



The following is an excerpt from the annual report for the LUFWS wolf project.

By Peter A. Dettling. © March 2026

THE DEADLY EXPERIMENT: WHY WOLF REGULATION MISSES THE MARK

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Since the revision of the Hunting Ordinance at the end of 2023, Switzerland has undergone a radical shift in policy. What is being sold as a proactive regulation that helps to curb population growth and foster coexistence, proves under closer inspection to be an ineffective, disastrous, and exorbitantly expensive experiment. The case of Canton Graubünden serves as a cautionary tale for the rest of Switzerland and beyond. Current practices threaten to destabilize the social fabric of wolf families, thereby fueling the very conflicts that cantonal and federal authorities aim to prevent. A look at the raw data from Graubünden illustrates the sheer scale of this culling strategy:

A review of regulatory culls: The case of Graubünden.

Regulation period 2023-2024:	Number of wolves shot
Proactive regulation (Dec. 1, 2023 – Jan. 31, 2024):	12
Reactive regulation (Aug.–Nov. 2023 & Feb.–March 2024):	9
TOTAL	21

Regulation period 2024-2025:	Number of wolves shot
Proactive regulation (Sep. 1, 2024 – Jan. 31, 2025):	48
Wolves shot by local hunters as part of regulation	(4)
TOTAL	48

Regulation period 2025-2026:	Number of wolves shot
Proactive regulation (September 1, 2025 – January 31, 2026):	35
Wolves shot by local hunters as part of regulation	(7)
TOTAL	35

These figures represent only the tip of the iceberg. When accounting for the total mortality rate from traffic collisions, culls, illegal poaching, and other factors within a single calendar year, the biological implications become more apparent:

- **2023:** Of the 96 genetically identified wolves, 23 (24% of the population) died within the same calendar year.
- **2024:** Of the 106 genetically identified wolves, 53 (50% of the population) died within the same calendar year.
- **2025:** With a total population estimated at over 100, 43 animals died, representing a loss of roughly 40%. [1]

The truth behind the statistics: cryptic mortality

Population biology has proven that so-called cryptic mortality, i.e. hidden and unrecorded mortality, such as illegal killings, is massively underestimated. Studies show that the actual mortality rate in hunted wolf populations is around 1.2 to 1.5 times higher than officially recorded. Data from Scandinavia illustrate the dramatic extent of this unknown number. There, two out of three illegally killed wolves disappear without a trace and do not appear in any statistics. [2] [3]

For the Canton of Graubünden, this means that for every officially culled wolf, a significant number of unreported deaths including poaching, accidents, and other causes must be factored in statistically. If a wolf pack already loses two-thirds of its offspring to legal culling, this additional, invisible pressure will inevitably lead to the collapse of its social structure. The population avoids immediate collapse only thanks to a reproductive buffer, which is currently being systematically eroded by massive culling.

The flawed logic of pup culling

One could argue that the authorities do not intend to destroy the social structure of the pack, but are instead focusing on the removal of pups. However, there are two primary counterarguments to this position.

First, the natural life expectancy of pups is already low. Leading wolf research (Mech & Boitani 2003) estimates natural pup mortality at 30 to 50 percent, depending on food availability, disease, and social stability. Second, the general lifespan of wolves is relatively short. If pup mortality is driven up to two-thirds per litter by drastic regulation, it massively exceeds the natural range.

The result is significantly smaller wolf families, which become extremely vulnerable to the already high mortality rate. If only one-third of the pups survive the regulation phase and further animals are lost due to natural causes, there are hardly any young animals left to stabilize the wolf family. These are then missing to help raise the next generation, hunt large ungulates, or defend the territory against other wolf families. If illegal shooting of parent animals or the dispersing of surviving young animals are added to this, the family is threatened with complete disintegration.

While the wolf remains a protected species on paper, this status is being effectively undermined by the introduction of proactive regulation. The fact that culls can occur even without livestock damage renders its legal protection obsolete.

