

Working for Wolf Conservation in Portugal: A Multidisciplinary Approach

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Abstract

The Portuguese wolf population has been declining fast in the last decades, mainly due to human persecution and habitat destruction, and currently occupies only 20% of its original distribution area that included the whole country. To avoid wolf extinction concrete and efficient actions must be taken to reduce conflicts with humans and increase tolerance towards this carnivore. To contribute to this goal Grupo Lobo, an independent, non-profit organization founded in 1985 to work for the conservation of the Iberian wolf and of its habitat in Portugal, has delineated in 1987 a conservation strategy named Signatus Project. This is a multidisciplinary approach to wolf conservation that integrates different lines of action: scientific research, awareness and education as well as promotion of practical conservation measures. The scientific research includes biological and anthropological studies leading to a better knowledge of the wolf and of its interactions with humans. The information gathered in these studies is used in educational actions that intend to spread accurate information on this misunderstood predator and raise awareness regarding its conservation. These actions include talks and exhibitions in schools, universities and public events, the production of didactic material for different publics, the coordination of a wide range of material about the wolf that is available for use, the edition of a newsletter containing news about the wolf, sent to members and other organisations, and a travelling exhibition equipped to visit all parts of the country. Finally with the development of practical conservation measures it is possible to effectively contribute to wolf conservation. One of such measures that is being developed successfully since 1996 is the recovery of the use of national breeds of livestock guarding dogs as an efficient way of reducing wolf damages on livestock and thus decrease conflicts with the human rural populations and improve coexistence. Grupo Lobo is also responsible for the establishment and current management of the Iberian Wolf Recovery Centre (IWRC). This Centre was founded in 1987 with the aim of providing an adequate captivity environment for wolves that are no longer able to live in the wild, allowing the wolves to live in semi-natural conditions, with good vegetal covering and topography providing adequate shelter and in adequate social groups. The IWRC provides the best possible care for wolves while it also enables research studies mostly concerning the social behaviour of wolves. Other important activities of Grupo Lobo include practical courses in support of graduates and post-graduates mainly from the Faculty of Sciences of Lisbon University but also from national and international universities and professional schools. Grupo Lobo also co-operates in research activities in Protected Areas and in national and international conservation and research projects, exchanges information and collaborates with wolf experts and organisations in many countries. Grupo Lobo is currently coordinating the Portuguese participation in the LIFE-COEX project. This project aims to improve coexistence of large carnivores and human activities in several southern European countries, through the development of the necessary legal and socio-economic conditions that may reduce conflict situations affecting their conservation.

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