



Europe's carnivores

A SURVEY OF CHILDREN'S ATTITUDES TOWARDS
WOLVES, BEARS AND OTTERS

A WWF-UK REPORT • MARCH 2000



The WWF
Campaign
for Europe's
Carnivores

THE WWF-UK CAMPAIGN FOR EUROPE'S CARNIVORES

The plight of Europe's large carnivores has become an issue of increasing conservation concern. They continue to be persecuted by humans, and in many cases their habitats are under threat. While the precarious status of Asia's tigers is widely known, some of Europe's own top predators, such as the Iberian lynx, are in danger of quietly disappearing. Others, such as the wolf, brown bear and Eurasian lynx, face an upsurge in conflict with people as they attempt to reclaim parts of their former ranges. The WWF-UK Campaign for Europe's Carnivores aims to raise funds and awareness to support selected carnivores and ensure they have a viable future in our continent.

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DR ALISTAIR BATH

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A CHILD'S VIEW OF EUROPE'S "BEAUTIFUL BEASTS"

Throughout children's literature, large carnivores are often cast as the villains. Whether it's the wicked wolf of "Peter and the Wolf" or the cunning, grandmother-gobbling wolf of "Little Red Riding Hood", the wolf in particular suffers from a serious image problem. Misconceptions based on mythology can create lasting impressions, especially when there is a paucity of information about the real nature of Europe's top predators.

To help redress the balance, WWF-UK mounted a national "Beautiful Beasts" competition to encourage children to explore and express their feelings towards Europe's carnivores through creative writing. Their stories and poems revealed some fascinating insights into how children perceive these animals. Extracts from some of the entries appear in this report.

Foreword

FOREWORD BY DR ALISTAIR BATH, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR AT MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY, NEWFOUNDLAND, CANADA

The WWF
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Large carnivores are increasing in many parts of Europe and the key

conservation question is not whether there is enough space for them but whether people are willing to share that space. In this study, WWF asks UK teenagers, our future decision-makers, how they feel about wolves, bears and otters?

Wildlife management is about understanding the species, whether numbers are increasing, decreasing or remaining the same. It is also about habitat; where do the animals live and are these spaces becoming endangered? And finally, wildlife management is about people and whether they place any values (negative, neutral or positive) on the species. Some have argued that everything we do in wildlife management is done for people. While habitat plays a part in understanding the current carnivore situation, the reality is that carnivores die because people kill them. Humans have often feared large carnivores, especially wolves, and the sad truth is humans kill them out of fear. To understand carnivore management in Europe, we need a better understanding of this human dimension. What are the attitudes and beliefs? Which beliefs are most directly affecting attitudes and which could be targeted in future educational efforts? Managing large carnivores requires answers to these questions and requires listening to all the interest groups.

Teenagers are one of these interest groups. Their attitudes may be different from those of the general public but as future decision-makers we should be aware of, and respect, their views. In the words of a North American chief: "We do not inherit the world from our parents, we borrow it from our children." Let's listen to what the UK children have to say about wolves, bears and otters.



Introduction and methodology

Human tolerance and acceptance are key to the survival of large carnivores in Europe today. With virtually no wilderness areas left intact, successful management of Europe's top predators requires peaceful coexistence with people. The challenge of conserving large predators in Europe's densely populated environment is therefore more socio-political in nature than biological. At a time when large carnivores are expanding their ranges in many parts of Europe and returning to areas where people have forgotten how to live with them, research into the human dimension of carnivore conservation is particularly important.

The Large Carnivore Initiative for Europe (LCIE), a partnership of



DAVID LAWSON, WWF

With virtually no wilderness areas left intact, successful management of Europe's top predators requires peaceful coexistence with people.

experts from more than 25 countries coordinated by WWF, has commissioned research into public attitudes towards carnivores in several European countries including Spain, Croatia, Poland and Slovenia. The WWF-UK Campaign for Europe's Carnivores has also commissioned a major attitude survey in the UK to gauge support for carnivores as part of Europe's natural heritage. The research, involving more than six thousand teenagers from 239 schools across the UK will help



PHILIPPE HENRY, OXFORD SCIENTIFIC FILMS

*“Wolves, lynx and bears, About them nobody cares
They’re hunted and killed, With their skins trucks are filled.”*

Ceri Hart, St Nicholas High School, Cheshire

Beautiful Beasts competition, (Poetry 11-13 age group)

inform future conservation policy, as well as public awareness and education initiatives around Europe. It also offers a unique opportunity to compare attitudes and knowledge levels between countries where large predators have been driven to extinction with those where human coexistence with large carnivores is still a daily reality.

