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The Iberian wolf (Canis lupus signatus). Credit: Shutterstock.

The Iberian Wolf: Protected in Portugal, Hunttable in Spain — Now One Law and One Future

Following a joint webinar on 24 July 2026, Green Impact ETS, Rewilding Portugal and Fondo para la Protección del Lobo Ibérico renew their call for Portugal and Spain to establish a binational structure for the Iberian wolf, modelled on the successful cross-border cooperation on the Iberian lynx.

A wolf strictly protected in Portugal can be legally killed within hours of crossing into Spain. That is the stark reality facing the Iberian wolf (*Canis lupus signatus*), a single shared population managed under two fundamentally different legal regimes, according to conservation organisations Green Impact ETS (Italy), Rewilding Portugal and Fondo para la Protección del Lobo Ibérico (Spain). The three organisations issued this call after a webinar held on 24 July 2026, “A Future for the Iberian Wolves,” hosted by WolfWatch Europe and moderated by Zoltán Kun of the Great Lakes Association (HU).

Divergent legal regimes for a single population

Portugal has strictly protected the wolf nationwide since 1988, six years before EU law required it, with no legal culling permitted. Spain protected wolves only south of the Douro river until 2021, when a state order extended protection across the whole country. In March 2025, however, Spain’s Law 1/2025 — a food waste law used as the legislative vehicle — removed wolves north of the Douro from the list of protected species. Four Spanish regions have since authorised lethal control programmes: Cantabria (a quota of 80 wolves through December 2026), Asturias (51 authorised, 43 killed in 2025), Galicia (wolves subject to hunting orders with no fixed quota) and La Rioja (wolves may be hunted and used as trophies).

Galicia and Castilla y León, both of which share wolf populations with Portugal, are of particular concern: wolves born under strict protection in northern Portugal routinely disperse across the border, where they can be legally hunted.

Protection alone has not been enough

Despite nearly four decades of full legal protection, Portugal’s wolf population remains in unfavourable conservation status. Around 58 packs are currently confirmed, but the species’ area of distribution has contracted by an estimated 20% since the last national census, twenty years ago, and now covers only about

30% of its historical range. Poaching, habitat fragmentation, declining wild prey and slow livestock-compensation schemes continue to undermine recovery.

In Spain, the organisations warn that the official census methodology is unreliable and subject to political influence: under Law 1/2025, the conservation status report submitted to the EU is determined by a vote among regional governments rather than by independent scientific assessment. The most recent vote declared “favourable” conservation status despite only 333 confirmed packs against a scientifically recommended threshold of 500. Illegal killing remains a serious and largely unaddressed problem on both sides of the border: an estimated 500–700 wolves are killed illegally each year in Spain, while Portugal recorded 133 official wolf deaths between 1995 and 2023 from a population of fewer than 300 — a figure widely considered an undercount given weak enforcement against wildlife crime.

A funded plan, not yet a funded reality

Portugal’s new ten-year recovery programme, Programa Alcateia (2025–2035), sets out 45 measures across prevention, monitoring and coexistence with an indicative budget of €15 million, and already includes a binational coordination component. To date, however, only €3 million has been secured, leaving €12 million uncommitted. The organisations argue that EU co-financing, particularly through the 2028–2034 Multiannual Financial Framework, is essential to close this gap.

The downlisting itself lacks scientific grounding

The three organisations stress that the underlying EU decision to downlist the wolf is, in their view, contested precisely on scientific grounds, not only on implementation. Only two years before the Commission proposed downlisting, the EU’s own position at the Bern Convention was that “lowering the protection status of all wolf populations is not justified from a scientific and conservation point of view” — based on the same underlying data later cited to support the reverse conclusion. The Large Carnivore Initiative for Europe (LCIE), the specialist group of the IUCN Species Survival Commission, has formally described the downlisting proposal as “premature and faulty,” noting that six of the EU’s seven biogeographical wolf regions, and six of nine IUCN-monitored transboundary populations, are still classified as unfavourable or vulnerable. Peer-reviewed analysis published in *Conservation Letters* has likewise characterised the Bern Convention Standing Committee’s December 2024 decision as “entirely political and not based on scientific evidence.” Writing in *Science* in October 2025, Randi et al. argued that the downlisting was not supported by the underlying population data and called for strict protection to be restored across Europe. Green Impact ETS’s own litigation before the EU General Court (Cases T-634/24 and T-563/25) challenges the downlisting on these same grounds.

A legal basis for cross-border cooperation already exists

There is currently no EU legal mechanism obliging Portugal and Spain to coordinate management of their shared wolf population, and no bilateral cooperation instrument exists between the two countries on this issue. The organisations point to two recent rulings that open the door to closer cooperation: the Court of Justice of the EU’s 2024 ruling on Estonian wolves (Case C-629/23), which established that conservation status must be assessed at the level of a population’s natural range rather than within national borders, and a ruling of Spain’s Supreme Court of 12 February 2026, which similarly held that wolf populations must be counted within their natural range rather than locally.

