

The use of livestock guarding dogs in Portugal: results from a long-term experience

Silvia Ribeiro & Francisco Petrucci-Fonseca

Grupo Lobo, Faculdade de Ciências da Universidade de Lisboa, Edifício C2 - 3º Piso, 1749-016 Lisboa, Portugal

Abstract

The Portuguese Iberian 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 active actions must be taken to reduce conflicts with humans, mainly caused by attacks on livestock, and increase tolerance towards the carnivore. Throughout their ancestral coexistence with large carnivores humans developed very original and efficient ways to prevent damage on livestock that did not imply killing the predator. So the concept and the tools necessary for coexistence are not recent ones. Hence the present focus should be on implementing and improving these damage prevention methods by adapting them to the current husbandry systems. One of most widely used methods is livestock guarding dogs. These dogs have been selected for thousands of years and when adequately raised can be very effective to protect livestock from predators. Nevertheless their use has been decreasing in the last decades and in many regions non-adequate dogs are used thus making livestock more vulnerable to predation. As part of a strategy for Iberian wolf conservation in Portugal, Grupo Lobo initiated in 1996 a line of action that aims to contribute to recover the use of Portuguese breeds of livestock guarding dogs and to implement them as an efficient way to reduce wolf damage on livestock, thus improving coexistence with the human rural populations. This action foresees monitoring the dogs' development until reaching adulthood (18-24 months of age) and a permanent support to the livestock breeder. This has proved to be very important for the success of the action. During the last 10 years more than 130 dogs, mainly from the Cão de Castro Laboreiro and the Cão da Serra da Estrela breeds, were integrated into goat and/or sheep flocks (averaging 175 animals in size) in the North and Centre of the country. The regular monitoring enables to immediately correct any undesirable behaviour by the dog or by the livestock breeder towards the dog. It also allows to control the conditions in which the dog is raised, namely in what concerns its welfare. To assure that the adequate conditions regarding the dog's raising and maintenance are followed a contract is signed with the livestock breeder. This enables to remove the dog if conditions are not followed. Dog's efficiency is evaluated when adult and is based on three criteria: damage reduction, dog behaviour and owner satisfaction. In fact, damage reduction may not always be very helpful when evaluating the efficiency of livestock guarding dogs, since predation rate can vary at a local scale, influenced by many variables (e.g. predator density, prey availability, flock management or habitat changes). This is also true when we are integrating dogs as prevention for future conflicts. Therefore it is important to have other criteria to assess their effectiveness. The behaviour of the dog seems to be one obvious choice. The behaviour model defined for these dogs by Raymond Coppinger has proved to be very useful. It identifies three behavioural components that are the basis for the efficiency of livestock guarding dogs: attentiveness, trustworthiness and protectiveness. An evaluation of 70 adult dogs reveals that more than 90% are rated as Good-Excellent in those three behaviour components. This is a very good result when compared to other results obtained in similar projects. Not all dogs were evaluated since mortality is higher in the first years of life and many die (or disappear) before

reaching adulthood. The main causes of death are unknown/disappearance, poison and disease with the overall mortality rate being 25%. Regarding damage reduction, in 40 cases studied there has been a reduction of 13-100% in 75% of the flocks, when comparing the number of damage one year before the integration of the dog and one year after the dog has reached adulthood. All livestock producers say their dogs are responsible for the observed damage reduction and more than 90% consider them very effective being very satisfied with their dogs. Apart from the success of the dogs to reduce wolf damage other important impacts of this action should also be mentioned, namely the increased knowledge about the use of livestock guarding dogs and of the characteristics of good working dogs, the recognition of the importance of having quality dogs, the increased concern for the dogs' welfare and the renewed interest for the national dog breeds some of which are also endangered. Grupo Lobo is an NGO founded in 1985 to work for the conservation of the Iberian wolf and of its habitat in Portugal. It is currently coordinating the Portuguese participation in the LIFE-COEX project (www.life-coex.net), which 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.

Palestra Convidada

International Symposium Large Carnivores and Agriculture: Comparing Experiences Across Italy and Europe
Assisi, Itália, 9-10 Março 2007