

ESR20-009 - Urbanization of a top predator: are wolves and humans adapting to life in close proximity?

Abstract

Urbanization is a rapidly growing phenomenon that dramatically alters animals' habitats and puts the survival of many species at risk. However, some species can also benefit from such changes, becoming 'urban exploiters'. Wolves in Italy have (unexpectedly) adapted to highly anthropic environments resulting in increased attacks on pets in private gardens and sightings in towns. This has led to speculation that the prolonged proximity to human habitation, dependence on anthropogenic food sources and additional opportunity for hybridization with dogs have decreased wolves' natural propensity to avoid humans, thereby increasing the risk of direct aggression. We adopt an interdisciplinary approach to analyse the effect of urbanization on wolves' feeding habits, their fear, risk-taking and aggressive behaviours, as well as their endocrinological and genetic profile, testing the hypothesis that urban wolves show a 'bolder' temperament than wolves living in more remote areas. We will evaluate people's attitudes towards urban wolves and their willingness to modify their behaviour, identifying key areas to help mitigate animal-human conflict. Predictive models of wolves' colonization have vastly underestimated the animals' adaptability to more urbanized habitats and the impact of human attitudes on wolves' successful return. We adopt a systems approach to develop a predictive model of wolves' return to Austria, including both human and ecological dimensions.

Scientific disciplines:

Behavioural biology (60%) | Animal ecology (30%) | Genetics (10%)

Keywords:

wolf behaviour, urbanization,

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Further links to the persons involved and to the project can be found under

<https://wwtf.at/funding/programmes/esr/ESR20-009/>