

WOLF WATCH EUROPE

IBERIAN WOLVES – WEBINAR JULY 2026 - Key Takeaways

- The Iberian wolf faces a critical governance mismatch: wolves strictly protected in Portugal can be legally killed after crossing into Spain (north of the Douro River), as Spain removed wolf protections in March 2025 via Law 1/2025 (a food waste law).
- Portugal has maintained strict wolf protection since 1988, but the population remains in unfavorable conservation status due to poaching, habitat fragmentation, slow compensation schemes, and insufficient funding.
- Spain's wolf census methodology is unreliable and politically influenced; official data likely overestimates wolf numbers, while the actual population may be significantly lower than the threshold for favorable conservation status (333 packs confirmed vs. 500 required).
- Illegal killing is a major unaddressed problem in both countries: an estimated 500–700 wolves are illegally killed annually in Spain; Portugal recorded 133 official wolf deaths between 1995 and 2023 from a population of under 300.
- A binational Portugal–Spain cooperation structure for the Iberian wolf, modeled on the successful Iberian lynx joint management framework, is urgently needed but currently does not exist.
- Legal challenges are ongoing in Spain against Law 1/2025, including before the Constitutional Court and regional courts, but injunctions have been difficult to obtain.

PORTUGAL

- Portugal has maintained strict wolf protection since 1988 — predating the EU Birds and Habitats Directive — with no legal culling permitted.
- Approximately 58 wolf packs are confirmed in Portugal, but the species' distribution has contracted by 20% since the last census (conducted 20 years ago) and covers only 30% of its range from 100 years ago.
- Despite decades of legal protection, the population remains in unfavorable conservation status due to ongoing poaching, habitat fragmentation, slow recovery of wild prey, and administratively slow livestock compensation schemes that erode rural tolerance.
- Portugal's new recovery program, Programme Alqueteia (approved 2025), includes 45 measures across prevention, monitoring, and coexistence, with a 10-year horizon to 2035 and an indicative budget of 15 million euros. However, only 3 million euros have been secured, leaving 12 million unfunded.
- The programme already includes a binational coordination component mentioning the need to coordinate with Spain, but implementation has not yet begun.

SPAIN

- Prior to 2021, wolves were only protected south of the Douro River. In 2021, a state order extended protection to the entire Spanish territory, accompanied by a national wolf management and coexistence strategy.
- In April 2025, Law 1/2025 — a food waste law — included provisions removing wolves north of the Douro River from the list of protected wild species. This was widely criticized as an inappropriate legislative vehicle.
- Following the change, all wolf regions except Castilla y León passed killing programs: Cantabria (quota of 80 wolves, April 2025–December 2026), Asturias (51 wolves authorized, 43 killed), Galicia (wolves included in hunting orders with no fixed quota), and La Rioja (wolves can be hunted and commercialized as trophies with no quota).

- Law 1/2025 also introduced a provision whereby the conservation status report sent to the EU is determined by a vote among regions rather than scientific assessment. The most recent vote passed a report claiming favorable conservation status, despite scientific evidence to the contrary.
- Castilla y León has not yet passed a killing program this year, likely due to caution following a 2024 European Court of Justice ruling that originated from that region.

PORTUGAL and SPAIN

- Wolf packs hold territories that straddle the Portugal–Spain border, and individuals disperse across it routinely. The "Portuguese wolf population" is an administrative, not ecological, category.
- Portugal bears the full cost of protection (enforcement, compensation, political friction) while a share of the population-level benefit leaks across the border, where Portugal has no say in what happens to those wolves.
- Galicia is a key ecological corridor; wolves born under Portuguese strict protection can be legally hunted after crossing into Galicia.
- There is currently no legal mechanism under EU law obliging cross-border regions to conduct joint censuses or coordinate management.
- However, a 2024 European Court of Justice ruling on Estonian wolves established that transboundary populations must be considered for assessments under the Habitats Directive. A 2025 Spanish Supreme Court ruling also stated that wolf populations must be counted within their natural range, not locally — opening the door for Galicia and Castilla y León to include Portuguese wolves in their censuses.
- The Iberian lynx provides a successful model: a joint working group coordinated by the Spanish Ministry and Portugal's ICNF, a single joint conservation strategy, a shared annual census with harmonized methodology, and continuous EU funding over 30 years.
- Rewilding Portugal, Fondo Para la Proteccion del Lobo Iberico, and Green Impact issued a joint press release calling for a binational Portugal–Spain structure for the wolf, including a joint strategy, shared annual census, and coordinated transposition of the EU downlisting directive.
- Portugal's national monitoring system recorded 133 dead wolves between 1995 and 2023, from a population of under 300. This is considered a significant undercount, as many illegally killed wolves are never found. Environmental crime enforcement is weak in Portugal.

In Spain, a voluntary census organization estimates 500–700 wolves are illegally killed annually, from a population of under 2,000. Illegal killing is prevalent in regions such as Pais Vasco, Navarra, Catalonia, and Castilla la Mancha. Wildlife crime is not a well-developed area of criminal law in Spain.

- Illegal killing is a major, underreported problem in both countries and a key driver of unfavorable conservation status.
- Official mortality figures are widely acknowledged to be significant underestimates.