The Graubünden "experiment": A declaration of bankruptcy in species protection

The canton sees wolf regulation as a kind of experiment.[4] Whether it is an experiment or not, the fact is that the cantonal Fish and Wildlife Service has not communicated the family structure of the local wolf packs in the canton for some time. If the effects of culling on behavior and family structure are to be investigated, detailed knowledge of the social structure of each wolf family throughout the year would be essential. Since the canton of Graubünden has recently stopped publishing information about the structure of the various wolf packs, it must be assumed that those responsible either do not know or, for some reason, do not want to communicate this information publicly. Neither option is acceptable.

The fact is that science and my personal observations in the field, described in detail in my books like *Wolfsodyssee* and *Wolfsdynastien*, show the negative impact of these regulatory interventions. Let me share a few thoughts on this:

1. **The paradox of wariness:** When experienced wolf parents are killed, disoriented young animals are left behind. Without guidance, they are forced to take greater risks in their struggle for survival, often becoming more visible to humans. Consequently, regulation often creates the very problem of "unwary" wolves in the first place. A similar issue arises when subadults—who serve as vital helpers to their parents—are shot. The resulting stress on the parent animals to maintain the pack increases, which can lead to riskier behavior, increased visibility, or a shift toward easier prey, such as livestock.
2. **Biological chaos:** The destruction of a pack's social structure can lead to either inbreeding or so-called double litters. When outside males join a destabilized family, they may mate with multiple females. Conversely, if no outside wolves join the pack, inbreeding can occur, which is a phenomenon that is virtually non-existent in stable wolf families. I have personally observed both inbreeding and double litters in Yellowstone and Banff National Parks as a direct result of such social disruptions.

The fact is that such constellations, brought about by humans through legal and illegal killing, can lead to genetic impoverishment on the one hand, or to an increase in pup numbers in the short term through double litters on the other. This in turn can lead to the division of family groups and thus to a higher wolf density in the area. This outcome is the exact opposite of what the proponents of regulation actually want to achieve. [5]

3. **Legitimization of poaching:** The massive rhetoric against wolves and the widespread legitimization of culling sends a fatal signal to parts of the population that illegal killings are a minor offense or even a necessary form of 'self-defense'. Studies show that when the state authorizes the shooting of wolves as intensely as is currently the case in Switzerland, the inhibition threshold for poaching drops dramatically. This reinforces cryptic mortality and ensures that official cull numbers no longer reflect the actual biological reality. [6]
4. **Accidental kills and ethics:** Proactive regulation inevitably leads to serious mistakes. In Graubünden, for example, three lynxes were mistakenly shot in November 2024 because game wardens misidentified them as wolves. Further accidental kills are unavoidable, as the case of the Moesola wolf pack shows. In that instance, game wardens shot the breeding male M152 because they believed him to be a subadult. This mistake cost M152 his life and robbed the family of their father, even though his removal had not been authorized. [7]

The situation of the Fuorn wolf pack in the Swiss National Park is particularly dramatic. When two dead cattle with bite marks were found at the edge of the national park at the end of August 2024, the fate of this relatively new and inconspicuous wolf clan was sealed. Even before DNA results were available, the Federal Office for the Environment (FOEN) gave the green light for the elimination of the entire family. In the following months, a total of 15 wolves were shot, including twelve Fuorn wolves and three outside wolves that happened to be in the area. This completely wiped out the genetically valuable Fuorn pack, which had Italian and Dinaric-Balkan roots. The fact that the Fuorn wolves spent most of their lives in a protected area and were nevertheless destroyed so hastily, along with the associated "collateral damage," is nothing short of an ethical bankruptcy.

