Position of De Hoge Veluwe National Park with respect to wolves.

Now that the wolf has returned to De Hoge Veluwe National Park, we are facing some serious dilemmas regarding wildlife management, economic damage, habitat and species protection, and visitor expectations. We set out below the reasons why De Hoge Veluwe National Park is in favour of controlled management of wolves throughout the Netherlands and of keeping them out of the Park.

Wolves are called apex predators, which means that they are at the top of the food chain. Their preferred prey differs from one region to another. Under natural conditions they mainly hunt ungulates such as red deer, roe deer, wild boar and mouflons. Under less natural conditions a wolf will also feast on domesticated, farmed species such as sheep.

Wolves have now settled in De Hoge Veluwe National Park – not by scrambling over the fencing or squeezing underneath it, but with the assistance of ill-intentioned people who cut holes in the fencing or who may even have brought the wolves in by vehicle. The wolves, which arrived here in 2021, have already killed a lot of mouflons, red deer, roe deer and wild boar. Not all the prey is found; the actual numbers are likely to be a lot higher. The number of animals falling prey to the wolves will rise, as is the case in other areas where wolves hunt. Wolves are non-selective and leave some of their prey half dead; they only partially consume a large number of their prey. This causes suffering to the animals.

Land management by means of big game
De Hoge Veluwe National Park manages its land in the most natural possible manner with the help of big game such as mouflons. This enables the Park to maintain open landscapes that are of ecological value and that provide visitors with a unique experience. Scientific research and almost 100 years of experience have taught us that, within the context of the Netherlands, active management of big game populations and vegetation is needed for the preservation of optimal biodiversity and a rich, varied landscape. That ultimately resulted in a large proportion of Natura 2000 habitats – protected European landscapes with extremely vulnerable species.

The mouflon is an outstanding grazer

The arrival of wolves in the Park has had an extremely negative effect, particularly on the mouflon and on the ability of that species to keep habitats in good condition. The mouflon is an outstanding grazer of dry heath, Nardus grasslands and sand drifts. Furthermore, mouflons eat a lot of young Scots pines, a tree that grows quickly and densely in open landscapes because of nitrogen deposition. So mouflons make an important contribution to biodiversity and to the management of those open landscapes, which are becoming increasingly rare in the Veluwe region. Consequently, the mouflon also ensures that the Park retains animal and plant species that are adapted to arid conditions – and many of which are very rare. Those species include rare spring-sedge, viper's grass, moonwort, the grizzled skipper butterfly, the wart-biter and the Lemonia dumi moth.

Fewer mouflons, more pressure on biodiversity

Red deer, roe deer and shepherded flocks of sheep cannot graze in the same way as mouflons because their diet is different. We therefore believe that our 220 mouflons (the number before the birthing season) will play an important part in the future of the Park.

The arrival of the wolf is seriously disrupting that. As the mouflons fall prey to the wolves, the open spaces grazed by the mouflons will grow more densely, so the open heaths and sand drifts and the species that flourish there will come under pressure. Nardus grasslands have priority habitat protection. That is the highest habitat protection level in Europe. The management of these landscapes is not related to just one species but to all the species that are adapted to those landscapes. This focuses in particular on Birds Directive species such as the European nightjar, the European stonechat, the northern wheatear and the woodlark. There are also concerns about the viviparous lizard, the sand lizard and the smooth snake. If the habitats decline or disappear, these species will decline too or even disappear completely. This means that there are also fears for the survival of the fox moth, the blue-winged grasshopper, rare spring sedge and viper's grass.

In addition, the disappearance of the mouflon, very likely in the course of 2022, would mean the end of a species that is an icon in the Park and of the special cultural and historical legacy left by the Kröller-Müllers, who introduced this species.

Interaction with visitors

Additionally, mouflons never cause injury to Park visitors, something that still occurs frequently with other large grazers in nature reserves. On the contrary, our visitors regard watching herds of mouflons in expansive open landscapes of the Park as a unique experience. The Park and the Veluwe as a whole would suffer considerable economic damage if the numbers of mouflon and other big game were to decline drastically because of wolves.

The Park is worried that if visitors at the game observation points rarely spot any big game, visitor numbers will decline. After all, the majority of the visitors come to the Veluwe not only to enjoy the wonderful landscapes and wide range of amenities, but also to see big game.

Causes of unnatural behaviour in wolves

It seems that the wolf is by nature an extremely shy animal that does its best to avoid contact with humans. The behaviour of the wolves that have been seen in the Netherlands up to now is very different. Whereas in normal circumstances the number of 'spontaneous' encounters between man and wolf is very small, wolves in the Netherlands have been seen walking along roads and through streets and have stolen sheep from a flock when the shepherd has been no more than 40 metres away. They have also been settling in agricultural areas, sometimes briefly, sometimes for an extended period, causing considerable emotional and material damage to sheep farmers and the like.

