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Abstract: Government agencies and NGOs are conducting campaigns to rise public acceptance of predators. However, the success of such campaigns greatly depends on the following prerequisites: i) knowledge about the frequency and spatial distribution of acceptance and rejection by the public; ii) thorough knowledge of the dimensions of the relationship between humans and predators in general and, in particular, of the underlying reasons for acceptance or rejection. Since these prerequisites were not available for the specific context of Switzerland, our project aimed at filling this gap.
The human dimension: reasons for acceptance and resistance of lynxes and other predators in Switzerland

M. HUNZIKER

Section Landscape and Society, Swiss Federal Research Institute WSL, CH-8903 Birmensdorf; HUNZIKER@WSL.CH

Certain areas of Switzerland are currently experiencing an increase of the Lynx population and of other predator populations: species once eradicated have been actively reintroduced - such as the lynx - or have simply returned of their own accord - such as the wolf. This development is not well accepted among parts of the public (e.g. Mutter 1996), as in many regions throughout the world (e.g. Bath 1991; Boitani and Zimen 1979; Kellert 1991; Pate et al. 1996). Government agencies and NGOs are therefore conducting campaigns to rise public acceptance of predators. However, the success of such campaigns greatly depends on the following prerequisites (Bath 1994):

- knowledge about the frequency and spatial distribution of acceptance and rejection by the public.
- thorough knowledge of the dimensions of the relationship between humans and predators in general and, in particular, of the underlying reasons for acceptance or rejection.

Since these prerequisites were not available for the specific context of Switzerland, our project aimed at filling this gap. To achieve this aim, two research phases were conducted in the study, namely an inductive and a deductive phase.

- The purpose of the inductive phase was to explore the problem and to gain a deeper insight into the various factors causing acceptance or rejection (Caluori and Hunziker 2001a, b; Egli et al. 2001; Wallner and Hunziker 2001). Therefore we conducted qualitative interviews, i.e., a procedure similar to the 'focused interview' of Merton and Kendall (1956). After transcription, the interview contents were analysed according to the approach of the 'Grounded Theory' of Glaser and Strauss (1967). The interviewees were selected according to the 'theoretical-sampling' strategy (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Hunziker 1995), i.e., persons of widely differing positions and opinions were selected.

- In order to obtain information on frequencies and distributions of the different attitudes and to test the hypotheses derived from the inductive phase a deductive research phase was conducted consequently (Hunziker et al. 2001). I.e., randomly selected individuals throughout Switzerland were approached by a written survey in summer 1999. Out of the 4600 standardised questionnaires sent to the representative random sample of the Swiss population, 1442 were returned completed. After digitising these questionnaires, the data were analysed statistically.

The investigations showed that predators are principally well accepted by the majority of the Swiss public as a whole; even better than in the past (Hunziker et al. 2001). Nevertheless, there are considerable differences in acceptance between urban and rural, affected and non-affected regions.
Objection to the presence of predators can largely be explained by subjectively perceived (potential) or actually experienced direct and indirect affection by the predators' presence (Egli et al. 2001). And one of the most influential factors — in particular regarding short-term improvements of acceptance — is the communication between the parties involved. Here, not only information provided by the authorities and specialists but also the personal relationship between them and the local population play an important role.

However, it became clear that other more deep-seated reasons also play an important role, in particular the people's general attitudes towards nature and wilderness — nature as a "partner" or as an "enemy" — and their general value orientation — traditional vs. post-modern — (Caluori and Hunziker 2001a). I.e., people who tend to be oriented towards traditional values are likely to oppose the presence of predators in Switzerland. By comparison, the age and educational background of the respondents were less important factors and whether respondents knew much or little about these animals seemed to have almost no influence on their views (Hunziker et al. 2001). Nevertheless, the findings showed that young people and those with more education were inclined to view predatory animals more positively.

The deep seated reasons of acceptance/resistance of predators, i.e., the general value-orientation and the attitudes towards nature and wilderness, were also responsible for the preferences regarding landscape developments such as cultural landscapes being abandoned and left to nature. Thus, at least the assessment of the "rewilding" type of landscape change seems to be driven by similar factors as the acceptance/resistance of predators. This further illustrates the high significance of value-orientations and attitudes towards nature as the basis of people's assessment of any natural development.

Due to the ongoing shift in values in Swiss society, acceptance of predators as well as of land abandonment will probably further increase without specific measures being applied. Taking the deep-seated origins of the attitudes into account, this development could be actively supported by, for example, encouraging people to understand nature as their partner and not as their enemy. Even in rural areas, where the short-term solution of concrete problems with predator damages has priority, such strategies could help to achieve a sustaining effect. And finally, public relations are crucial and should be paid as much attention as possible when furthering acceptance is the task.

References


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