

Wolves and livestock-guarding dogs in Portugal: partners in survival

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Abstract

Man and wolf historical relationships show that anti-predator techniques and husbandry methods that take into consideration the predator presence are fundamental for the co-existence of livestock and wolf. The use of livestock-guarding dogs is part of the ancient traditional system of flock protection against predators in all Europe. Nevertheless, due to wolf extinction this tradition is being lost, endangering with extinction many of the livestock-guarding dog breeds. Also in Portugal, most of the flocks grazed in the traditional extensive methods are deficiently protected with inappropriate raised dogs or dog breeds, leading to increased wolf damages. In those areas where the wolf was recently extinct, we are witnessing the appearance of stray/feral dogs responsible for many attacks on livestock, for which the wolves are still blamed. These situations lead to a generalised discontentment of livestock producers towards the wolf and towards the governmental agencies responsible for the payment of compensations for livestock depredation, making more difficult the implementation of conservation measures for this predator. In Portugal man-wolf conflicts have a long tradition. This led to the development of new techniques of wolf persecution (the construction of stone traps locally known as "fojos") and livestock protection using selected breeds of guarding dogs (Cão da Serra da Estrela, Cão de Castro Laboreiro and Rafeiro do Alentejo), raised in different environmental and cultural regions. The revival of livestock-guarding dogs as a new measure in wolf conservation in Portugal seems to be a good way of reducing the economical losses of livestock producers, contributing, at the same time, to the recovery of those dog breeds. It is expected that this measure will reduce the need of actions, such as poisoning or snaring, currently used to alleviate losses due to wolf depredation, and will allow the peaceful coexistence between livestock and wolf. This is the aim of a project started in 1996 currently financed by the National Institute of Agricultural Research, under the PAMAFIED programme (Contract n. 8133). The approaches developed so far are: i) a genetical analysis of 60 specimens from Cão de Castro Laboreiro and Cão da Serra da Estrela breeds, in order to evaluate the inbreeding degree; and ii) a behavioural study of 12 selected pups raised with the flocks since two months of age.

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