

Changing Attitudes to Swedish Wolf Policy

Wolf Return, Rural Areas, and Political Alienation

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Abstract

In 1966, the grey wolf was listed as a protected species in Sweden. Since then, the Swedish wolf population has increased in size, making human-wolf encounters more common, particularly in rural areas. Previous qualitative research has shown that segments of the rural population perceive the wolf to be incompatible with traditional rural life. Some also believe that the return of the wolf was orchestrated by urban interests, and perceive the wolf policy as a vehicle for the consolidation of urban power in rural areas. Thus, the return of the wolf can be assumed to aggravate pre-existing urban-rural tensions, resulting in conflicts over wolf policy, which Swedish wolf governance could be ill-equipped to handle. In view of this, this thesis is an examination of,

how environmental, socio-political, and institutional factors affect variations in public attitudes to the Swedish wolf policy over time, and discuss their policy implications.

Drawing on extensive survey material collected in Sweden in 2004, 2009, and 2014, the wolf policy is approached from a political science perspective. This thesis is an attempt to bridge a number of existing gaps in literature related to wolves and policy, individual and collective level explanatory factors, and attitude change. The underlying assumption is that environmental, socio-political and institutional factors are likely to impact attitudes to wolf policy. Environmental change is found to be relevant, direct experiences with wolf have increased over time, a development that was also associated with an increase of support for a more restrictive wolf policy (Paper I). Regarding socio-political change, politically alienated individuals were less likely to support the current wolf policy, and more likely to favor either more, or less restrictive policy options compared to other individuals. Rural areas displayed higher levels of political alienation than urban areas, and people living in rural areas were more likely to favor a more restrictive wolf policy (Paper II). Furthermore, individuals living in municipalities in which a high proportion of residents had grown up in a rural area, tended to favor a more restrictive wolf policy, an effect which could also be associated with political alienation (Paper III). Finally, institutional change was examined through an analysis of public support for the actors within the Wildlife Management Delegations (WMDs). In general, the interest groups represented in WMDs were found to reflect the representation preferred by the public. However, findings show a fundamental value divide in relation to natural resources, among the Swedish public, which is also reflected within the WMDs (Paper IV).

The return of the wolf has caused part of the general public to want fewer wolves in Sweden. This attitudinal change is related to a growing divide between urban-rural areas in Sweden, and associated with a general pattern of political alienation. Thus, the wolf policy has become a symbolic issue around which rural citizens rally their fight against urban interests for political autonomy.

Keywords

attitude change, political alienation, urban-rural conflict, governance, wolf policy

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