

# Wolves at a French Buffet

Situation appraisal for livestock farmers challenged by wolves  
for the past 25 years

Michel Meuret

PhD - Research director at INRA, UMR Selmet, Montpellier, France



After their disappearance in the 1930s, wolves came back to France in 1992; most of them coming from Italy within the Mercantour National Park (Provence)



*Photo credits:* Parc National  
du Mercantour 2



# Wolf is strictly protected species in France

In 1990, France ratified the international Bern Convention about the Conservation of Wildlife and Natural Habitats in Europe.

In 1992, France began to implement the EU Habitat Directive, that is the legal duty of conserving outstanding wildlife habitats and their species, *Canis lupus* included.



'French' wolves benefit from the prohibition of any form of deliberate perturbation, capture or killing.

Wolf return was expected and saluted by some as a  
“Victory for Nature!”

The President of ‘France Nature Environment’, the national Federation of Nature preservation associations from France, called for the fight:

*“To fight for a free and wild wolf is to fight against all confinements, walls, prisons of all kinds, and against the impoverishment of the biodiversity. [...] Without this super-predator, our mountains and forest ecosystems are bastardizing, turning into open poultry houses. Life needs the wolf, the man needs life.” (Brard 1996).*





## An example of "open poultry house" in the Southern French Alps



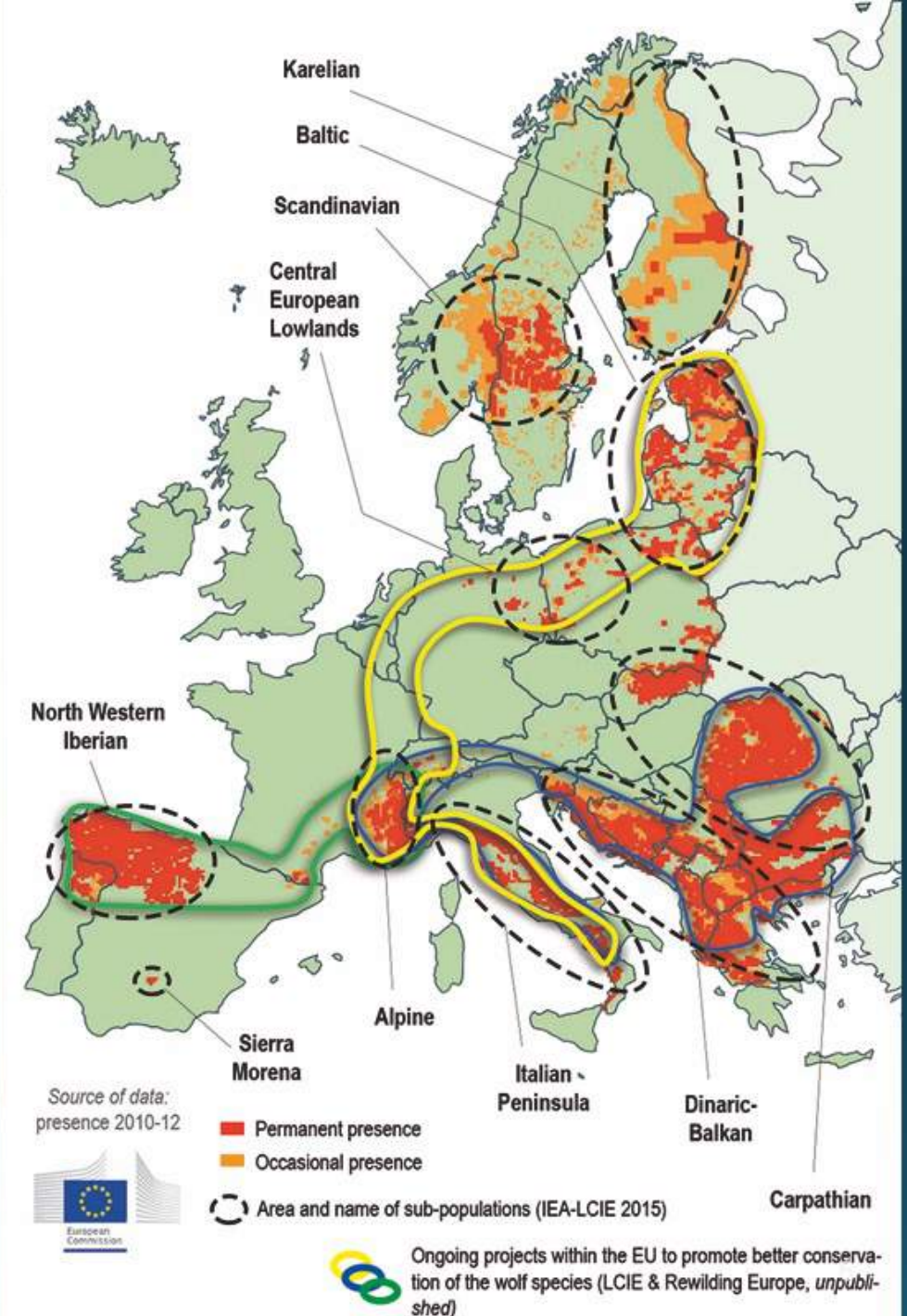
*Photo credits:*  
Philippe Lemoine



# France is located at a crossroads of wolves' recovery plans in Europe

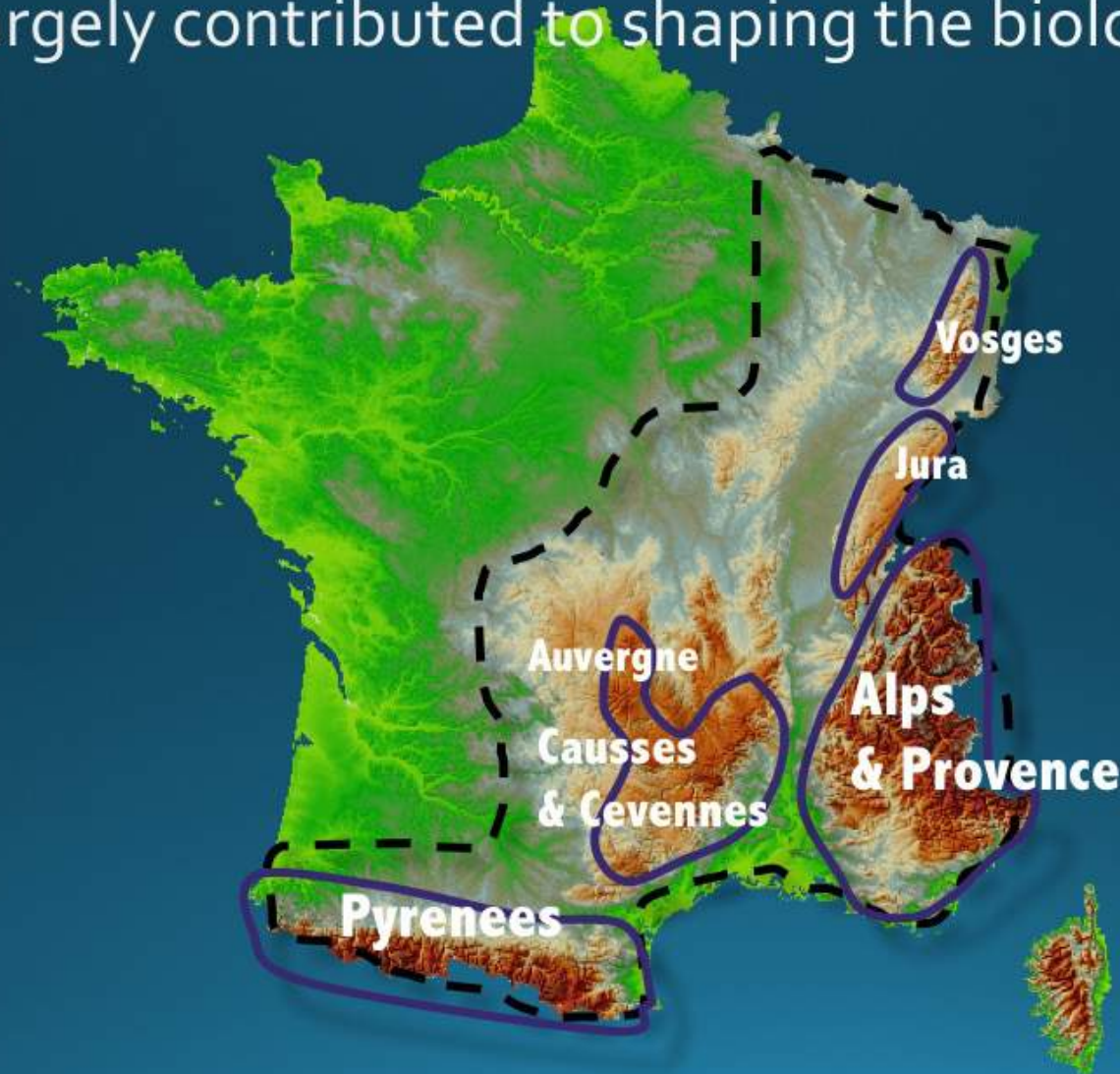
Three wolf dispersion corridors should cross the entire eastern side of France.

The South-East of the country, with a number of almost contiguous nature parks, is seen as highly favorable to the connection between subpopulations in Europe.



