

Promoting cooperation and interaction in Finnish wolf territories

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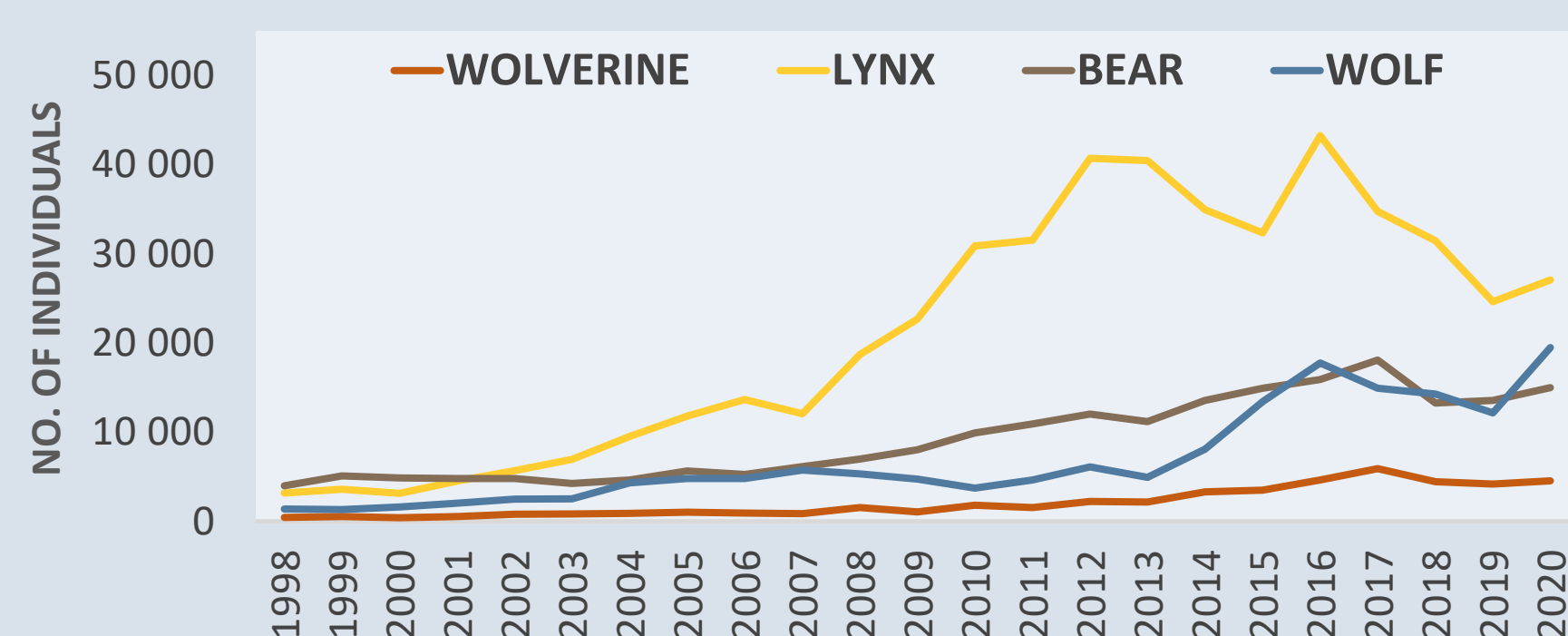
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The LIFE BOREALWOLF project (2019–2025) develops tools for facilitating the coexistence of people and wolves, thus aiming to increase the acceptability of wolves in the Finnish society. A vital tool for this is disseminating know-how about coexisting with wolves. Aims of the project also include promoting interaction and collaboration within and between stakeholders, as well as strengthening the existing volunteer networks. These two goals in particular focus around a volunteer network of large carnivore observers and local stakeholder groups of territory cooperation.

