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**Large Carnivore Initiative for Europe Core Group
position statement on the use of hunting, and lethal
control, as means of managing large carnivore
populations**

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the Directorate of Culture and Cultural and Natural Heritage*

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Background

The Large Carnivore Initiative for Europe (LCIE) was established in 1995 in recognition of the many complex challenges surrounding the conservation of carnivores. Focusing on five species - the brown bear, Iberian lynx, Eurasian lynx, wolverine and the wolf - the LCIE's mission is "to maintain and restore, in coexistence with people, viable populations of large carnivores as an integral part of ecosystems and landscapes across Europe". For these goals to be reached, large carnivores will have to be maintained in areas where they are presently abundant, encouraged to increase in numbers in areas where they are rare, and restored to some areas where they are presently absent.

Management challenges

Based on our experience it is clear that there is no single approach that will enable this coexistence to be achieved throughout a continent as diverse as Europe. There is great variation in (1) habitat and landscape, (2) availability of prey, (3) patterns of land-use and animal husbandry, (4) social traditions and attitudes towards large carnivores, and (5) levels of socio-economic development. In addition, some large carnivore populations are abundant and continuous with other populations, while others may be critically small, fragmented and highly endangered. In order to succeed, a conservation strategy must clearly be adapted to local ecological and social conditions, and be flexible to cope with changing circumstances.

While large areas of Europe presently offer potentially suitable habitats for one or more of these species beyond their present reduced distributions, there are no large wilderness areas left in Europe. Therefore, large carnivore conservation must often occur in multi-use landscapes. Within such landscapes a variety of real or perceived conflicts with humans can occur, including:

- (1) Depredation on livestock and other productive units,
- (2) Competition with hunters for wild ungulates,
- (3) Fear for personal safety (especially from bears and wolves) and other psycho-social conflicts.

A pragmatic consequence of this is that in some situations coexistence may be more readily achieved if large carnivore populations were maintained at a lower density than that which an area could potentially support. There are a variety of non-lethal methods that can be used to remove individual large carnivores or limit their population growth rate (e.g. translocation to other suitable areas). However, these are often impractical and too costly for large-scale application. In most situations lethal methods remain the most practical and effective in many parts of Europe.

Hunting and Conservation

Hunting of large carnivores has long been, and still remains, a tradition in many parts of Europe. The motivations vary from limiting damage and other conflicts, through to recreation, and to the desire for a trophy. In addition, lethal control of individuals to limit damages is currently practised in many areas where recreational hunting is prohibited. Although we are aware that hunting / lethal control of large carnivores may be controversial, the LCIE believes that it may be compatible with their conservation in many, but clearly not all, regions and situations. It is important to remember that carnivore conservation does not necessarily imply strict protection.

The potential benefits of large carnivore hunting / lethal control include;

- (1) Allowing the continuation of long-standing traditions in the rural areas where large carnivores occur.

- (2) Increasing the acceptance of large carnivore presence among hunters if they can regard them as rewarding game species or a source of income, rather than as competitors.
- (3) Increasing the sense of empowerment among local people that have to live in the same areas as large carnivores.
- (4) Allowing large carnivore populations to be maintained at densities where damage to livestock and predation on wild prey are kept at levels that can be tolerated. In addition, hunters may be able to assist in the lethal control of specific animals, for example those that become habitual livestock killers.
- (5) Helping to maintain shyness among large carnivore populations towards people thus reducing potential conflicts.
- (6) Providing an opportunity to sell trophy hunts, and thereby generate revenue in rural areas (thus giving an incentive to maintain healthy large carnivore populations).
- (7) Helping to increase long term acceptance towards large carnivores in areas where they are recovering, by slowing down the rate of recovery.

The LCIE believes that, in certain cases, allowing legal hunting of viable populations will help reduce poaching if the local people feel that they are involved in the management process. The LCIE strongly opposes poaching under any circumstances and realises it is a major threat to large carnivore population survival in many areas.

- (9) Reaching a population level that can support hunting may provide a benchmark for the success of a conservation / restoration plan – this should also demonstrate the flexibility of a conservation plan to the various interest groups.

Conditions

However, there are a number of conditions that must be fulfilled to ensure that hunting / lethal control is compatible with large carnivore conservation. The LCIE accepts the hunting / lethal control of large carnivore populations only when the following circumstances are met:

- (1) Hunting and lethal control are part of a comprehensive conservation management plan for the whole population and its habitat. This plan should be written by the appropriate management agency in appropriate consultation with the local human population and acknowledged wildlife interest groups (both governmental and non-governmental). The plan should be acceptable to a majority of the affected groups and a majority of the local population. These management plans should be fully compatible with national and international laws and agreements.
- (2) In the conservation management plan, the large carnivore population must have been documented to be demographically viable and able to sustain the proposed level of hunting / lethal control without jeopardising its conservation status.
- (3) The social organisation of the species, and how removing individuals will affect it, must be taken into account.
- (4) Goals for the minimum size of carnivore populations must be stated in the plan. An adequate monitoring system must be implemented to ensure that the population is kept above the minimum level. In cases where population size cannot be estimated directly, monitoring could focus on indices that reflect distribution and population trend.
- (5) Important biological data (sex, age, condition, body mass, reproductive organs, genetic samples, etc.) should be collected from all harvested individuals for monitoring and management purposes. The results of the hunting and monitoring must be reported annually and compared with the goals of the conservation management plan.
- (6) The methods used must not contravene international, national or regional laws and killing should be carried out humanely. All those involved in the killing of large carnivores should be specifically trained..

(7) Sufficient limitations must be imposed on hunting to ensure its sustainability. In effect this will require some form of closed seasons, and in most cases some form of quota. The use of a female sub-quota is also strongly recommended to prevent over-harvest.

(8) All human-caused mortalities (including carnivores killed through hunting, depredation-control or poaching, in self-defence, or in traffic collisions) should be taken into account when setting quotas. In addition, animals wounded, but not recovered, should be assumed to have been killed.

(9) Mitigation measures should have been evaluated and implemented where practical before lethal control or hunting is initiated mainly to limit damage to livestock.

The LCIE also recognises that the acceptability of using state-employed personnel to lethally remove large carnivores as opposed to recreational hunters will vary from region to region. Therefore, the costs and coexistence benefits of this need to be carefully evaluated on a case by case basis.

Conclusion

This position statement is only intended to provide a general framework, to what we feel are acceptable management instruments, while explicitly stating that local societal and ecological factors will need to be discussed in order to find which approach works best locally. This position statement is not intended to state that large carnivores should be hunted, or that they should be prevented from becoming too dense, or that lethal methods are the only appropriate way to control their numbers should this be required. However, the LCIE does believe that hunting large carnivores is acceptable under some situations, and that there may be some advantages to this, and that in some situations it will benefit (and be compatible with) their conservation. Likewise, the LCIE strongly recommends the use of non-lethal mitigation measures to reduce conflicts, but accepts that lethal control may be required in some situations. Given the complex social issues surrounding large carnivore conservation the LCIE strongly recommend that appropriate attention be paid to studies of both the human dimension and ecology when making management decisions.