

People's experience of wildlife predators must be highlighted in the debate about them.

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

After having been practically wiped out Norway, as well as in generally in Western and continental Europe, wolves and other predators are back. But is there a place for predators in Norway?

In a new study from the University of Stavanger (UiS), the researchers have taken a new approach to understanding more about our conflicts with predators. They have arrived at the conclusion that facts alone are not enough with regard to this issue. People's experience of wolves and other predators must also be taken into account.

"The conflict surrounding the management of wolves and other predators is deadlocked. A good understanding of what the conflict is about is important in achieving better management of predators", says Morten Tønnessen, associate professor at UiS.

He is a philosopher and biosemiotics specialist with expertise in relations between humans and animals. Tønnessen has been researching wolves since 2007. He carried out this study together with Professor in Linguistics and Communication Studies at Universitetet i Agder (the University of Agder), Paul J. Thibault. For this study, they interviewed people in Rendalen in Hedmark, Kautokeino in Finnmark and Kristiansand and Stavanger.

The study shows that people's views on the wolf, and animals with which they are considered to be in conflict, depend on their knowledge, experience, livelihoods and local environment. It also shows that people's interpretation of images, sounds and video clips of wolves and other animals very much depends on the context.

The study is a sub-project of the Norwegian-Estonian research project Animals in changing environments, a co-operation between UiS and the University of Tartu in Estonia. The main theme is how animals' living conditions are being changed due to man-made environmental changes.

The wolf as a symbol

Among the five large predators in Norway—the bear, the wolf, the

wolverine, the lynx and the golden eagle—the wolf has a special place. This is not an unexpected finding according to the two researchers. In his doctoral thesis in 2011, Tønnessen described how the wolf in Norway—and a number of other countries—has become a symbol for predators in general.

When a sheep is killed by predators, most people automatically think of wolves. In reality, however, the wolf accounts for 7% of sheep that are thought to have been killed by predators between 2010 and 2014. The other predators accounted for 93%, according to figures from the predator tracking system, Rovbase.no.

Opposition to the wolf appears to be greater than towards the other predators that do more harm than the wolf. So why is that?

"Controversy regarding wolves is not just about what the wolf actually does but what the wolf is regarded as a symbol of", says Tønnessen.

The symbolism connected to wolves and sheep goes right back to the Bible. Besides being a symbol of freedom and strength, the wolf is also a symbol of nature being violent and threatening, while the sheep symbolises something innocent that must be protected.

Later, the wolf also became associated with wickedness and uncontrolled hunger, according to Tønnessen.

Film clips and images

The participants in the study, who come from different places in Norway, were interviewed about relevant themes connected to predators. Film clips and images of predators in different situations were also shown. The participants were supposed to explain what they saw on the screen, without being aware of the context in which the image or film

was shot.

The researchers were able to study the participants' reactions to images and film clips through what they said and from their [body language](#) and facial expressions. The researchers paid particular attention to people's expressions and gestures.

"Body language constitutes the greatest part of human communication. What we say is just a small part of what we are communicating. That is why we wanted to study people's body language as an extra source of information", says Tønnessen.

Occupation and where someone lives is important

So what is people's reaction to the wolf?

There was a great diversity of opinion, from those who defended illegal wolf hunting to those who would like there to be more wolves. When the films and images were being shown, the participants' body language varied from place to place and from person to person. According to the study, even those opposed to wolves may have a lot of respect and admiration for the wolf as a hunter.

Some of those opposed to wolves imitated the wolf's movements when they had to describe how, for example, it jumped on a moose before the rest of the pack took their turn.

People's occupation or hobbies also have a bearing on how they regard the wolf and other predators.

The researchers saw evidence that the more participants undertook physical activities outdoors and benefited directly from nature's resources, for example, as farmers or hunters, the more expressive or

active their body language was during the tests in the study. It was also among these participants that the researchers found most opposition to predators. Opposition to predators was particularly strong in Kautokeino.

Cultural portrait

All the participants were very knowledgeable about at least one animal species. For example, people in Kautokeino were very knowledgeable about reindeer, and in Rendalen people knew a lot about hunting moose.

Regardless of their backgrounds, everyone was capable of misinterpreting what they saw on the screen. This could concern an image, sound or a video clip of predators where they were not aware of the context in which the recording had been made.

One image of three wolves with a person in the foreground was interpreted in highly different ways.

Most people saw two wolves and interpreted the third wolf as prey or possibly a fox. One person thought that the animals in the image were not wolves at all. The interpretation varied greatly regarding whether the wolves were hostile or whether they were play-fighting.

One participant thought that the fiercest wolf was looking threateningly at the person in the image. The person was perceived as being everything from a young girl to an adult man or woman. This was significant with regard to how the situation with the wolf was being interpreted.

"The difference in attitudes to predators also says something about how people live in nature and society", says Morten Tønnessen.

"In those areas where wolf management is controversial, agriculture and hunting are much more important to the local economy than in other

parts of Norway."

Dog versus wolf

Many moose hunters are negative towards wolves because of conflict between hunting dogs and wolves. In many areas, hunters have stopped hunting with dogs. The hunting dogs seek out the wolf, but the wolf regards the dog as an intruder and goes on the attack.

"Generally speaking, we can say that there are two different points of view of nature; the one in the countryside which regards nature as something to be utilised, and the more romantic view of nature that is more common in urban areas", Tønnessen explains.

He adds that after wolves arrived in Østmarka near Oslo, those opposed to wolves can no longer say that it is easy for townsfolk to be pro-[wolf](#) when they do not live near them.

"To solve the conflict around [wolves](#) and other [predators](#), there has to be security for people's future situations and their views and identities must be taken seriously", the researchers conclude.

This study was presented at the international conference Animals in the Anthropocene: Human-animal relations in a changing semiosphere at the University of Stavanger in mid-September. The study is to be published in the book "Semiotic methods in the study of human-animal interactions" which will be published by Tartu University Press in spring 2016. Research Assistant Laura Kiiroja together with the two researchers contributed to this study.

Provided by University of Stavanger

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