

Katie Wilkinson Scholarship Report

The wolf at the door: A qualitative investigation into land users' attitudes to wolf reintroduction in Scotland

by Emma Wright



Looking up the River Spey to the Cairngorms

In January 2007, the Royal Society published a study proposing that wolves should be reintroduced to Scotland. The report argued that a population of wolves in Scotland would control deer populations and thus facilitate wider ecosystem benefits, such as increased rates of natural forest regeneration. The study triggered a wave of media attention and national debate that raged well beyond the Scottish border. Thanks to the generosity of the Katie Wilkinson Scholarship, I was able to spend two and a half months in Scotland this summer, exploring the dynamics of this debate. My aim was not to seek an answer as to whether or not wolves should be reintroduced, but rather to understand the issue from the viewpoint of some of the key stakeholders.

Whilst the true location and date is unknown, the wolf disappeared from this island around 1750, and thus we lost our last keystone predator. Lynx and bear were hunted to extinction several centuries previously, and many argue that without these predators the ecosystems cannot function as they should. Proposals for reintroducing wolves to Scotland have been filtering through for decades, with many advocates arguing that a wolf population would restore the ecosystem to a more natural state. Some say there is a moral obligation to restore the wolf to Scotland, as humans were responsible for its local extinction. It is also said that wolves could boost the local rural economies, for example through attracting more tourists to Scotland.

‘Scots don't want a step back in time’ – 12th July 2008, *The Daily Record* (Scotland's bestselling daily newspaper).

‘Is introducing wolves back into Britain howling mad?’ – 11th October 2007, *The Daily Mail*.

‘Day of the wolf - but its evil image could stop it saving the Highlands’- 31st January 2007, *The Guardian*.

‘Wolves and wildcats: bring ‘em on’ – 17th January 2008, *The Times*.

A selection of headlines addressing the question of wolf reintroduction in Scotland.

Is there, then, a space in the Scottish landscape for a wolf pack or two? It takes little imagination to predict some of the potential conflicts that would arise from such a reintroduction. For example, that same report by the Royal Society recognised that sheep farmers would be directly affected by a wolf population, as wolves would be likely to predate on substantial numbers of stock. Less tangible but highly significant is the wolf's age-old reputation. Its role in western folklore is far from favourable; are people ready to welcome back the killer of Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother?

The debate rages on today. Ecologists dispute the relative importance of large predators in the food chain and whether there are enough resources in Scotland to support the addition of wolves. Meanwhile, the media is torn as to whether wolves are beautiful representatives of the wilderness or evil killers. Of course, neither representation gives a true picture of the wolf, yet this tension highlights the need to be aware of what is termed the 'human dimension of wildlife management'. If we are to manage the conflict between predators and man, we need to understand peoples' attitudes to that predator. This was the pretext for my research: that in a debate which is getting progressively noisier and more polarised, an investigation that aimed to get a comprehensive understanding of the hopes, fears, confusions and opinions of stakeholders was overdue.

For the purpose of my research, I selected land users as the stakeholders whose attitudes I would investigate. 'Land users' was a deliberately expansive interest group, including anyone who uses the land in any capacity and would thus be directly affected by wolf reintroduction to Scotland. I conducted eighteen 'full length' interviews (from an hour to three hours) with farmers, land owners, deer forest owners, mountaineers and members of conservation agencies. Key to my research was the development of trust and confidence between the interviewee and myself. I was very conscious of the sensitive and highly personal nature of the issues that were discussed. Using interviews to collect data meant that I was able to establish a basis of trust between myself and the interviewee which would have been much harder to achieve had I gone in armed with a basic tick-the-box questionnaire. This meant I could move beyond any defensive, knee-jerk responses towards much more thoughtful, in-depth discussion, something I found very rewarding. As well as those full length interviews, I spent considerable time collecting more informal data, for example through discussing the issue of wolf reintroduction with members of the public, going to sheep sales, observing land-use meetings on private estates, and being shown around farms. I have recorded details from these in a field diary, and it has formed a valuable part of my research.



View from the Summer Isles across to Ben Mor Coigach.

As I write this, I am still grappling with hundreds of pages of interview transcripts, seeking patterns and themes that run through this debate. I have included here some quotes that illustrate some of the key issues that have arisen through my research.

I soon realised that the question of wolf reintroduction in Scotland is merely the tip of the iceberg. Below the surface of the water lies a vast, cumbersome mass of centuries-old conflicts regarding the use of the Scottish landscape. One interviewee presented what he considered to lie at the heart of the debate:

“...things are changing, so you’ve really got to look at the future – what do you want for Scotland? Do we want it to be one great flaming wilderness with lots of wolves and not a lot else, or do we want a living landscape with people? Well Scotland’s about people, it’s about the community, it’s about the relationships between wildlife and people. And we can all live if we just manage it carefully”

A landowner/farmer, Argyll

In contrast, a recurring view was that Scotland has been mismanaged for centuries, and that biodiversity needs to be prioritised. For some, this would necessitate the reintroduction of predators like wolves and lynx:

“If we had four hundred thousand red deer and however many packs of wolves Scotland can support – I don’t know, ten? then many areas of vegetation would grow back. But without a top predator, we don’t know what natural is. We’ve lost the concept of a natural ecosystem in Scotland.”