A precedent for effective transboundary cooperation already exists for another shared Iberian carnivore, the Iberian lynx: a joint working group co-coordinated by Spain’s environment ministry and Portugal’s ICNF, a single bilaterally adopted conservation strategy, one shared annual census using harmonised methodology, and over three decades of continuous EU funding through successive LIFE projects.

The organisations’ call to action

Green Impact ETS, Rewilding Portugal and Fondo para la Protección del Lobo Ibérico are calling on the governments of Portugal and Spain, and on the European Commission, to:

- Establish a binational Portugal–Spain structure for the Iberian wolf, co-coordinated by ICNF and Spain’s environment ministry on an equal footing with the autonomous communities, producing a joint conservation strategy and a single shared annual census;

- Ensure coordinated transposition of Directive (EU) 2025/1237 by January 2027, with both countries maintaining or restoring the level of protection needed to achieve favourable conservation status across the shared population;
- Secure ring-fenced, multi-annual EU funding under the 2028–2034 Multiannual Financial Framework for joint monitoring, shared data and cross-border coexistence measures; and
- Fully fund and implement Programa Alcateia, including its binational coordination component, matching Portugal’s national commitment with EU co-financing.

Quotes

“The Iberian wolf is one population living in two countries. Its legal status cannot depend on which side of an administrative line it happens to be standing on. We already have a working model for this in the Iberian lynx — what is missing for the wolf is the political will to apply it.”

— Gaia Angelini, President, Green Impact ETS

“Portugal has upheld strict protection for the wolf since 1988, yet the population remains unfavourable. Legal protection is necessary, but it is not sufficient without funding, enforcement and, critically, cooperation with Spain on the other side of a border that the wolves themselves do not recognise.”

— Marta Cálix, Head of Ecological Restoration, Rewilding Portugal

“The way Spain’s current conservation status assessment is produced — by a vote among regional governments rather than by science — illustrates exactly why an independent, harmonised, cross-border approach is needed. Recent case law gives us the legal grounds to build one.”

— Sara González Merinero, Lawyer, Fondo para la Protección del Lobo Ibérico

About the organisations

Green Impact ETS is an Italian third-sector environmental organisation working on wolf and large carnivore conservation and EU nature law, and coordinates WolfWatch Europe, a coordination platform connecting around 100 NGOs across Europe.

Rewilding Portugal works on ecological restoration and wolf conservation in the Greater Côa Valley and beyond.

Fondo para la Protección del Lobo Ibérico is a Spanish organisation dedicated to the legal and scientific defence of the Iberian wolf.

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WolfWatch Europe: greenimpact.it/wolfwatch-europe-eng

ANNEX — FURTHER INFORMATION

- Webinar agenda – “A Future for the Iberian Wolves” (24 July 2026): <https://greenimpact.it/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/Agenda-Iberian-Wolves-3.pdf>
- Briefing – Facts and figures about the Iberian wolf (30 June 2026): <https://greenimpact.it/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/2026-30-June.-Briefing-IBERIAN-WOLF.pdf>
- WolfWatch Europe – Key takeaways from the Iberian Wolves webinar (July 2026): <https://greenimpact.it/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/Takeaways.-WOLF-WATCH-EUROPE.Iberian-Wolves.-Webinar.-July-2026.pdf>
- Spain – Current legal framework and next steps toward strict protection of the Iberian wolf: <https://greenimpact.it/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/SPANISH-WOLVES-1.pdf>

- The Iberian Wolf in Portugal and the Transboundary Challenge (Rewilding Portugal presentation): https://greenimpact.it/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/IberianWolf_Webinar_Portugal_Transboundary.pdf
- Randi, E. et al., “Restore strict protection for wolves in Europe,” Science 390, 452–453 (2025): <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.aeb0660>
- LCIE (IUCN SSC Large Carnivore Initiative for Europe), “Statement on the Proposed Downlisting of the Wolf Under the Bern Convention and the EU Habitats Directive” (2024): https://lciepub.nina.no/pdf/638670498186284408_LCIE%20-%20statement%20on%20wolf%20downlisting%20proposal.pdf
- Kutal, M., Duřa, M., Haring, M. & López-Bao, J.V., “Deeply Political and Populist Decisions on Large Carnivores in Europe in Recent Times,” Conservation Letters 18, e13125 (2025): <https://doi.org/10.1111/conl.13125>

About WolfWatch Europe

Launched in February 2026 by Green Impact, [WolfWatch Europe](#) is a new initiative set up in response to the recent EU decision to downgrade the protection status of the wolf. It serves as an information gateway dedicated to wolf-related developments across Europe.

The platform provides updates on scientific research, science diplomacy, legal frameworks, litigation cases at both EU and Member State level, emerging policies, key events, economic analysis and cultural perspectives.