

Wolves and Humans in Croatia – Two Stories

by Josip Kusak

Wolves and humans is a topic we cover regularly in *Wolf Print*, and below are two stories that highlight the reactions of villagers in Croatia who came into close contact with wild wolves in their region. These two incidents have also had a profound effect on Josip Kusak, the biologist called on to try and help rescue the wolves. Without wishing to spoil the stories, the final outcomes are not positive for the individual wolves, but the attitudes of the local people surely must provide us with some hope for the future survival of the wolf as a species.

Editor

Adam and Eva

One of the regular 'Large Carnivores' committee meetings was taking place last February, when my mobile started to vibrate. An unknown voice told me that a wolf had been captured alive and was being



Female wolf Eva under surgical treatment in the veterinary ambulance in Imotski on 26 February 2005. Photo: J. Kusak



FWound on female wolf Eva under surgical treatment in the veterinary ambulance in Imotski on 26 February 2005. Photos: J. Kusak



Releasing the wolf Eva after surgical treatment and marking with GPS-VHF collar. Photo: Braco Ćosić

held in a village called Sebišine, near Imotski town in Dalmatia. A quick check by the local Damage Inspector, Damir Bosiljevac, confirmed the news.

Imotski is in the southern part of the wolf range in Croatia, and is a 6 hour drive to get there. The next morning, loaded with all the equipment needed for tranquilizing and processing a wolf, and accompanied by a student, Vedran Slijepčević I was on my way to the Imotski area.

We arrived at Sebišine in the early afternoon, to a crowd of curious locals, several journalists, and even a reporter from national television. It was quickly established that local resident, Adam Bakavić, had found a female wolf caught in a poacher's snare set for wild boars near the village three days previously.

The wolf had become quite a celebrity in the area and had been visited by hundreds of locals since being captured. When we arrived she was sitting in a corner opposite the barn door, and appeared very stressed. We quickly darted her and ten minutes later she was fast asleep, now blissfully unaware of the crowd around her.

The wolf was a young female in her second year of life. The steel cable had caught her around the abdomen and cut through her skin and muscles while she was struggling in the trap. The wounds were very severe and had already become infected.

Her new found celebrity status led to her being followed by journalists while she was being transported to the local

veterinary ambulance where her wounds were surgically treated and sewn up.

The whole event was transmitted live on the local radio, and while putting the stitches in I had to explain, on air, what her chances of survival were. People later phoned in proposing a name for the wolf, and Eva was chosen, because the name of the man who freed her from the trap was Adam.

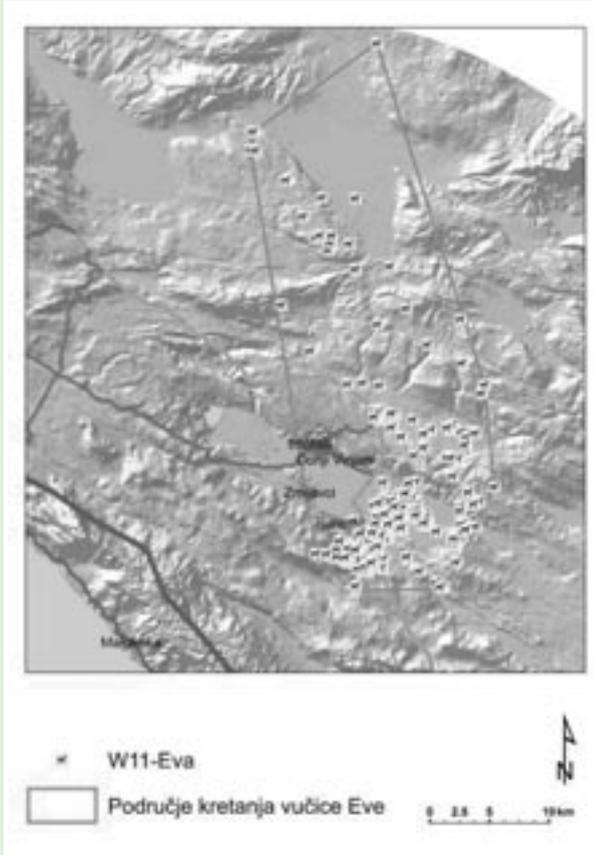
I fitted Eva with a GPS-VHF collar and released her back into the wild the same evening. Considering the severity of the wound, I did not give her more than a 50/50 chance for survival. What I didn't know at that time was that Eva would have a rich food source at a slaughter dump in the vicinity. She joined the rest of her pack, and we confirmed this with the howling of 3-5 wolves from the direction of the VHF signal.

The pack was staying in the Imotski area most of the time, resting in the dense chaparral during the day, and descending to the open fields of the "Imotsko polje" valley at night. The border between Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina is in the middle of valley and was established in the Middle Ages, during the Turkish invasion, and is the point which a canon would reach by it shooting from the highest tower toward the southeast.