Personal, professional view of a Nature Conservation Adviser in the National Trust for Scotland

One of the main counter-arguments to wolf reintroduction hinges on the importance of hill farming to the rural economy, and the impact that wolf predation on stock could have on an already-declining industry:

“The wolf is a predator, and it’s hard enough at the moment for hill farmers of Scotland, it’s a particular struggle. You just have to look at the statistics. Sheep farmers in particular, having wolves who would clearly want to predate on lambs if not adult sheep, because they’d be easy pickings for a wolf... So to have another threat it would just be another straw to break the camels of certain individuals and for the industry as a whole.”

Unofficial opinion of a representative of the National Farmers’ Union for Scotland

A farmer evoked the current difficulty of hill farming very clearly:

“You know, we just, we’re struggling. I mean, we’ve had twenty bad years. Twenty years of saying ‘well, next year will be good’. Fertilizer went up enormously last year, we’re only getting possibly three pounds more for our lambs than we did last year, fuel is up...”

A hill farmer/landowner, Argyll

However, some advocates of wolf reintroduction suggest that the decline of hill farming is a reason for wolf reintroduction. One supporter explained to me that *“To my mind, it doesn’t really matter if wolves take sheep, because they’re subsidised and people are paid for rearing them, and it wouldn’t affect their income”*. Others proposed that compensation could repay farmers for any sheep lost to wolf predation, making the programme of reintroduction profitable for hill farmers.

I come from the Welsh borders, so I am familiar with hill farming and its difficulties. However, deer shooting estates were new territory for me, and I had to quickly learn how to negotiate the highly contentious issue of red deer in Scotland. Whilst few would dispute the monarch of the glen's iconic status, red deer mean different things to different people. To some, deer are a shooting season, an income and a way of life. To others, red deer are at unmanageable levels, and are responsible for turning the landscape of Scotland into an overgrazed desert. A member of staff for the Deer Commission for Scotland gave me his (unofficial) view that "*Deer populations are high in some areas*", and it seems to me that the truth lies in a compromise somewhere between the two opinions. Whether wolves would fit into that compromise I'm not sure. One estate owner in Ross-shire gave me his take on the conflict:

"There is an attitude that deer are bad and trees are good. As far as I know nobody comes to Scotland to see great acres of conifers. They do like to see deer...there are people who are obsessed by this idea that we need their wolves running around keeping deer numbers down."



Red deer farmed for venison in Argyll



Red deer in the wild in Sutherland

A frequent rhetoric in the question of wolf reintroduction is that wolves in the Highlands would increase and enhance the opportunities for ecotourism:

"The whole ecotourism has huge potential, which has been shown already I guess with the white tailed eagle on Mull has brought in a lot of visitors and I can't remember how much money it's generated but it's been very significant and there's no reason why it would be any different with beavers or wolves"

The unofficial opinion of a representative of 'Trees for life'

However, I also encountered considerable scepticism amongst land users regarding the idea that ecotourism with wolves could boost the rural economy. Another interviewee said simply:

"In my experience of people coming up to Scotland to see wildlife, they don't really want to pay to see it. They certainly don't want to pay a lot of money".

(Transcript yet to be approved)

A mountaineer, drawn to the beauty and challenge of the Scottish Munros, told me that he would be unwilling to walk in the Highlands if there were wolves around:

“You could be in an area, you know, ten, fifteen, twenty miles in either direction and there’s a pack of wolves floating around... Before you know it, these things are hungry. You know, you tell me a single person who wouldn’t be afraid of that.”

I had, I think, underestimated the extent of hatred and fear that the wolf still evokes. One woman told me that were wolves to return to Scotland, she would feel unable to take her children for walks in the mountains around her home. Whilst wolves in Scotland could attract a market for ecotourism, they could also deter people from spending time – and money – in the Scottish Highlands.



The seafront at Ullapool is a hive of activity, with several businesses offering wildlife tours to see species like minke whale and bottlenose dolphin. Could wolves offer similar opportunities?

Or could wolves actually deter tourists, particularly the many hikers that visit the Highlands each year?

Finally, one theme that emerged was that of reintroducing lynx. It is currently thought that lynx were roaming through the British landscape until 7th century AD. Research into its prey and habitat requirements has suggested that the environmental conditions over much of Scotland today would be suitable for lynx reintroductions. Furthermore, lynx do not suffer from the same reputation as the wolf; indeed, in my research I found people were often considerably more positive about lynx reintroduction than they were towards the idea of having wolves back.



European lynx (*Lynx lynx*)
Photo by Peter Cairns.

So should we reintroduce wolves or not? The purpose of my research was not to answer this question, but rather to present as many views as possible and build up a comprehensive picture of the human dimension to wolf reintroduction. The picture I have in many respects bears little resemblance to what I expected to find. It is far more complex, the opinions are stronger, and there is much greater diversity in peoples' attitudes and experiences than I had thought possible. As far as conclusions to my research are concerned, the best I can offer at the moment is that everyone needs to talk to each other a bit more. Simplistic, yet crucial. Regardless of wolf reintroduction, if the Scottish landscape is to be managed in a way that benefits both its people and its biodiversity there needs to be far more cooperation and dialogue between all land users.

People invariably ask me whether I think wolves should be reintroduced or not. As a purely emotional response, I would love to see wolves returned to Scotland. I have an unshakable feeling, walking amongst those awe-inspiring mountains and lochs, that something is missing. That there should be a wolf or a lynx, hunting in the forests and along the crests of the hills. One landowner told me that he would love to see wolves returned to Scotland in seven generations; perhaps, given the grand challenge that their reintroduction presents, this is a realistic timescale.

I would like to thank the Katie Wilkinson Scholarship trustees for their generosity and support, without which I would not have been able to complete this deeply rewarding project.



Grey wolf (*Canis lupus*)
Photograph by Peter Cairns