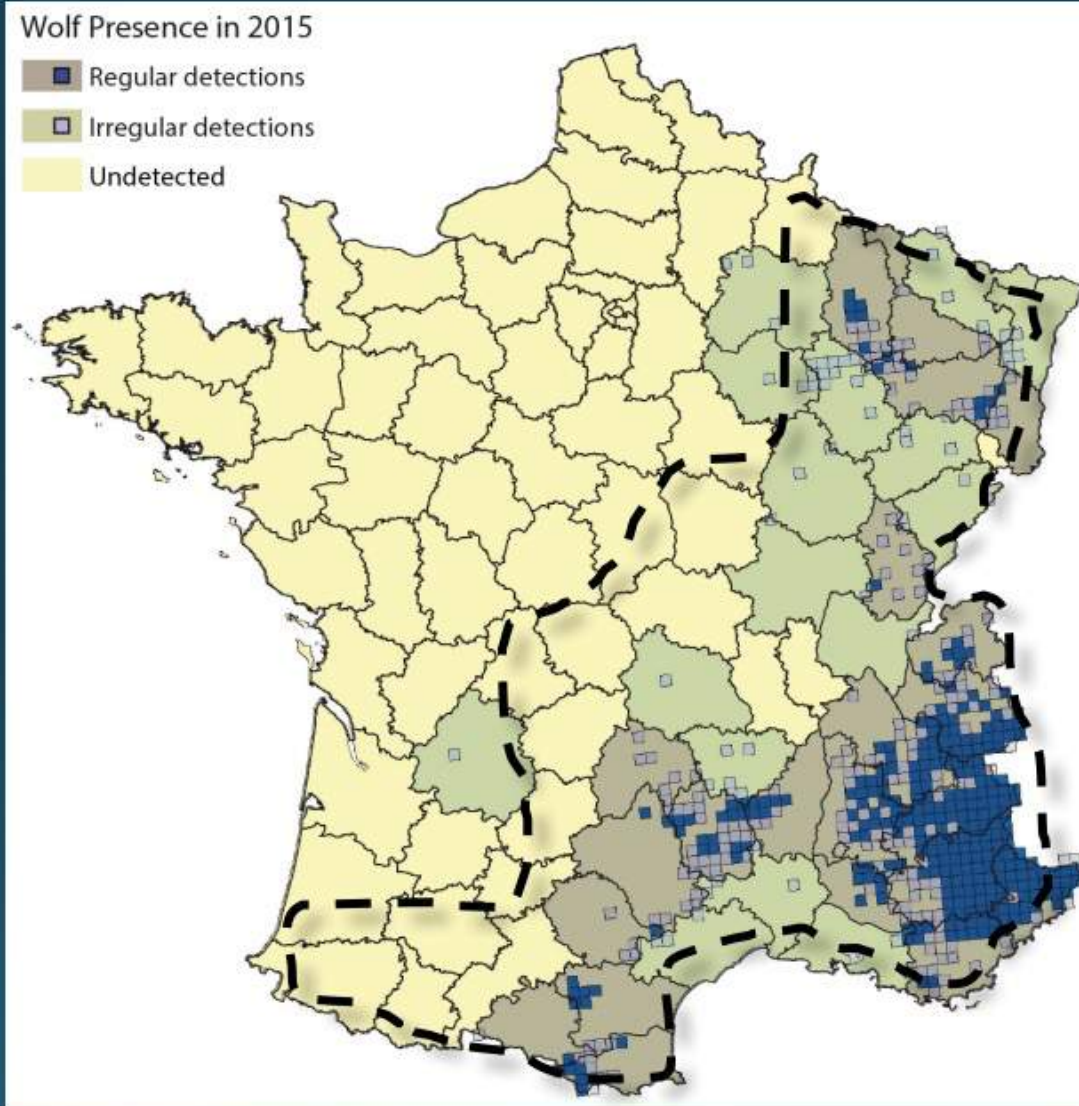


The concern is that Eastern part of France is made of emblematic landscape owe to grazing livestock farming. For centuries, grazing practices have largely contributed to shaping the biological richness of the countryside.