THE NETWORK OF LARGE CARNIVORE OBSERVERS (LCOs)

- The population monitoring of large carnivores and decision making on their management in Finland relies heavily on citizen observations, which are confirmed and reported by trained volunteers = LCOs.
- This network of LCOs has been active for over 40 years, gradually extending to some 2 400 volunteers. Members are typically recruited by the local game management associations, and they are required to take part in training before being appointed by the Finnish Wildlife Agency.
- The LCO network is extensive but having a sufficient regional coverage can still be an issue – i.e., individual observers may get strained by volunteer tasks. Acting as a LCO can be burdensome in conflicts, as these people are often the “first responders” and may thus face a lot of discontentment.



The line chart shows the number of individuals recorded in the track and other observations confirmed by LCOs. Their total numbers have increased gradually, currently reaching an annual sum of tens of thousands data entries.

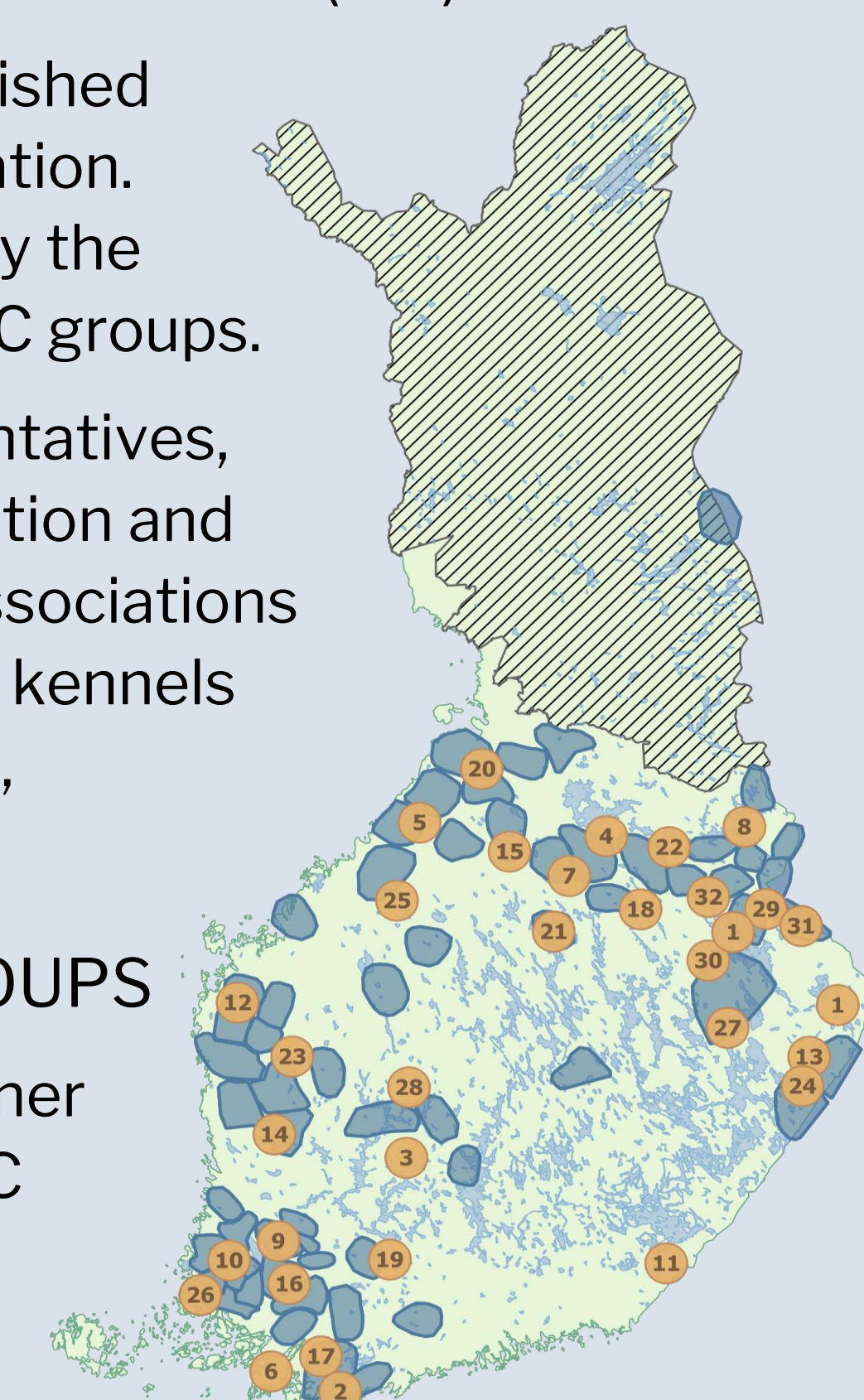
Data: Natural Resources Institute Finland.

