

Pitch for June 3rd WAB Congres

First of all, let me introduce myself. My name is Annet Muller-ter Veen. I hold a Bachelor's degree in Education, a Bachelor's degree in Psychology, and a Master of Science in Healthy Ageing and Healthy Society. From this position, I am an advisor to the foundation *Wij(s) met Wolven* and to the international Association Wolfstop Europe. The foundation *Wij(s) met wolven* is established as a voice for residents of the Netherlands who, for various reasons, are concerned about the presence of wolves and the growing number of wolves in our small country. On their behalf, I conducted two surveys with over 3,000 respondents in the Netherlands regarding the concerns people have about wolves in their environment.

On the map of Europe, the Netherlands occupies only a tiny space. In this small country live over 18 million people. Our country has no wilderness, only cultivated nature in an highly modified and urbanized environment. That cultivated nature consists of fragmented areas. The largest area is the Veluwe, which is filled with villages and towns and crisscrossed by highways and railways. In the densely populated urban area of the province of Utrecht, there is a national park of about 100 km², also intersected by highways and railway lines. In the north of the Netherlands, there are two nature parks of 61 and 37 km². Many people live and work within the boundaries of the national parks I just mentioned. And in all of these areas are packs of wolves present. Wolves that have rapidly multiplied over just a few years. In addition, young wolves from Germany continue to enter our country in search of their own territory.

Due to the lack of untouched nature and a population density of 533 people per km², it is impossible for wolves in the Netherlands to avoid contact with human activity. These natural areas, which are also used for recreation, attract millions of visitors each year. As a result, there is a high chance that wolves become habituated to people and that they will lose their natural fear. They appear more and more frequently near humans. Not only that—last year, a five-year-old child was bitten while playing in the forest, and during another event parents saw how a wolf came out of the bushes, knocked over their two-year-old daughter, and stood on her chest. And recently, there were two separate biting incidents—one in the Veluwe and one in Utrecht—in which women were bitten in the upper leg. And although it is normal behavior for wolves to attack dogs, it is not normal for this to happen while the dogs are on a short leash or are close to people. Nevertheless, this has occurred several times at different locations in our country.

When we talk about wolves and emotions, it goes beyond primary feelings. It's not just about liking or fearing wolves. No—this is about how the presence of wolves in working- and living environment influences the daily life of people. I will explain what the thousands of people I represent told us.

In the media and by politicians, livestock farmers who have many wolf victims among their animals are often not taken seriously. Their suffering is dismissed with the argument that their animals will eventually end up at the slaughterhouse anyway. These people experience this as hurtful, and it makes them angry and sad.

But beyond that, there are thousands of individuals who maintain grazing animals as a recreational pursuit. These animals have names and are considered part of the family. These people feel powerless to protect their animals from wolves. Wolves that they know attacked their neighbor's animals just last week—despite having wolf-proof fencing. They feel that they are failing in their care for their animals because they must keep them in stables far more than they would like, rather than in the pasture where they belong.

Entrepreneurs have come to us. For example: After the five-year-old girl was bitten, areas around their restaurants or campsites had to be closed off for months during peak season for safety reasons. They lost months of income for their families. This causes them a great amount of stress, and they worry about what will happen in the future as the wolf population grows and the chance for incidents increases.

Many entrepreneurs with animal-related businesses have stopped operating because they can no longer keep their animals in a way that aligns with their business philosophy.

Many people experience fear, and many live under chronic stress. There is fear for the safety of their animals, but also fear of walking, cycling, and recreating in wolf territory. Children are afraid to bike to school. There is also fear of being outdoors in the dark in wolf areas. Then there are vulnerable people, such as the blind, who no longer dare to move around their own neighborhood with their guide dogs because multiple dogs have been attacked by wolves. This is making them more dependent on help from others. Chronic stress leads to various health problems, such as heart issues, depression, and emotional trauma.

Veterinarians told me, they often feel uneasy answering the phone in the morning, knowing they will once again have to treat sheep that have been attacked and seriously injured and still alive. There are periods when they face such horror scenes every morning for weeks, that they report nightmares, sleeplessness, chronic stress, and PTSD symptoms as a result.

Several doctors and psychologists who have been in contact with the Wij(s) met wolven foundation report seeing a growing number of patients with health complaints related to chronic stress due to concerns about wolves in their living or working environments, including heart problems, depression, and PTSD.

Many people are angry. Angry because they feel like that their concerns are not taken seriously, and because they have the idea that everything in the Netherlands seems focused on “getting used to the wolves,” while their lives are being turned upside down because of the presence of wolves in their environment. For them, this creates a feeling of powerlessness, especially because media reports and information from various organizations often don’t match what people are actually experiencing. This leads to increasing misunderstanding towards each other, which affects society as a whole. Incidents have also shown that emergency services do not respond adequately and that emergency workers are hesitant to act when wolves are involved in an incident. This is largely due to the fact that people fear the legal consequences of their actions during an emergency.

People are also hurt when accused of hating wolves. That accusation is not fair. Most of these people are animal lovers and they are deeply saddened that over 50 wolves have already died in traffic accidents in our country. They experience an inner conflict—they feel stressed about the presence of wolves and feel relief when there are less, but also feel deep sorrow over the fate that befalls so many wolves.

Because the situation in the Netherlands is, in my view, very complex, I call on you as scientists to take this information seriously. A unique situation has occurred in the Netherlands: so many wolves are adapting to life in an highly modified and urbanized environment with a high chance on becoming habituated to humans. The concerns and experiences people have are not based on theory or overstated stories, but on what is actually happening in their immediate surroundings. During the winter and the late summer, there are indeed almost every day multiple wolf attacks on livestock, and incidents involving people and children are also really increasing since last year.

You are probably all familiar with the four factors that increase the risk of human attacks, as outlined in the report *The Fear of Wolves* by the Norwegian scientist John Linnell. For the Netherlands, two of these four factors apply, namely habituation and a highly modified environment.

This reality in the Netherlands leads me to formally call out to you as scientists: I challenge you to take on an important topic for scientific research—one that has mostly been avoided until now. I would like to see scientific research conducted on this unique situation with wolves in the Netherlands, and the effect this has on public health in the long term.

Who among you will take on this challenge?