# Wolf presence in 2015



Data source:  
National Hunting and  
Wildlife Service



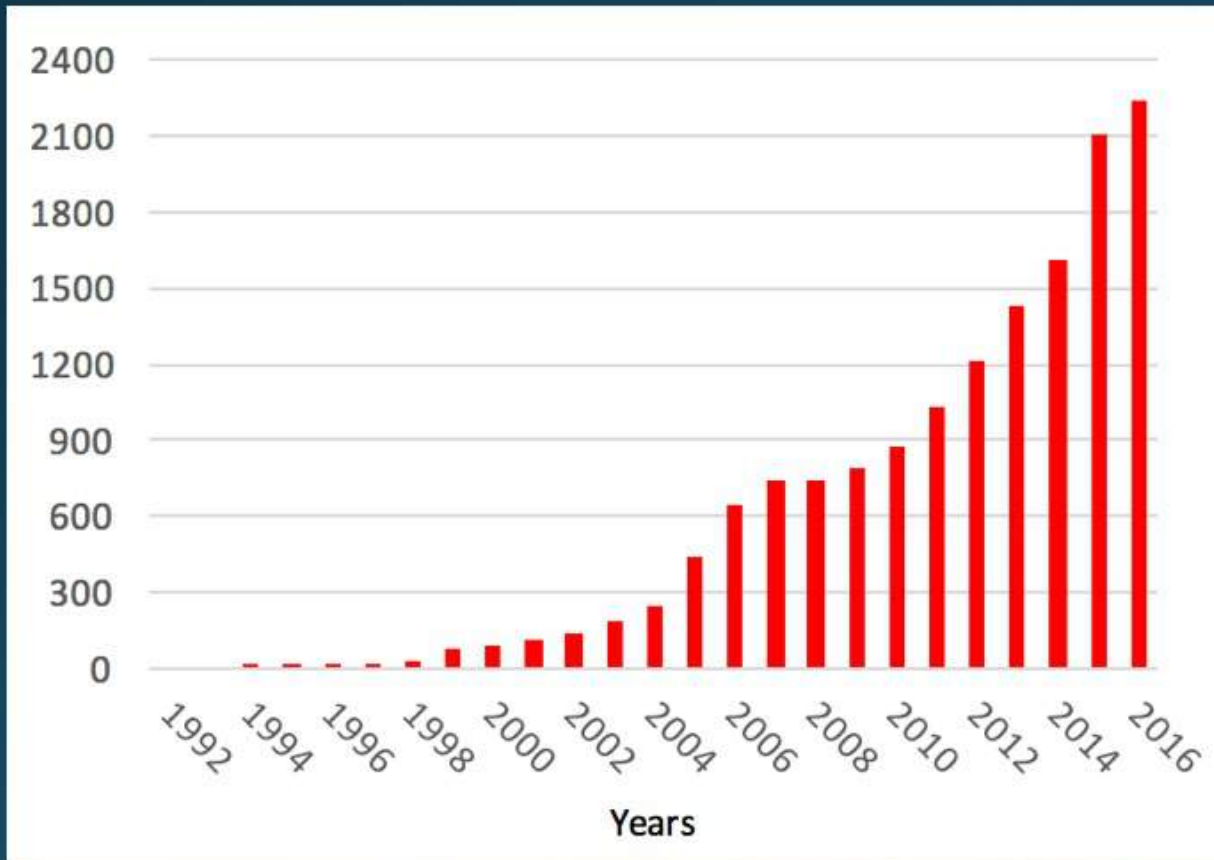


# Livestock protective measures with multiple constraints



Since 1997, measures to protect herds have been encouraged and financed by French authorities on the basis of EU funds.

They have been progressively generalized.



Numbers of livestock farmers that are protecting their herd against wolves in France

Data source: DRAAF Rhône-Alpes



## *Protective measure A – The Assistant Shepherd*

About 70-80 % of the total budget of protective measures.

His/her job is to relieve the shepherd or farmer-herder for additional tasks related to protection against wolves (100-200 working hours/month).

*Unquestionable utility, despite critical constraints when it needs to share a small mountain cabin.*



*Photo credits: GIEC Pastoralisme*



## *Protective measure B – Livestock Guard Dogs*

LGDs were introduced urgently in Provence and in the Alps from the end of the 1990s.

~ 3.000 to 4.000 dogs are currently present in France.

The effectiveness of guard dogs begins with a minimum of two dogs per herd or per batch of grazing livestock.

Some farms need to have 10 to 14 dogs!

*LGDs become a major concern in France for the multi-use of the countryside: public safety problem.*



*Photo credits: Elisa Gilbert*



## *Protective measure C – The Compulsory Night Pen*

*Postulate:* A herd locked up at night under the guard of humans and dogs no longer undergoes attack.

*This compulsory practice:*

- *decreases the daily available grazing time;*
- *disrupts the seasonal and daily herding adjustments;*
- *increases the erosive impact of stamping fragile soils.*



*Photo credits: M. Meuret*



What kind of results?

# Number of wolves and livestock victims in France : 1992-2016



Data source:  
ONCFS

Minimal estimates of wolf number



Data source:  
DREAL Auvergne  
Rhônes- Alpes



...Without speaking about the farmers' and herders' distress





How to explain the large and constant increase in the number of victims during the last seven years?