Three carnivore species were featured in this survey. The wolf, extinct in the UK for well over two centuries, was selected as a predator subject to a vast, and mainly negative mythology. The second species, the brown bear is Europe’s largest carnivore, occupying a more benign and even affectionate place in folklore. (The bear is believed to have disappeared from the UK around two thousand years ago.) The third species featured was the otter, a medium-sized carnivore that is still present in the UK where it has recently returned to many former localities.

METHODOLOGY

This survey was designed by Dr Alistair Bath, who has conducted similar studies in North America and in a number of European countries. Schools were randomly selected to participate in the study in an effort to secure a representative sampling across the UK. The average age of the 6,154 respondents was 13. Sample sizes were sufficiently large to allow for generalisations to be made about the student teenager population in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The sample size for each of these countries was as follows: England (3,206 pupils from

124 schools), Scotland (888 pupils from 36 schools), Wales (915 pupils from 33 schools), and Northern Ireland (1145 pupils from 46 schools). To allow further analysis of geographical variations, England was divided into ten regions: London, Southeast, Southwest, Northern Home Counties, East Anglia, West Midlands, East Midlands, Northwest, Northeast and North. Separate data is available for these areas.

Participants were asked to complete a detailed, self-administered questionnaire that posed 16 attitudinal questions about each of the three carnivore species and a total of 20 knowledge questions. Data entry and analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

At a time when large carnivores are expanding their ranges in many parts of Europe and returning to areas where people have forgotten how to live with them, research into the human dimension of carnivore conservation is particularly important.



CHRISTOPH PROMBERGER, WWF

Summary of results

Positive attitudes towards all three species were recorded across all parts of the UK. Students, the future-decision-makers in Europe, want to see a Europe where carnivores such as bears, wolves and otters exist. Even though teenagers showed poor knowledge levels towards all three species, particularly the brown bear, a clear majority was in favour of conserving them.

More than 70 per cent of teenagers thought it important to maintain wolf populations in Europe for the enjoyment of future generations, and nearly 76 per cent in the case of otters. Interestingly, there was less support for the bear, 64 per cent, even though students professed to like it more than the wolf.

A majority of students also believed that even if they never saw any of the three species, it is important that they exist in Europe. Again, support was greatest for the otter, and least for the bear. Perhaps surprisingly, while 61 per cent of UK teenagers agreed that it was important that

wolves existed in Europe, their counterparts in wolf areas in Spain – home to approximately 2,000 wolves – demonstrated even greater support. An overwhelming 87 per cent of Spanish students from mountainous, rural areas of Zamora concurred with the statement, with four per cent disagreeing and the rest neutral. In a less rural part of Zamora where there are few or no wolves, Spanish students were more similar to those in the UK, with 62 per cent backing the existence of wolves, 13 per cent against and 25 per cent neutral.

FIGURE 1

RESPONSE OF UK TEENAGERS TO THE STATEMENT: **“It is important to maintain wolf/brown bear/otter populations in Europe so that future generations can enjoy them”**