Eva and her pack crossed this border many times, staying in both countries (47.1% in Croatia and 52.9% in Bosnia and Herzegovina). They were visiting the slaughter dump and also the only herd of goats in a village. Damir Bosiljevac knew the



Female wolf Eva at the release site on 26 February 2005. Photo: Photo J. Kusak



Locations (541) and range (640 km²) in Croatia and B&H of female wolf EVA during 157 days of tracking in 2005.

When wolves reappeared in Dalmatia some 10-15 years ago, many people believed these were captive wolves brought by conservationists in helicopters at night. My explanations about the great ability of wolves to disperse into new areas were worthless until those who saw a map of Eva's wanderings started to believe me.

Adam Bakavić is a car mechanic, but his mother keeps a small flock of sheep. The whole village is surrounded by dense shrubs of Mediterranean oak and hornbeam, with patches of small meadows interspersed within this forest. One Sunday morning, when the sheep were grazing on a meadow only 50m from the house, a wolf attack happened. Four sheep were killed, and two lambs were missing. The data from the collar was clear: Eva had been there that morning. Some of the villagers were laughing behind Adam's back, but he said that a wolf is a wolf, it does what wolves do, and it is

During the summer a pack started to kill the dogs in the surrounding villages. This was mainly on the Bosnia and Herzegovina side of the border and it was usually hunting dogs that were killed. The explanation that wolves are protective, and that they see dogs as intruding wolves and were probably defending pups, did not help. The local hunters were angry. On 3 August 2005, at around 3.30 am, Eva approached the houses in the village of Vinjani, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, probably to settle a dispute with one of the dogs. This time a man with a gun was waiting for her and shot her. Wolves in Bosnia and Herzegovina are not protected and their hunting is legal. Adam went to Vinjani and collected the collar and Eva's body which was without a head. The hunter had decided to keep this as a legal trophy.

Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina have long had a common border and share the same wolf populations, but the status of wolves in the two countries is different. Many people now feel it would be beneficial to coordinate the legal status and management of all large carnivores and other wildlife according to international conventions.

Eva was tracked for a total of 157 days, and was located a total of 541 times. She was located 255 times (47.1%) in Croatia and 286 times (52.9%) in neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina. In Croatia she used the small area around Imotski, whilst in Bosnia and Herzegovina she travelled up to 80 km inland, reaching Tomislavgrad, before returning back to the border area where she spent most of the time. The total area she used was 640 km², which is three times the average size of wolf pack territory documented so far in Croatia. I can only assume that Eva walked at least part of that time alone, and was getting ready to leave the pack and look for potential new territory.

owner well as he was often called on to examine cases of wolf attacks on that herd.

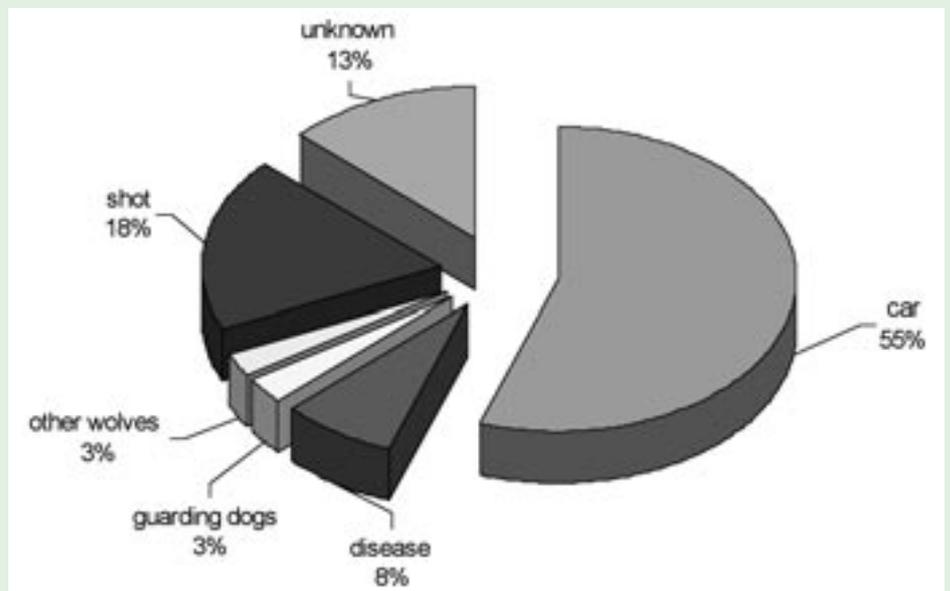
Eva's story was broadcast on Croatia's national news network on four occasions during the Sunday evening news bulletins, with new information each week about Eva was faring. She became famous, and it was revealed that at on one occasion she made an excursion 80 km into Bosnia and Herzegovina before returning 10 days later.

up to us to be aware of this and to protect our sheep. On television he said that the important thing was that Eva was OK. Many people saw this, but one woman reacted. She was a dentist, living in the capital, Zagreb. She called Adam and donated twice as many sheep as he had lost to the wolves. This was shown on television again, and the neighbours did not laugh any more.