LIFE BOREALWOLF SUPPORTS THE LCO NETWORK

- The project assists LCOs by collaborating in the field and by providing a guidebook on large carnivore observations, distributed free of charge.
- The project also strives to engage new volunteers, also non-hunting observers. This is facilitated by an online course and examination. Same materials are also compiled into a package for face-to-face training events.
- The freely available web-based course reinforces the status of the network as large carnivore experts and promotes information sharing. This will serve the LCO network as well as authorities by fewer reports of mis-identified observations and fewer contacts targeted to non-responsible actors.
- To motivate the volunteer observers, they are provided with regional feedback and an overview of collected observation data.

THE NETWORK OF TERRITORY COOPERATION (TC) GROUPS

- The TC groups are a local-level network established for the management of the Finnish wolf population. First groups were formed in 2016, and currently the Finnish Wildlife Agency coordinates 32 local TC groups.
- The TC groups consist of stakeholder representatives, who convene to discuss the regional wolf situation and plan for useful actions. These actors include associations for game management, farmers, conservation, kennels and villages, as well as police or game wardens, municipalities etc.



TC groups (orange) and wolf territories (blue; from March 2022) shown on the map of Finland. Reindeer husbandry area (hatched) is not included in the project.

Territory data: Natural Resources Institute Finland. Background map: National Land Survey Finland.

LIFE BOREALWOLF SUPPORTS THE TC GROUPS

- The project produces meeting agendas and other materials for the groups. It has also updated TC guidelines using feedback from the groups.
- TC groups are facilitated to plan and carry out wolf management actions. The project maps out best practices and compiles useful wolf-related information for the TC groups to disseminate. The groups are encouraged to communicate locally about their actions.
- In cases of local conflicts and lack of purpose, project staff is available for open dialogue and facilitation. This has proven to be important for maintaining motivation among groups and keeping stakeholders informed.
- New groups are established whenever locals have a need to launch one. The project will guide and oversee to establishment of new groups to assure all interested parties are included.
- Regional seminars are organised annually to promote dialogue between TC groups, local stakeholders and the administration. These solution-oriented events bring regional actors together to deliberate on viable means of overcoming wolf-related challenges, offering a pathway of influence for those not included in TC groups.



HOW TO MOVE FORWARD AFTER LIFE BOREALWOLF?

- For the LCO network, it is vital to continue regular updates on the training materials, in collaboration with management and research. Motivating volunteers will likely remain a challenge, as people are increasingly occupied with their spare time, and the mean age of rural populations increases.
- For the TC groups, the goal is to attain effectiveness and sense of purpose. When the groups are motivated and driven, they can function independently, leaving the administration solely with a role of establishing new groups. This will promote transferring the working concept to other areas and species.

CONCLUSIONS

- Functioning cooperation between territory residents, LCOs and authorities ensures that wolves are comprehensively monitored, people have access to reliable information about wolves, and residents have opportunities to engage and be heard. → Crucial to successful management of wolves!
- Consequently, operating models such as LCOs and TC groups can be recommended for other countries, where conflicts arise from wolf presence. Effort is required to build and maintain these networks, but experience from LIFE BOREALWOLF shows, that they remain moderate through shared responsibility and close collaboration between administration and research.