

LARGE CARNIVORE DAMAGE PREVENTION AND CONSERVATION: LIVESTOCK GUARDING DOGS IN FINLAND AND ESTONIA

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Introduction

Livestock guarding dogs work by staying with the livestock and driving away intruders, with rarely any need for physical conflict. They have been used for millennia to protect domestic animals from large carnivores. Research was initiated during the late 1970s. In general, LGDs were capable of reducing predation in a variety of management systems. The return of carnivores to their original habitats has caused conflicts of interests between different stakeholder groups. The developing of damage preventive methods and resources, the production and distribution of reliable information can be addressed as the keywords for obtaining consensus. In the long term, the management policy procedures can have both educational and eco-tourist importance and will have to be integrated in the local communities well-being. At its best, the welfare of livestock, LGDs and wolves decreases the citizens' or farmers' concerns on their livelihood and security.

The aim of this study was to explore the special conditions in Finland and Estonia for Livestock guarding dogs and their suitability as working dogs in the area where they traditionally are not used.

Methods

The study included semi-structured interviews, in-site-visits to Finnish and Estonian farms, as well as the analysis on comparing large carnivore damage prevention practices. The themes were the following: 1. The rule frames of large carnivore conservation, 2. Livestock guarding dogs, 3. Human well-being and acceptance by local people, 4. The large carnivore damage prevention – The use of compensation and economic incentive systems to alleviate and 5. Different large carnivore damage compensation schemes in Finland and Estonia.

Results

In summary, the themes or factors that emerged from this study were: the welfare of guarded animals and LGDs in their guarding job; people at and outside the farms; public opinion on questions related to nature; cost-effectiveness; cultural, socio-economic and stakeholder relations in general. Both discussions and contacts with new LGD owners are together demonstrating the LGDs being a resourceful way to solve problems on farms caused by large carnivores. As Marker et al. (2005a) concludes 'the perceptions of the people involved were just as important as any objective calculation of performance;' therefore, based on these subjective responses, the livestock guarding dogs proved to be successful this far in Finland and in the early development stage in Estonia. However, the institutional framework seemed to be targeted to challenging development expectations in both countries.

In Finland, the damage compensation system has been valid longer; in Estonia, first compensations were paid in 2009. The emphasis is on the preventive measure development. Estonia differs from Finland also because of the large and severe damage on crops caused by wild boar. Damages caused by wild boar are not, however, on the list of compensation.

Discussion

The significance of further comparisons and research to pay greater attention to the possibilities, limitations and the cost-effectiveness schemes of large carnivore management in different demographic structures of predator populations, landscapes and cultural surroundings is urgent. In other words, there is still a need for more comprehensive research of the positive and negative factors dealing with large carnivore damage prevention among different contexts and among different stakeholders confronting the phenomena. Large carnivores are protected by several international agreements and EU regulations. Large carnivores are often perceived as a threat to human safety. An understanding of the values, beliefs and the fears of those who are involved or affected is an important aspect of preventing carnivore damages.

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