There are several reasons behind such unnatural behaviour in wolves.

· For the first time in the history of mankind wolves are not being hunted, so they are losing their innate fear of humans.

· Wolves are entering very densely populated areas for the first time, so the chance of an encounter between wolves and people has risen exponentially.

· Wolves are increasingly coming into contact with dogs, domestic or feral, so these species crossbreed, leading to behaviour that is both less natural and less shy.

In addition, it is questionable whether the arrival of the wolf in the Netherlands is having a positive effect on the ecosystem, as proponents suggest. Every square metre in the Netherlands has always been, and is still, influenced by man. Consequently, a natural ecosystem will never exist.

That has already been amply demonstrated in areas such as

the Amsterdam Water Supply Dunes, the Oostvaardersplassen Nature Reserve and Deelerwoud natural forest. It is generally unrealistic and undesirable to allow nature to have free rein in an agrarian landscape such as that in the Netherlands. A well-regulated balance gives the best results, both for nature and for man.

Effect on red deer

The presence of wolves in the Park has already had a major impact on the current management of our big game, not only the mouflon but also the red deer. Ever since De Hoge Veluwe National Park was founded, the resident big game have been managed on the basis of scientific knowledge. One of the effects of World War Two was that a large part of the big game population was eradicated by the German occupying forces. It took more than 30 years to rebuild viable deer and wild boar numbers. That will not be possible with wolves, however.

The big game management is always in balance with other objectives of the Park.

It has been demonstrated in recent years that the optimal balance of these objectives is guaranteed when the population of red deer in the Park numbers 180 in the spring, in other words before the deer birthing season. If the red deer population exceeds 180, other objectives, such as natural forest regeneration, are at risk. At the same time, a minimum population has to be safeguarded so as to allow natural grazing to do its work. The Park wants to preserve that situation; we achieve it by means of culling, which is carried out by professional wardens and invited – and properly trained – hunters. The culled game is handled by a professional local butcher and turned into products that are used by the Park restaurant to prepare and serve delicious dishes. These biological products are also sold in the Park Pavilion shop.

Bigger herds because of the arrival of wolves
Since the public were prohibited from leaving the paths (wandering), red deer have spread across the Park. This has increased the likelihood of visitors coming across red deer. Another positive effect of the ban on wandering is that the wildlife, especially the red deer, has once again started to live in more 'natural' herd sizes.
After the wolf made its appearance, however, the red deer have tended to huddle together. That means that the herds are larger again, so the chance of members of the public spotting them is smaller. In some places, this also increases the pressure on the forest and it will become harder to manage the species. These red deer are also reacting nervously; the presence of wolves causes stress.

Effects of the presence of wolves
The Park aims to achieve the highest possible level of biodiversity; this was recognised in 2017 when the European Parliament honoured us with the Belleuropa Award. The arrival of the wolf disrupts the natural balance and causes a decline in biodiversity.
The drastic reduction in the number of grazers has a major effect on the Park's conservation obligations within the framework of Natura2000 with respect to protected species and habitats. The mouflon, for instance, is indispensable in the protected open areas. Considerable management problems will also arise if and when certain forms of grazing are no longer being carried out because the wolves have caused the number of grazers to fall below a minimum level. The inter-provincial wolf plan fails to make the link with the Natura2000 targets. That could have a dramatic effect on the flora and fauna in the Park, also in a legal sense, if it proves impossible to realise the Natura2000 targets.

Research
It is claimed that wolves in the Netherlands are purebred and form part of the Central European population. However, De Hoge Veluwe has indications that at any rate one wolf in the Park is a crossbreed (wolf/dog) and, contrary to the claim that no interchange takes place between the Central European and Baltic population, parts of the DNA can be linked to wolves from Latvia. The Park is carrying out further research into that.

Controlled management of wolves
Although the Park has no objections to the presence of wolves in the Netherlands, it must in our view be possible to conduct controlled management of that species. Where the presence of wolves causes unnecessary harm to a species that assists in the management of extremely valuable open landscapes, as is the case with the mouflon, it must also be possible to keep wolves away, either temporarily or permanently.

Conclusion
De Hoge Veluwe National Park is not opposed to wolves but is extremely doubtful about whether the presence of wolves in a densely populated country like the Netherlands is desirable. Having mouflons in the Park is essential for the preservation of heaths and sand drifts. The arrival of wolves signals the disappearance of not only our mouflons but also of the other grazers – and with them many other protected wildlife and plant species.
In conclusion, the presence of wolves will destroy long years of consistent management of the forests and large wildlife species in the Park, along with the wealth of carefully compiled scientific data. In the light of the arguments expressed here, we want the Park to stay free of wolves, which have been illegally and maliciously introduced into the Park. We also intend to provide the general public with more complete information than has been the case up to now: currently available information is generally biased towards the wolf, to the detriment of biodiversity.

Hoenderloo, 25 March 2022