The ecological short-sightedness of this measure is particularly evident when looking at the immediate consequences. Following the elimination of the Fuorn pack, sheep kills in the area actually increased as a new wolf clan, the Sinestra pack, moved in. This new family exhibited much more conspicuous behavior than their predecessors and quickly became the focus of management efforts. Consequently, a request was made to eliminate the entire family including the parents and their seven pups. By the end of the regulation phase in January 2026, a total of six wolves from this new pack had already been killed. [8]

At the expense of taxpayers and democracy

In Graubünden, statements made by Arno Puorger of the Fish and Wildlife Service shortly after the first regulation phase highlighted the intensity of these operations. Almost the entire gamekeeping staff, approximately 50 out of 59 people, was exclusively occupied with wolf management for weeks. Puorger spoke of round-the-clock operations, which often took place under difficult conditions at night and in high-alpine terrain. A look back at recent years reveals the full extent of the problem: the workload related to wolves has skyrocketed from 8,628 hours in 2021 to over 18,430 hours in 2024. This represents more than a doubling of the hours in just three years. The figures for the Canton of Valais are equally stark, where game wardens worked a total of around 6,400 hours of overtime in 2024, nearly 1,000 hours more than in the previous year. [9] [10]

The financial implications

Wolf regulation is not only time-consuming but also extremely costly. The Canton of Graubünden incurs considerable expenses for additional equipment, such as night-vision devices and thermal-imaging technology, as well as for compensation for the massive amount of overtime. In order to alleviate the pressure in the long term, staffing levels have been steadily increased in recent years. For example, the 2025 budget includes an additional 2.9 full-time positions for game wardens and 2.0 positions for scientific staff to ensure enforcement in the field. [11]

Under these circumstances, it defies all logic that those responsible are even considering making the annual, extremely expensive "experiment" a permanent task, as has been communicated on several occasions, especially in times of cantonal and national austerity measures and, at the same time, growing financial demands in areas such as energy supply, military build-up, and climate adaptation [12]. This is particularly true when wolf damage is viewed in the overall context of sheep farming: while every wolf attack is highly publicized in the media and politically, tens of

thousands of sheep die every year on Swiss farms and in the Alps completely unnoticed by the public.

Sheep mortality

According to a report in “Schweizer Bauer” on January 11, 2025, a total of 56,838 sheep died across Switzerland in 2024 as a result of disease, accidents, weather conditions, or neglect.[13] In comparison, the approximately 1,000 livestock animals killed by wolves seems almost marginal: the wolf is thus responsible for less than 2 percent of the overall mortality. [14]

The fact that the state is spending millions on increasing the number of gamekeepers and hunting a species that statistically poses only a minimal risk, while the massive losses of livestock due to disease, accidents, or neglect are hardly debated politically, makes the "wolf cull experiment" appear increasingly disproportionate and extremely destructive symbolic politics. This is particularly true when the following facts are taken into account: by 2022, the number of sheep depredations in Graubünden had already fallen significantly, and losses across Switzerland had also decreased noticeably in cantons with wolf families. It is important to emphasize that this decline began before proactive regulation was even introduced.[15] This development clearly shows that consistent livestock protection is the decisive factor in reducing conflicts. The current culling program is therefore combating a problem that was already on the way to being resolved.

Taxpayers are thus financing a strategy that is unilaterally focused on decimating wolves, even though this approach is not supported by scientific findings, economic criteria, or animal welfare principles. Furthermore, at a time when democracy is under pressure worldwide, it must be emphasized again and again that the authorities are acting contrary to the spirit of the 2020 referendum. At that time, the Swiss electorate voted explicitly against such a far-reaching and preventive relaxation of wolf protection, which means that the current approach lacks direct democratic legitimacy.

Time to face reality

This extreme strategy of mass wolf elimination is biologically unsound, ethically incompatible with modern animal welfare standards, and – given that the 2020 referendum was ignored – an act of unprecedented democratic ignorance on the part of politicians. This deadly experiment serves neither the wolf, the sheep, nor the mountain farmers; it should be shelved in favor of seriously pursuing alternative solutions.

