

Submitted Abstract

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Abstract

The long tradition of mountain farms in Switzerland is under threat. Decreasing food prices, climate change, urbanisation and the ever-increasing gap between producers and consumers put farmers everywhere under immense economic and social pressure. In addition, mountain farms have to cope with another problem: the wolf. In the last twenty years, population numbers have drastically increased in the comparable densely populated alpine regions of Switzerland. The predators pose not only a direct threat to sheep and goats, but are a disruptive societal topic in the whole country. Farmers therefore have to deal not only with the existential problem of livestock kills, but also navigate the political controversies concerning the wolf.

There are numerous ways with varying effectiveness to prevent predatory attacks on livestock. Two of the most efficient herd protection methods are livestock guardian dogs (LGDs) and electrified fences. Although their qualities are scientifically proven, the implementation is highly time and cost intensive. Even with public support and compensations, the main bulk of work and the ongoing costs have to be carried by the farmers themselves. This leads to an increase in workload or labour cost. For some farmers, these expenses are no longer bearable and the continuation of livestock farming is at stake.

In contrast to the negative views on the predator in rural areas stands the urban population of Switzerland. Strictly voting against eased hunting regulations in September of 2020, most city-dwellers seem to have a romanticized view on the wolf and reinforce the ongoing urban-rural divide. However, there are wolf supporters who are aware of the critical situation of alpine farmers. For them, the coexistence of predators and agriculture is particularly important, which is why they are keen to support them.

In our study, we explore different strategies that employ the combination of herd protection with communitarian work. Our two main examples are cooperational approaches between farmers and volunteers, and community supported agriculture schemes. To show their effectiveness we deploy a trans-disciplinary research approach using methods from biology, sociology and economics. We give an insight in the capability of these approaches to not only protect livestock from wolf kills, but also to foster a stronger relationship between urban and rural populations. The expected social effects will lead to a higher evaluation of alpine farming and should help to maintain this specialised type of agriculture for future generations, despite predatory and economic pressure.