

Finland to continue wolf culls despite NGO uproar

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According to the Finnish Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, 55 out of 290 grey wolves were culled during the 2015-2016 hunting season

Finnish authorities said Monday they plan to maintain culling of the protected wolf population to prevent illegal poaching, despite opposition from environmentalists.

Fifty-five out of Finland's 290 grey wolves were culled during the

2015-2016 hunting season, and the Finnish Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry said culling needed to continue.

"The aim is to increase the wolf population's acceptability especially amongst local people living in the wolf territories and to diminish... illegal poaching," the ministry said in a statement.

The decision came after two month-long trial culls in 2015 and 2016, during which licensed hunters were allowed to seek permits for killing individual wolves.

But in addition to the 55 wolves culled over the winter, 23 animals died for other reasons such as traffic accidents, poaching, or were shot by police to protect people.

Ministerial adviser Sami Niemi admitted the high number of other deaths had caught the authorities by surprise and as a result, the licensing system was being modified before hunting could continue.

Niemi said the ministry was now to define an annual maximum for all wolf deaths to prevent excessive culling.

Environmentalists have heavily criticised Finland for culling an animal strictly protected by the European Union's legislation.

"The numbers have been significant and wrong wolf individuals have been shot in these hunts", the Finnish Nature League's manager Sami Saynevirta told AFP.

He was referring to the estimated 20 reproducing leader wolves that were shot during the latest cull, although the aim was to target young individuals.

But the ministry said that before the trial culls, when hunting was not allowed, the wolf population reached its record low at between 120 and 135 animals in 2013, mainly due to poaching.

After the culls, Finland's Natural Resources Institute estimated there were between 200 and 235 wolves left in the country, but new counts are needed to define how many wolf packs were able to reproduce this year.

The European protection rules allow some exceptions, such as hunting wolves in Finland's northern reindeer herding areas and more restricted hunting of individual wolves that attack livestock elsewhere in the country.

Hunting is a widespread tradition in Finland. About 300,000 people register each year for permits, one of the highest per capita rates in Europe.

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