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Abstract

Psychological ownership as a tool in sustainable wolf management

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Wolf (*Canis lupus*) management policies in Finland are based on the terms for achieving favorable conservation status via strict protection, as specified in the Habitats Directive. Consequently, wolf management has been imposed in a top-down manner and have inevitably been lacking in terms of place-based policy. This has resulted in multidimensional and hierarchical management conflicts. Wolf management legitimacy crisis appears both in actual illegal killing and also in passive behavior such as feigning ignorance when supporting illegal killings. Disputes over the national objectives for wolf management have hindered systematic management of the wolf population. We operationalize the concept of psychological ownership (PO) as a novel theoretical approach to wolf management to promote socially and ecologically sustainable wolf policies in Finland. In identifying both key actors and key experiences in the development of PO toward wolves we analyzed historical data on hunting legislation, the effect of hunting bounties, and also, classified stakeholder attitudes in old publications. In the light of historical data we conclude that hunters are a key group in developing PO toward wolves. When it comes to key experiences, by having a control over local wolf occurrence with conservation hunting / trophy hunting, hunters have a possibility to invest themselves into the local wolf management and thereby change attitudes and enhance a sense of responsibility toward wolves i.e. develop the psychological ownership toward wolves. By gaining financial compensation from sharing a living territory with wolf pack ordinary citizens may support hunters as key actors in wolf management and thus further strengthen the hunters' sense of responsibility toward wolves. In addition, experiences strengthening the feeling of security in the wolf areas are in key position when ensuring human coexistence with wolves. By participating into the local-level wolf management and by becoming closely acquainted with the species locals may develop PO toward wolves, and also, trust toward game management authorities. Fear of wolves can also be reduced. Strengthening the psychological ownership toward wolves prioritizes local-level socio-cultural needs and considers local people as actors when implementing the place-based wolf management policies.