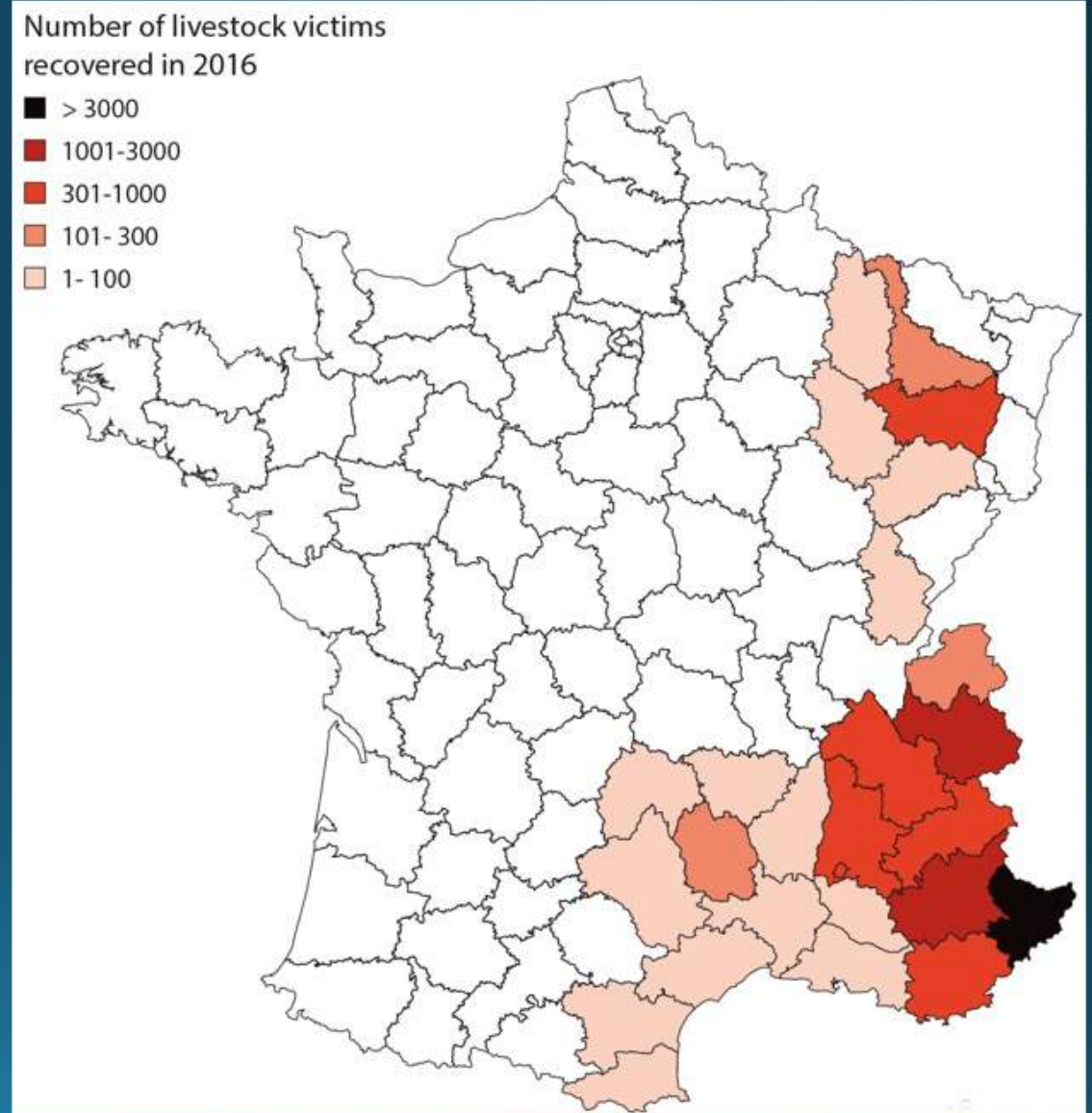


## Hypothesis #1

*The colonization of wolves reached new territories with farmers poorly prepared or unprepared to protect their flocks.*

**Not validated**

Livestock farmers in the seven initial regions of wolves' presence still suffer 90% of the total losses.

