matter of place, honour and integrity. Whereas humans (and even bears) have and know 'their' place, wolves are considered 'homeless', hence crossing boundaries and trespassing and thereby causing problems. According to local knowledge, successful wolf attacks can only happen to peo-

ple without proper knowledge (of protecting one's livestock with dogs) and people who lack honour. Consequently, learning about wolf attacks becomes treacherous as people consider the matter as a question of moral integrity.

MANUELA VON ARX and ILONA IMOBERDORF (Zurich) reported from an applied perspective of their work at KORA, a Swiss centre for research into carnivore ecology and wildlife management. In their research project on communication means and contents regarding wolf incidents, encounters and sightings, they analysed various media outlets and how public authorities countered these with their own communications. The presenters studied how, when, what and by which means authorities try to establish and communicate wolf knowledge to the general public. Given their applied perspective, the aim of their research was to find 'best practice' examples that would improve communication on wolf matters in the future.

In order to understand public opinion in regard to the return of wolves to Switzerland, ELISA FRANK's (Zurich) multi-sited ethnography employs the 'tracking strategy' (Marcus 1995) of identifying and following two lead metaphors (literally, the Leit-Wolf) across several sites. The first Leit-Wolf, the forestry assistant, brings wolves into the discourse of a new forest ecology and economy that builds on natural rejuvenation of trees. In this context, browsing damage to trees by deer is one of the key problems. Wolves help management efforts as they prey on deer and thereby can help reduce browsing damage and produce calculable benefits for the forest and society. The second Leit-Wolf, the 'wolf-in-dogskin', traces how wolves have become part of well-known positively understood national story characters in the media. This integration is facilitated by the wolf's reversible figure as wolf-dog which not only leads to a positive re-evaluation of wolves by focusing on their genetic relation to dogs but also to a re-evaluation of dogs as 'wild' companion animals. These issues can be followed in public debates on dog/wolf hybrids as well as on new practices of 'natural dogmanship' or 'BARFing' (feeding dog's with natural, raw

food).

In the final presentation, NIKOLAUS HEINZER (Zurich) reflected on the Zurich wolf project and how the researchers have become entangled in their field since 2016. To position themselves consciously in the field of wolf-related actors in Switzerland, the project started with a public kick-off symposium that introduced the project and its agenda to these actors and opened a discussion that was continued in a wolf exhibition in the Alpines Museum der Schweiz. Looking back at the diverse conversation the research team has had so far, the presenter emphasises that anthropological research is always research with people and is built on familiarity and trust with a variety of actors. Yet at the same time, this increasing closeness to actors may also be a source of ever-new conflicts that shape the research process.

In the concluding discussion one question dominated: In how far can our disciplines contribute to finding solutions to the conflict between humans and wolves? For MICHAELA FENSKE, the strengths of the academic disciplines are that they tease out multi-voiced pasts that may give rise to multi-voiced futures. The recent focus on multispecies approaches would also guarantee that the human-wolf relationship is situated within larger assemblages of relationships between a variety of human and non-human actors. BERNHARD TSCHOFEN added that the conference itself was an example of the multi-vocality represented in the individual presentations. As such, the conference made visible how entangled wolf researchers are with the field they study and that their research practice thus needed to be a highly reflexive one.

A critical voice in the audience proposed to critically engage with the term 'co-existence', which was often heard during the conference to describe the living-together of humans and wolves. Is it a term that applies to the peaceful social existence between humans only? For the present anti-wolf campaigners this relationship is one between hunter and prey (with changing sides!) and therefore peaceful co-existence as a future scenario seems doubtful. BERNHARD TSCHOFEN suggested in conclusion that both 'co-existence' and 'conflict'

need to be closely examined in their ranges of meaning, and the role of emotions, in particular, be more strongly considered.

Reflecting on the conference, it became clear that the humanities have important contributions to make to questions of (human-) wolf management. Comparative, historical and ethnographic approaches combined showed aspects of human-wolf relationships rarely acknowledged by current public debates. Yet it was evident, too, that wolves still feature primarily as narrative figures in a variety of discourses. The 'more-than-human' anthropology's imperative to consider animals as active actors in shaping multispecies life-worlds would mean to focus more on 'real' encounters, with wolves 'in the flesh'. But how to translate such an approach of doing research *with* the animal (and not just *about* the animal) if the animal is notoriously secretive and resists becoming part of research fields?

Conference Overview:

Organizers' introductions

Irina Arnold & Marlis Heyer (Würzburg): Chased by Wolves: Multispecies Politics in Motion

Emilia Wieczorkowska (Katowice): Wolves in Poland: the situation of the species trapped between the imagination and reality

Heta Lähdesmäki (Turku): The Memory of a Shared Past. From Human-Wolf Conflicts to Co-Existence

Hakon B. Stokland (Trondheim): Return of the wild wolves? 50 years of efforts to reintegrate wolves into modern Norwegian society

Michael Gibbert (Lugano): From the Wicked Wolf to the Wicked problem: Tackling Wolf Management in Grisons/Ticino

Aleksander Trajce (Roehampton): The wolf in Albania: a vagabond vigilante

Public film screening 'Germany's Wild Wolves – as they really are' by Sebastian Körner and panel discussion with Sebastian Körner, Michaela Fenske, Michael Gibbert and Susanne Hose; moderation by Jana Pinosova

Manuela von Arx & Ilona Imoberdorf

(Zurich): How to communicate wolf? – Development of a concept for regional authorities

Elisa Frank (Zurich): Follow the wolves: reflecting on ethnographic tracing and tracking

Nikolaus Heinzer (Zurich): Amongst Wolves? Reflections on the relations to the field in a cultural-anthropological research project

Organizers' summary and discussion

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