

# Policy Support Statements of the Large Carnivore Initiative for Europe (LCIE).

Policy support statements are intended to provide a short indication of what the LCIE regards as being good management practice with respect to certain aspects of large carnivore conservation.

## Response to hybridisation between wild wolves and domestic dogs

### Background

Dogs were originally domesticated from wolves. Today the relationship between wolves and dogs is highly complex with at least five areas of interaction that are relevant for wolf conservation. Dogs are used to defend livestock from wolf depredation, wolves may kill dogs, dogs may transfer diseases to wolves, and feral dogs may compete with wolves for food. In addition, wild wolves and dogs (both domestic and feral) can interbreed and produce fertile offspring.

Hybridisation has been well documented from many parts of Europe – from Spain to Russia, with recent cases in Germany, Norway, Finland, Italy and Latvia. The available data indicate that hybridisation is most likely to occur in (1) areas with very low wolf density where the availability of potential mates is low such as in areas where wolves are colonising, or (2) in areas where the wolf population is subject to heavy perturbation, for example from intensive hunting. These are also the circumstances where hybridisation can have the greatest negative effects as the hybrids will constitute a relatively large portion of the population.

The potential negative effects of hybridisation are twofold;

**Genetics.** During the millennia since dogs were domesticated from wolves they have been selectively bred for a wide range of traits that humans consider desirable. These include early sexual maturation, two breeding cycles per year (in most breeds), delayed behavioural maturation, a wide range of physical traits involving size, coat, and skeletal modifications, and tameness. All of these traits will reduce the fitness of an individual in the wild.

**Behaviour.** We lack hard data on the behaviour of free-ranging wolf-dog hybrids, but there is reason to believe that they will show more undesirable behaviours than pure wolves because of their inferior adaptation. These behaviours could potentially include an even greater tendency than pure wolves to attack livestock and demonstrate bold behaviour.

### Response

The LCIE acknowledge that it will probably be impossible to ensure that wolf populations are 100% free from domestic dog genes. In addition, it is likely that selection will remove these genes from the population. However, because of the high degree of public concern, the potential for even a few hybrids litters to swamp small recovering populations, and the general goals of conserving wild gene pools, the LCIE, supported by the IUCN Wolf Specialist Group's "Wolf Manifesto", recommend that;

- Everything possible should be done to minimise the risk of hybridisation between wolves and dogs. This requires that the keeping of wolves and wolf-dog hybrids as pets be prohibited, discouraged, or at least carefully regulated, and that strong actions be taken to minimise the numbers of feral and stray dogs.

- Everything practically possible should be done to remove obvious hybrids from the wild should such an event occur and be detected. In reality this will be most effectively achieved through lethal control, as the chances of selectively live capturing all the specific members of a hybrid pack are minimal. Furthermore, the welfare issues associated with keeping wild-born hybrids in captivity must be considered - as it is almost inevitable that they will be captured after the period when they can potentially be socialised towards humans.
- It is important that management authorities clarify their legislation concerning the legal status of wild-born wolf-dog hybrids. Their management status should be such that they receive the same legal status as wolves from hunters and the public in order to close a potential loophole for the irregular killing of wolves – but such that they can be effectively removed under special license by carefully trained government appointed wardens when necessary. From the point of view of EU regulations there should be an automatic derogation from Habitats Directive protection, and that all effective methods, even those banned for normal hunting, should be allowed provided that they are selective and humane.
- When removing potential hybrids from the wild it is crucial that all staff are familiar with the physical characteristics of wolves and hybrids, and that great care be taken to not kill pure wolves by mistake. A clear set of criteria should be decided in advance. From experience F1 hybrids can generally be recognised based on morphological criteria – but later generations may be difficult to detect – even with genetical methods. In cases where identity is unclear, it is possible to collect scats and have them DNA tested before making a management decision.