

THE PRESIDENT OF THE EUROPEAN Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, has taken a sudden interest in wolves and it doesn't bode well for the future of Europe's top predators.

Last September one of the hapless carnivores apparently killed her favourite pony, 30-year-old Dolly, near her home in northwest Germany. And wolves have been a hot topic of conversation in the EU ever since.

Genetic testing indicated that a wolf known as GW950m – an older male reputedly responsible for killing a dozen sheep and cows – was the culprit. Von der Leyen countered by ordering officials to carry out an in-depth analysis into the 'wolf menace' across the EU.

Meanwhile, a bounty was placed on GW950m's head. The authorities in Hannover claim they had already approved it – the day before Dolly was killed.

While von der Leyen and the Hannover authorities deny that she personally intervened in the case, it's hard not to speculate if, just two months later, Dolly's demise contributed to a non-binding resolution by the European Parliament, calling for wolf protection to be 'downgraded' to help livestock farmers. Von der Leyen herself then invited MEPs to submit any evidence indicating that "the wolf species is no longer endangered in Europe" as part of an in-depth analysis on the wolf's status.

There are an estimated 17,000 wolves in 28 countries across the continent (13,000–14,000 of them in the EU). A long history of hunting and persecution pushed them to the brink of extinction by the beginning of the 20th century, but reintroductions and careful protection have helped them to make a remarkable comeback.

Germany has led the way in living with wolves, since the first wolf pack arrived in Saxony a couple of decades ago. The country now has 128 packs, 38 pairs and nine individual wolves, living in 12 of the 16 federal states. But, as in other parts of Europe where wolves have been reintroduced, there are

often tensions between conservationists and farmers. As wolf

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It is illegal to kill wolves in Germany – but there are exceptions

“As grey wolf numbers increase, there is a rising tide of hostility”

MARK CARWARDINE

OPINION

numbers increase, there is a rising tide of hostility.

There's no denying that rogue individuals, and packs living where there is a shortage of natural prey, do kill livestock. In 2019, Germany's wolves killed no fewer than 2,894 domestic animals (including 2,476 sheep).

But studies have shown that, even when livestock is abundant, most wolves still prefer to feed on wild animals (in particular, roe deer, red deer and wild boar – which, in Germany, make up 98 per cent of their diet). And there are tried and tested ways of reducing livestock predation: boosting the availability of natural prey, electric fencing and the use of guard dogs among them. Many federal states even have 'wolf commissioners', who help farmers to protect their stock, and there is generous compensation for predated animals.

It is illegal to kill wolves in Germany, except under special circumstances. But

the level of protection elsewhere on the continent varies from country to country. Nordic nations, under pressure from strong hunting lobbies, are actually culling their wolves; the Norwegian government, in particular, seems determined to limit its wolf population to just three breeding pairs.

The fear is that the reaction following the death of Dolly will spread across the continent. Then it won't be just Scandinavia hellbent on creating the most hostile environment for wolves possible.

We blithely expect people in Africa and Asia to live alongside lions, tigers, Komodo dragons and a host of other potentially far more dangerous animals without question (and, often, that is exactly what they do).

Why can't the rest of us behave like grown-ups, put our vested interests aside and be as sympathetic and enlightened about conservation as they are? **W**

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