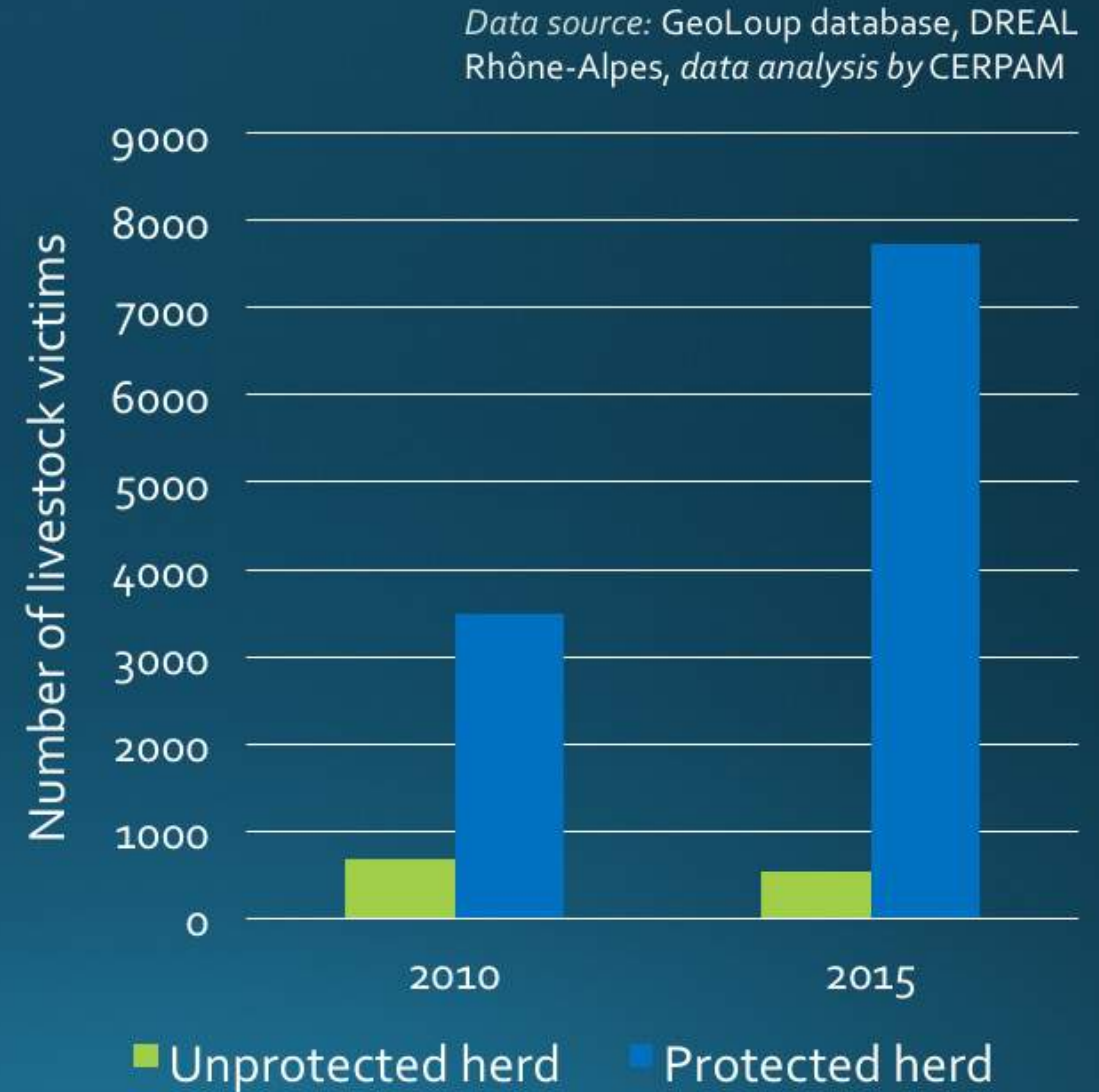


## Hypothesis #2

*Suspicion of farmers who "do not play the game of protection": they benefit from the financial aid granted but only put in very partial protective measures.*

**Not validated**

In Provence and in the Alps, most of victims belonged to protected herds.





Another consequence of wolf predation impacts the use of grazing places in the presence of wolves

- According to herders, a herd keeps the memory of the grazing place where the majority of its individuals have been stressed by an attack
- Most animals refuse to stop there again to graze, preferring to pass as quickly as possible
- Such “event memory” persists at least for two to three years;
- These places are lost areas for grazing, even if the fodder resources are fresh, abundant and usually appreciated.

# The failure of protective measures: explanation





Do we miss something?

France is the European country that has implemented one of the most elaborate livestock protection against wolf predation.

However, France appears to suffer the most livestock losses in the World (10.000 victims/year = 30 times higher than in the US Northern Rockies ...having 1.700 wolves).



Strictly protected wolves have adapted easily  
to favorable conditions in France



We simply miss to consider wolves as they are in real:  
very effective and adaptable predators

