

## Foreword

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This book is the result of the research project 'The Return of the wolf to Germany: mapping extraordinary affective encounters' (October 2019–October 2022), funded by the initiative 'Originalitätsverdacht? Neue Optionen für die Geistes- und Kulturwissenschaften' of the Volkswagen Foundation, at the Department of Cultural Studies of the University of Koblenz. The initiative aimed to develop innovative research ideas and encourage original and unconventional thinking. I leave it to the reader to decide whether I have produced something original. I enjoyed embarking again on wolf issues after a gap of almost twenty years. As an environmental anthropologist with a focus on human-animal relations, I had started with wolves, ventured astray, and only returned to them many years later.

My studies in social/cultural anthropology, religious studies and environmental sciences at the University of Heidelberg culminated in a master's thesis on human-wolf conflicts in Mongolia. Based on short-term ethnographic fieldwork with Mongolian herders in Tuva, I problematised the prevailing view of wolf biologists working in the area at the time, who saw wolves only as enemies of local herders and a threat to herding and thus to economic livelihoods. While this cultural image of the wolf certainly existed among the Tuva, it turned out to be far more complex and ambiguous. Wolves hunted and killed livestock (or, very rarely, herders themselves); herders hunted and killed wolves. But wolves were also sacred animals, messengers from the sky god, respected and admired for their cunning, endurance and bravery. Wolves living in the neighbourhood were particularly well regarded, not unlike their human neighbours, with whom they formed reciprocal social relationships. The relationship between the Tuva and the wolves thus went far beyond a simple economic rela-

tionship and included social and, above all, religious dimensions that made the wolves complex enemies.<sup>1</sup>

Subsequent projects focused on various human-environment relationships—a new religious movement that sees itself as a nature religion, the embodied experiential knowledge in English horticulture—before beginning a long-term project in 2015 on hunting in Germany as a form of human-animal relationship. Conceived as a sensory ethnography, I have since been investigating the sensory training of hunters, their perception of the landscape as a hunting landscape, how their sensory practices are guided by the lives and actions of wild animals, and how the two dominant paradigms in hunting (traditional and ecological) shape their relationships with animals and the environment in general.

Since wolves had also returned to Germany several years before I started my hunting project, I had the opportunity to encounter wolves again, at least thematically. Traditionally, wolves belong to the category of so-called predatory game for hunters, and thus actually also to huntable game, to which hunters used to have privileged access but no longer do, since wolves are now under protection and (except in Saxony and Lower Saxony) are legally no longer game. No wonder, then, that the wolf is a constant topic of discussion among hunters; this was reason enough for me to get on the trail of wolves in Germany and to develop a new research project that would make use of my experience with hunters and wolves. The current wolf project can therefore be seen as part of my many years of research into human-wildlife relationships.

Since autumn 2020, my research on wolves and hunting has continued in a new collaborative and international project funded by the European Research Council (ERC). As a senior researcher, I am working on a project titled, 'Veterinarization of Europe? Hunting for Wild Boar Futures in the Time of African Swine Fever' (BOAR),<sup>2</sup> led by Ludek Broz, at the Department of Ecological Anthropology of the Institute of Ethnology at the Czech Academy of Sciences. Until 2026, I am investigating the relationship between hunters and wildlife (wild boar in particular) in the light of recent changes in hunting practices and technologies in relation to African Swine Fever (ASF), which broke out in eastern Germany in autumn 2020 and has been feared for years. As the ASF area is

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1 Gieser, Thorsten: 'Beyond Natural Enemies: Wolves and Nomads in Mongolia', in: Heyer, Marlis/Hose, Susanne (eds.), *Encounters with wolves: dynamics and futures*, Bautzen: Sorbisches Institut 2020, pp. 50–62.

2 <https://www.wildboar.cz/> (accessed: 30.03.2024).

also wolf territory, and as the life of wild boar on the ground takes place in the area of tension between human and wolf hunters, wolves will therefore remain part of my research on human-wildlife relations in Germany for several years to come.

At the same time, I will focus on developing new theoretical and methodological approaches to human-wolf encounters in the coming years (until 2027) as a collaborator in the research project ‘Sensory Acts: More Than Human Communication in the Circumpolar North’ (SACTS),<sup>3</sup> funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), at the University of Regina in Canada and led by Alex Oehler.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the people who have contributed to the success of this book. My special thanks go to all those who talked to me about wolves during my research and helped me to better understand the complex relationship between humans and wolves. Among those I would like to (and may) mention by name are: Willi Faber for many monitoring excursions in the Westerwald and for his insights into wolf management in Rhineland-Palatinate and the work of NABU; Frank Wörner for his support and his immense knowledge of wolves in the Westerwald and his insights into the work of the Society for the Protection and Conservation of Wolves; Frank Faß for making me feel so welcome at the Wolf Centre in Dörverden and giving me several days of his time; the team of the LUPUS Institute for Wolf Monitoring and Research, especially Gesa Kluth for many interesting coffee talks and support over the years, and Lea Wirk (with sniffer dog Molly) for what felt like hundreds of kilometres of monitoring excursions in Lusatia, where our conversation never ran out and from whom I was able to learn a lot about wolf management in Saxony; the team of the hotel Zum Hammer in Neustadt/Spreetal, who have hosted me so well over the years that the Hammer and Neustadt have almost become my second home; Stephan Kaasche—simply because you can’t get around the best local nature guide if you want to do research on wolves in Lusatia; Joscha Grolms and Laura Gärtner from the wilderness school WildnisWissen, who trained me in the art of tracking for a year and taught me to distinguish wolf tracks from dog tracks (roughly, anyway); Julian Sandrini from the Koordinationszentrum Luchs und Wolf in Rhineland-Palatinate for his support; Garry Marvin and Alex Oehler for their valuable feedback on my book manuscript; the whole BOAR team in Prague for many stimulating discussions on human-animal relations over the past