The first signs of critical self-analysis are emerging in the Canton of Vaud. Although the canton in western Switzerland has invested considerable resources in wolf control, the hoped-for decline in attacks has not materialized. In early February 2026, the authorities publicly questioned the effectiveness of the culls and commissioned KORA (the Swiss foundation for large carnivore ecology and wildlife management) to scientifically analyze the actual effects of these control measures.[16]

While there is nothing wrong with new, rigorous studies, we do not have to look far to find solutions that already work:

The Calanda Model (2012–2019): A blueprint for successful coexistence

The example of the Calanda wolf pack serves as a prime illustration of how stability leads to success. This was the only wolf family allowed to develop over many years without significant human intervention. It proved that well-established, professional livestock protection combined with a stable wolf family structure is the decisive factor for successful coexistence. Initially, a local sheep herd suffered significant losses until professional measures were consistently implemented. Following this, coexistence worked beautifully. For smaller herds where protection dogs were not used, well-maintained and consistently erected electric fences proved sufficient. [17]

The Beverin Model (2019–2022): A failure of massive human intervention

Contrary to the Calanda wolf family, the Beverin pack was subject to a very aggressive regulation effort even before the nationwide wolf cull began. The result was a destabilized family structure, which led to an unusually large family size and the highest conflict density in the entire canton. This occurred despite, or more likely because of, the constant culling, and it proves that massive human intervention often exacerbates the very problems it claims to solve. [18]

Conclusion

Constant disturbances and culls put wolf families under chronic stress, disrupt their social family structure, and impair the animals' health and behavior. A population weakened and thinned out in this way is particularly sensitive to unforeseen events, such as diseases that could threaten the entire population. This inevitably brings the ethical dimension to the forefront. Instead of investing enormous amounts of time, energy, and taxpayer money in a counterproductive, experimental, never-ending, and highly destructive wolf regulation effort, the focus should be on professional livestock protection measures, direct financial support for mountain farmers, and transparent, politically independent wolf research and communication. In this model, the offices for Fish and Wildlife could participate, but should not be given sole control or the final say.

This could create a situation in which not rifles, but knowledge, education, active support for mountain farmers, and empathy toward wolves create a win-win situation. Such a Swiss model would attract worldwide admiration and ultimately bring tourists to the country who want to experience this groundbreaking coexistence firsthand and report on it. In a world where polemics and ignorance often determine action, this path would be almost revolutionary. Yet, viewed soberly, it is easily achievable if the political will existed and popular referendums were taken seriously.

Instead, we are currently confronted with a wolf management system that is ethically questionable, very expensive, and ineffective in every respect. Above all, this results in unimaginable suffering for one of the most ecologically valuable and social animal species that this world has produced in the course of its long history. This is precisely why the words of world-renowned wolf researcher Paul Paquet are so important:

" Too often, conservation focuses solely on the maintenance of populations and their requisite habitat. We forget that wild populations are made up of individuals that can suffer the same stress and pain, which we deem unacceptable for companion animals that share our homes or those we farm to eat. Although suffering is clearly a feature of a wildlife, the human-induced suffering generated by [...] wolf culls is not. We can end it if the public fully understands what is being paid for with their tax money." [19]



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[11] Canton of Graubünden – Message on the 2025 budget: Evidence of job increases (p. 394) and deficit reporting.
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[15] https://www.pronatura.ch/sites/pronatura.ch/files/2024-01/faktenblatt_risse_2023-12-26.pdf

[16] See: [Canton of Vaud questions the effectiveness of wolf culling – SWI swissinfo.ch](#)

[17] Detailed insights into the development of the Calanda wolf family can be found in my books "Wolfsodyssee" (2020) and "Wolfsdynastien" (2024) or in my online documentary series "Einmal um die Sonne mit den Calanda Wölfen" (Once Around the Sun with the Calanda Wolves).

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