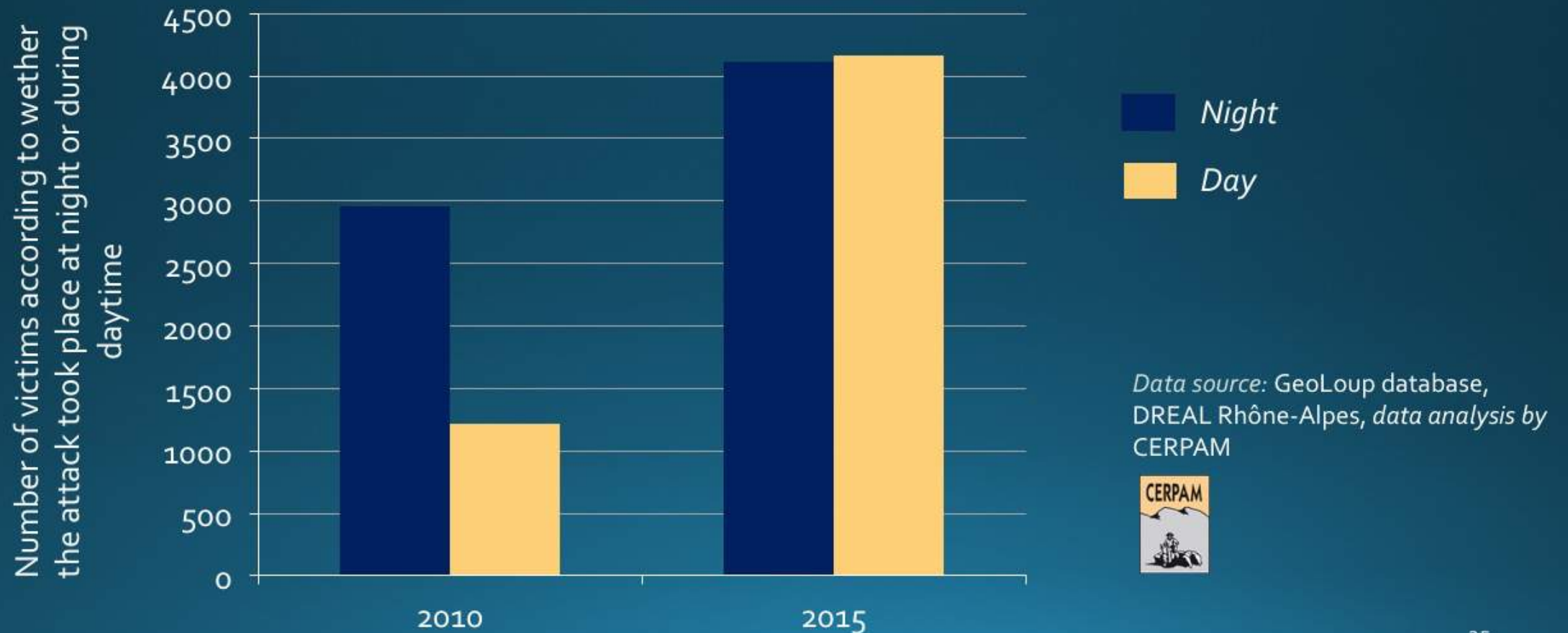
- ✓ Very smart
- ✓ Opportunistic
- ✓ Capable of learning...
- ✓ ...within families
- ✓ Highly adaptable
- ✓ Often unpredictable
- ✓ Mobile and prolific