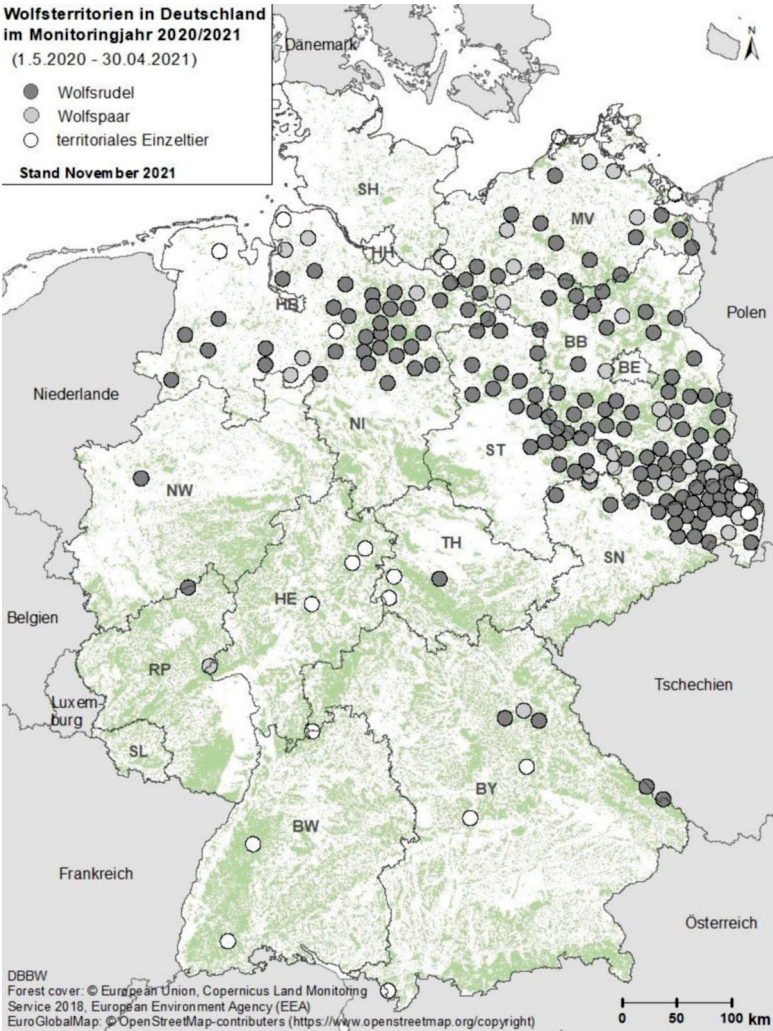
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3 <http://www.sensoryacts.ca/> (accessed: 30.03.2024).

years; Michaela Fenske, Marlis Heyer, and Irina Arnold from the Würzburg DFG project ‘Die Rückkehr der Wölfe: Cultural Anthropological Studies on the Process of Wolf Management in the Federal Republic of Germany’ for the good exchange and cooperation on several publications; Bernhard Tschofen, Elisa Frank, and Nico Heinzer from the Zurich SNF project ‘Wolves—Knowledge and Practice: Ethnographies on the Return of Wolves in Switzerland’ for the stimulating exchange on wolf issues; I also had the opportunity to discuss the German version of my book with the Faculty of Applied Ecology at the Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences at Evenstad. I am grateful to John Linnell, Barbara Zimmermann, Petra Kaczensky, and all the other ecologists there for their insights. At Evenstad, I also profited from conversations and a long walk in the snow with Olve Krange. His sharp sociological mind helped me to see the strengths and weaknesses of my arguments. I presented a paper at the Wolves across borders Conference in Sweden in 2023, based on the German version of Chapter 2 of this book. The many conversations with wolf researchers from all over the world helped me refine the English version of this current book. I am grateful to Andreas Ackermann for the freedom he gives me in Koblenz to pursue my research interests away from teaching. Without the Volkswagen foundation this project would have been impossible, and their flexibility and support were outstanding. My editors Ute Maack (for the German version of this book) and Patty McGray (for the English version) have made this book more readable with their special feel for language. Finally, I would like to thank Erica von Essen, my intellectual sparring partner, who has been with me through the ups and downs of writing this book and who has been a constant source of inspiration.



Figure 1: Wolf territories in Germany in the monitoring year 2020–21



Source: Federal Documentation and Advisory Centre on the Wolf (DBBW)