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## **EXPERT COMMENT – Have hopes of coexistence ended as Belgium’s first wolf in 100 years is presumed dead**

When Naya arrived in Belgium in January 2018, she was the first wolf to be tracked in the country for at least 100 years. She’d been followed with a radio collar since she was a cub, so scientists knew when she left her family pack in eastern Germany to start a new life across the border. They also knew when she met another interloper, the male wolf, August, in August 2018.

Their cubs were the first Belgian-born wolves in over a century. A handful of fleeting wolf sightings in Belgium and the Netherlands in recent years led many to believe that the species is back for good in northeast Europe, reoccupying the territories they vacated after centuries of hunting. Instead, Naya is now almost certainly dead.

Naya was a bit special. Wolves will often strike out for new territory, but Naya’s was an adventurous trek west, captured by radio and camera traps. Her journey seemed the culmination of the gray wolf’s recolonisation of western Europe from old strongholds in Poland and Romania.

The wolf’s return to old European haunts is matched by the [comeback of brown bear, Eurasian lynx and wolverine](#) in other parts of central and western Europe. These species are increasingly at home outside of nature reserves, sharing the land with humans. Wolves are [expanding their range in North America](#) too, increasingly into urban areas.

But the last photos of Naya, taken by the Belgium government’s Nature and Forest Research Institute, were in May 2019. Her mate, August, has reverted to lone wolf behaviours and is no longer caching food for cubs. Government

and conservation groups [agree that Naya and her cubs are dead](#). A €30,000 reward for information has been raised, [petitions launched seeking justice against Naya's "murderer"](#) and a furious war of words has ignited between conservationists and hunters, who have been [fingered as Naya's killers](#).

From such high hopes only a year before, does Naya's death endanger the idea of modern societies living alongside large predators like wolves?

### **Who's afraid of the big bad wolf?**

There is a grim inevitability to Naya's fate. Wolves, above all predators, seem to provoke intense reactions. We either revere them as an incarnation of essential wildness, spawning hundreds of t-shirt designs – usually with added moon and a bit of howling – or they prove an irresistible target for hunters. In the latter category, wolves are an intruder, an existential affront that must be wiped out, regardless of wider public tolerance or legal protection.

The survival of large carnivores sharing our landscapes depends as much on public mood and knowledge as it does practical conservation. [A recent study](#) set out to untangle different influences on people's attitudes to wolves in Germany, where the species returned in 2000. The researchers wanted to know which information sources had the greatest impact in forming opinions about these new neighbours.

The study compared the responses from people living in an area with wolves to those from people living further afield. In the region with wolves, people held more neutral views compared with the positive responses elsewhere. People who lived alongside wolves had more knowledge about them, but were also less positive about the species if they got their information from the press or TV news. Unfortunately, that's where most people heard about the wolves.

If people got more of their information from books or films, they were more likely to have positive attitudes about wolves. Clearly, wolves like Naya need better agents – more film roles or sympathetic novels could swing public opinion in their favour.

There are only a few wolf celebrities to counter the blood-stained cliché,

notably the Jungle Book's wolf pack, a loving family, who adopt and protect Mowgli. There is also the she-wolf who suckled Romulus and Remus, the brothers who founded Rome, although Romulus later murdered his brother, so maybe his upbringing left something to be desired.

The benefits and drawbacks of wolves are widely known, or, quite often, widely assumed. Wolves can attack people and livestock, but they also create jobs and generate tourism. They can also reinvigorate landscapes by hunting the herbivores that stop trees and forests from growing. As with most things when it comes to wolves, both the [positives and negatives seem to be exaggerated](#).

The main challenge remains that wolves have a terrible branding problem; wherever wolves and people have lived side by side, their place in our folklore and faiths is malevolent and unusually rapacious. As Naya's death shows, they may be irretrievably typecast.

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