

The conflicts over wolves in Norway: How the predator became a symbol of rural demise



Ketil Skogen

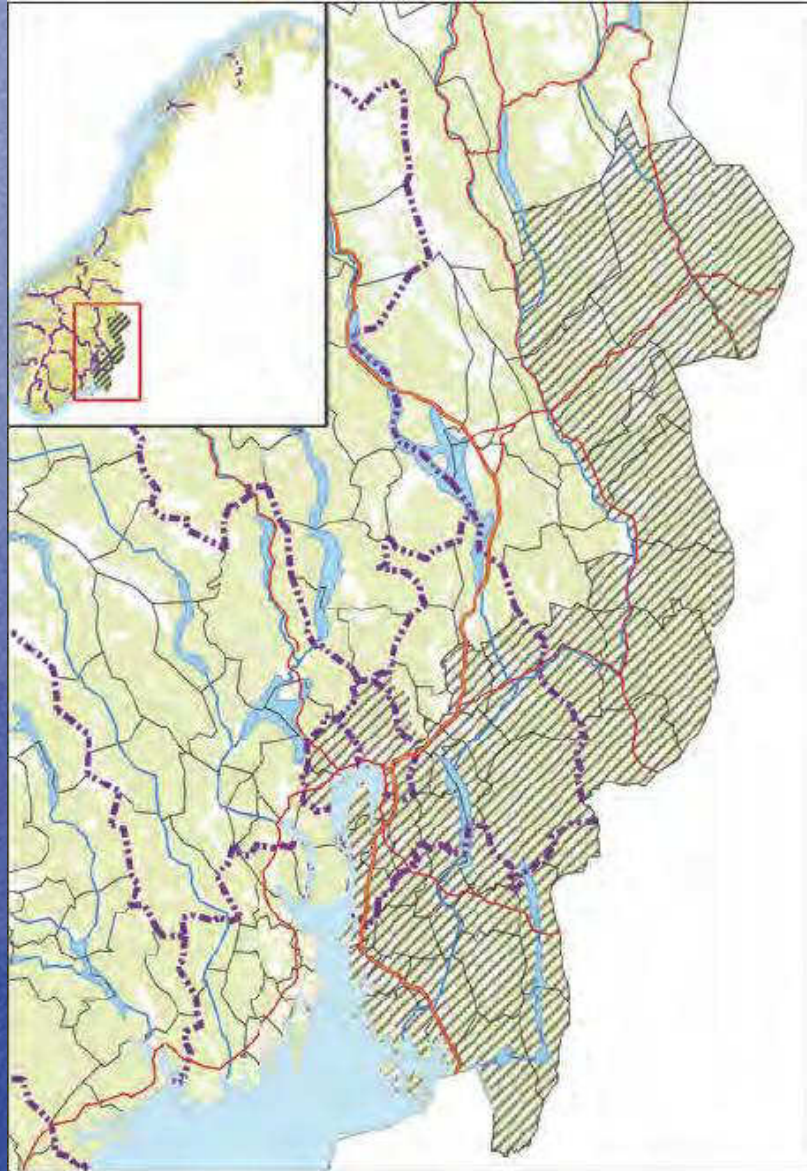
Wolf recovery in Scandinavia

- The Scandinavian wolf population is on a road to recovery due to strict protection.
- Wolves have reappeared in areas where they have been absent for as much 100 years, and there is a lot of conflict.
- The wolves have killed livestock and hunting dogs and may cause fear among local residents who are not used to having large predators around.
- But our sociological research since 1999 has shown that these conflicts are more complex than they may seem.

The Norwegian wolf areas

- Our study sites are scattered along the southern part of the border with Sweden, where the Norwegian part of the Scandinavian wolf population is found.
- Unlike many areas where large carnivores cause conflict, this is partly a forest industry region with limited agriculture, and partly agricultural areas without much livestock.
- Despite the wolves indisputable impact on the limited livestock production, this is certainly not the main driver of conflict here.

Current wolf
management
zone



Conflicts over wolves are *social* conflicts

- Conflicts occur in areas with minimal material damage, and people who oppose wolf protection are often much angrier with their human adversaries than with the animals.
- Conflicts reach beyond controversies over management practices: they are about wider processes of social change perceived as threatening by many people in rural areas.

Traditional land use and social change

- Anti-wolf attitudes predominantly prevail among people who are firmly rooted in traditional land use practices and in a rural working-class culture. These attitudes are not always – or even predominantly – related to adverse material effects of wolf presence.
- Rather, wolf protection is perceived as a potent expression of a changing land use regime, seen as threatening rural economic activities and – importantly – traditional rural lifestyles.

- The back-curtain is rural economic decline, leading to depopulation and dismantling of private and public services.
- Importantly, this happens in a time when a conservation ethos has achieved a dominant position in the public discourse, and increasingly manifests itself in practical land management: restrictions on land use, new protected areas, and protection of species previously persecuted.

- Some social groups interpret these changes in the cultural valuation of nature (of which wolf protection is one expression) as driving forces behind the decline in resource industries (i.e. the economic foundation for rural communities), and as threats to a traditional rural lifestyle that rests on harvesting resources.
- Whether this is objectively true or not, is not the issue here. The point is that fighting wolf protection may be understood as defending the rural economy and rural culture against harmful outside forces.

“Utmark” and “villmark”

- A fundamental question here is whether the forests of south-eastern Norway are a landscape where humans should continue a sustainable interaction with nature that has been going on for centuries,
- ...or whether these forests should become a wilderness again.
- In the Norwegian language, we have two words that may appear similar, but actually mean very different things. “Utmark” emphasizes the use value of the land and its cultural heritage, whereas “villmark” emphasizes the wildness, i.e. the pristine qualities of the land.

How to think about a landscape and its people

- A “landscape” is something more than a piece of land with certain features.
- Any piece of land may be very different *landscapes* to different people.
- How the land is used now, and has been used in the past, is a crucial element in how we understand and value it.
- How we understand the landscape has implications for what it should contain: Those who value the production landscape may see no room for wolves, even if others see the landscape as “wild”.













- Controversies over landscape valuation reflect social change that strongly affects rural areas.
- This has to do with economic decline coupled with urban expansion (physically and culturally).
- But these controversies also play out *within* rural communities, reflecting changing demographics and a shifting economic base.
- We might say that the wolves were unlucky to get tangled up in conflicts that were there before them.

No coincidence

- But it was certainly no accident that the wolves returned when they did.
- Precisely the changes in valuation of nature that troubles many rural residents, paved the way for large predators.

Conclusion

- While it is certainly important to minimize practical problems caused by wolves, e.g. to farmers and hunters, eliminating conflicts over wolves and other large carnivores is not realistic.
- This means that we should not be too disappointed even if we do not accomplish it.
- That may leave us with the energy to accomplish what *is* realistic. And there are many things we can do to take *some* of the edges off the conflict.