Mech and Boitani 2003





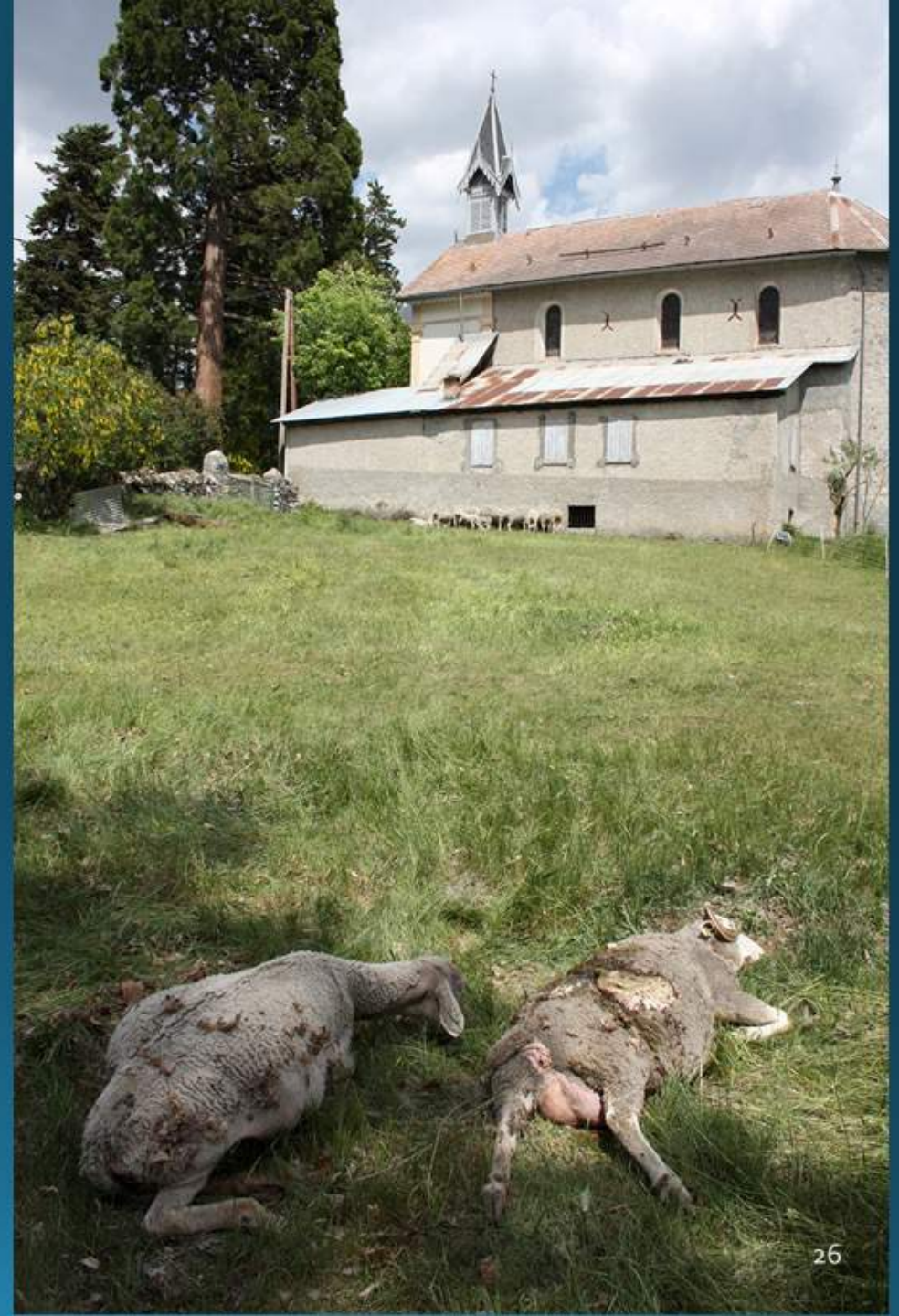
Their adaptive capacity is illustrated in France with the shift from predation at night (when flocks are penned and in the custody of guard dogs and humans) to **attacks during daytime**.





Another sign of adaptation:  
while predation still occurs in high  
mountain summer pastures, more  
and more attacks are now also  
carried on during almost the four  
seasons, in inhabited valleys and low  
lands where the absence of snow  
allows grazing all year round.

*Photo credits: Sylvie Arnaud / La Provence*







This behavioral adaptation of wolves to favorable conditions is natural.

Unfortunately, it was not anticipated in France.

*"The wolf fears humans"* is a hackneyed assertion transposed from countries where wolves are abundant (Canada, Russia, Romania...). In these countries, humans with guns and traps have for many years actively regulated wolf populations, when wolves – and other predators – come close to humans and domestic animals.








## What kind of Humans do wolves fear?

French mountains and hills are full with numerous and diverse humans: hikers, skiers, bikers and herders, the latter only provided with good mountain shoes and binoculars.







The first postulate underlying herd protection measures is clearly wrong ...when it has been applied in France:

*"An additional and continuous human presence with the herd is sufficient to keep the wolves at bay."*

Our Assistant Shepherds are not in a position to signify clearly enough to the wolves that they represent any serious kind of threat.

They are innocuous humans ...among so many others.



*Photo credits: Roger Minard*





The key premise of coexistence between wolves and humans would be possible only if the strictly protected status of wolves, according to the EU Habitats Directive and International Berne Convention, was deeply revised.



Livestock guard dogs, electrified and strong fences, red fladries, etc., as barriers ...simply foster wolf creativity far more than they show wolves the limits not to be crossed for their safety.



From evidences elsewhere in the world, we conclude that the coexistence between livestock farming and wolves needs the establishment of **reciprocal relationships** in order to maintain an acceptable distance.

(Lescureux, Garde and Meuret, *in press*)

This reciprocity may include shooting and trapping in the event of attacks, eliminating the most reckless individuals or groups, sometimes even entire packs.

The aim is to learn 'French' wolves to associate danger with closeness to humans and domestic herds.



# An advice from across the Atlantic (Bozeman, Montana, USA)



**PEOPLE AND CARNIVORES**

Solutions that work for people, land  
and wildlife

<http://www.peopleandcarnivores.org>

**Matt Barnes**



*Applied rangeland  
scientist and  
conservationist*

- ✓ The wolves need to associate cattle or sheep with humans, and humans with danger.
- ✓ People can chase wolves off, but they need to be convincing, as well as persistent.
- ✓ Once a wolf or bear has gotten a food reward, they are much harder to chase off.

The alternative solution could be:



New  
habitat  
for our  
livestock  
*(all year round)*





And the end of this