Attempt to rescue a wolf named Mane (WCRO 67) from Mazin

Lika is situated between the mountains of Velebit and Plješivica on the Croatian border with Bosnia and Herzegovina. The size of the area is roughly equivalent to the size of Yellowstone National park. The mountains and hills in that region are all covered with forest, with several large open valleys between them. The name Lika comes from the ancient Greek word Lycaion, which means wolf, and which determines the area as a "country of wolves". Traditional foods in this region are sheep cheese and lamb meat, and it has always been as much sheep country as wolf country.

In the past, those who were able to kill a wolf were admired among other villagers,



Causes of known wolf mortality in Croatia during the period from 2002 to 2005.



Photo: Braco Ćosić



Photo: Braco Ćosić



Josip Kusak tranquilized a wounded wolf near village Mazin in Lika at 01.09.2005 20:00. It was an adult male wolf, 37kg. Locals were rather interested in saving the animal, they even gave it a name "Mane", after the village where it was found. Photos: J. Kusak

who would stuff the killed wolf with straw, put a pole through its body, and carry it from village to village, singing traditional songs about the event of killing a wolf, and collecting rewards (usually food) for doing a good deed for the community. Nowadays, although wolves are protected, they are still being illegally shot. But, is this going to change?

On 1 September 2005, something very interesting happened. Locals from the village of Mazin in central Lika found a wounded wolf. Instead of killing it, they called a local veterinarian who in turn called us. Describing the situation, they explained how the wolf had somehow crawled close to Mazin and entered a fenced orchard yard behind one of the houses and could not move any more. The first information we received suggested that the injuries resulted from a collision with a car. However, soon afterwards, local Damage Inspector, Igor Hak, who is also a Large Carnivore Emergency Team member from this area, together with regional coordinator for wolf conservation program, Dragan Sarić, arrived at the village. After a brief consultation we decided to try to save the wounded wolf and try to return him to the wild. Before I could go to Lika, I had to collect a Mongolian student, Enkhsaikhan Namtar, who was arriving from Germany at the train station later that afternoon. As we were going to spend the next month together doing field work, I asked him for an easier nickname, and he proposed that

Saikhanaa would serve this purpose. Soon after the introductions and explanations, we were both in my small field car, with a large cage behind us upon which we fixed Saikhanaa's two backpacks. It was already dark when we arrived at Mazin. The wolf was still there, being "guarded" by a dozen curious locals, including women and children. The wolf was barely able to lift its head, and did not look in good shape. However, the villagers were keen that the poor animal should be taken to the Veterinary faculty and medically treated. They named him Mane.

Later that evening we brought Mane back to the Veterinary faculty in Zagreb. He was an adult male, approximately 3 to 4 years old, and weighing 37 kg.

The following morning, the surgical team from the Clinic for Surgery, Orthopaedics and Ophthalmology started the treatment. The X-ray taken showed a bone fracture in the right hind leg which had been caused by a gun shot. It was decided to perform surgery, but unfortunately, during the treatment the wounds were found to be too serious to treat, and were deeply infected and already invaded by maggots. The veterinary surgeons felt that Mane did not have much chance of survival, and that treatment would just prolong his suffering. In agreement with representatives from the State Institute for Nature Protection, it was decided to euthanize the animal.

As Mane had been illegally shot, the case was reported to the nature conservation inspection of the Ministry of Culture.



The X-ray taken showed the bone fracture in the right back leg caused by a shot and it was decided to perform a surgery. Unfortunately, during the treatment the wounds were found to be too serious to cure, deeply infected and invaded by maggots. Photos: J. Kusak



Josip Kusak tranquilized a wounded wolf near village Mazin in Lika at 01.09.2005 20:00. It was an adult male wolf, 37kg. Locals were rather interested in saving the animal, they even gave it a name "Mane", after the village where it was found. Photos: J. Kusak

There were 38 wolf deaths reported in Croatia between 28 January 2002 and 24 December 2005. The main cause of known wolf mortality was traffic (55%), followed by illegal shooting (18%) and diseases (rabies, leishmaniasis). We even documented a case when a wolf was killed by livestock guarding dogs, and by other wolves as well.

We are aware that these data are biased because illegal shooting usually is not reported, and other mortality cases unrelated to humans might not be found. This mortality rate is not threatening the population, which has actually increased during the last five years to about 200, with their range also increasing.

I have been involved in the wolf conservation program since the very beginning in 1993 and 1994 – a year of wolf in Croatia, which resulted in legal protection in 1995. We are used to thinking about population numbers and trends, but having had the opportunity to save individual animals has given me a different and much more personal perspective about the whole idea of saving them.

As well as dealing with the cases of Eva and Mane, I have also been called on to tranquilise and release back to the forest two orphaned lynx kittens and one poacher-snared young bear.

Interestingly, cases where locals have found captured or wounded wolves and lynx and did not kill them, but instead called authorities for help, have never before been documented. We believe this is another "side effect" of the whole conservation program and efforts, where locals recognized there is somebody who is helping those animals, either on an individual basis or on a population level.