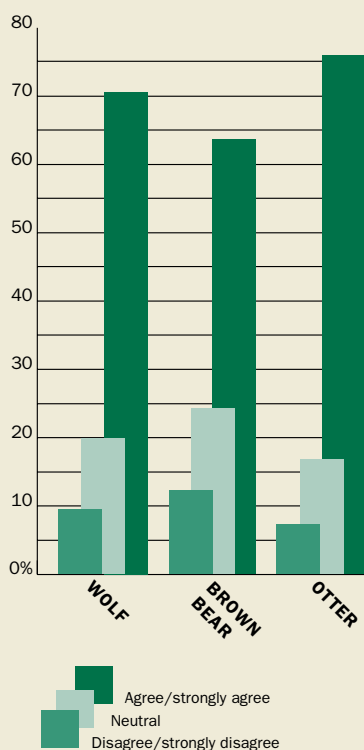
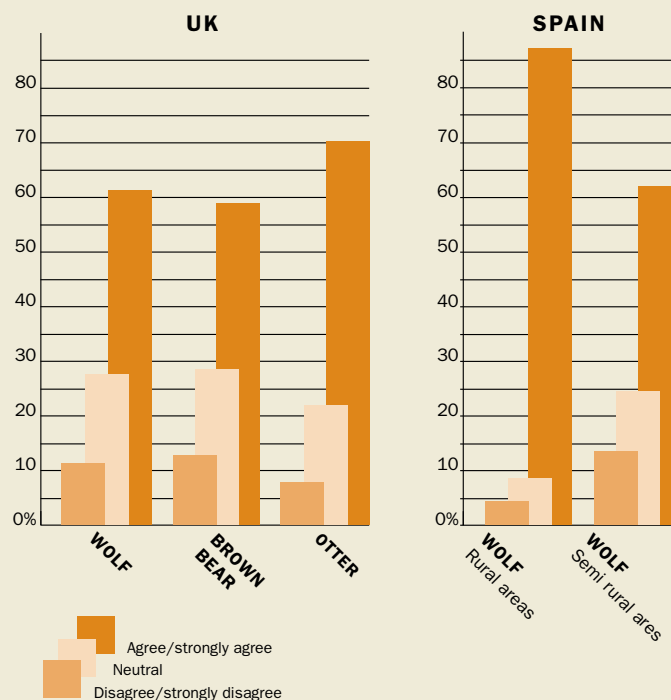


FIGURE 2

RESPONSE OF UK AND SPANISH TEENAGERS TO THE STATEMENT: **“Whether or not I get to see a wolf/brown bear/otter, it is important to me that they exist in Europe”**



*“As I lay here I look and cry as all the people pass me by,
I want to go back to the mountains where I belong, where I learned
to grow big and strong. I miss my pack I wish I was back to where I belong.”*

Derek Thorne, St Mary Magdalen’s Catholic Primary School, London

Beautiful Beasts competition, (Poetry 7-9 age group)

This research shatters the myth, at least as far as young people are concerned, that those living with carnivores are likely to be more negative than their less rural counterparts.

Approximately two-thirds of all UK teenagers also wanted to see complete protection for the three species (65 per cent for wolves, 64 per cent for bears, and 68 per cent for otters). However, many were undecided whether having them in Europe was good or bad.

Whereas most research in other European countries has shown that views about large carnivores tend to be either very positive or very negative, many UK teenagers hold less polarised views. Some 52 per cent of teenagers were unsure whether having wolves in Europe was good or bad. This feeling was strongly contrasted by that held by students in the rural wolf areas of Zamora in Spain. A convincing 77 per cent believed that having wolves in Spain was good, with just 4 per cent disagreeing with the statement. Even in the less rural areas of Zamora, Spanish students remained considerably more positive than their UK counterparts with 60 per cent stating good, 12 per cent bad, and 28 per cent undecided. This research shatters the myth, at least

as far as young people are concerned, that those living with carnivores are likely to be more negative than their less rural counterparts.

UK teenagers also displayed a lack of a NIMBY or “not in my backyard” mentality. Asked whether there was any need to have wolves, bears and otters in Europe when plenty existed in Canada and Russia, a clear majority thought there was. This majority, in answer to a similar question in the more rural areas of Zamora in Spain, was 92 per cent.

NATIONAL VARIATIONS

The UK survey also revealed some interesting national and regional differences within the UK. The greatest differences to emerge were between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK, although there were also statistically significant variations between London and the rest of England. Northern Ireland respondents were less positive towards all three species than those in all other countries. For example, only 39 per cent of Northern Irish students said they liked the wolf, compared to a national average of 47 per cent. Welsh students were best disposed towards the wolf with 51 per cent expressing positive feelings, and Scots towards bears (55 per cent).

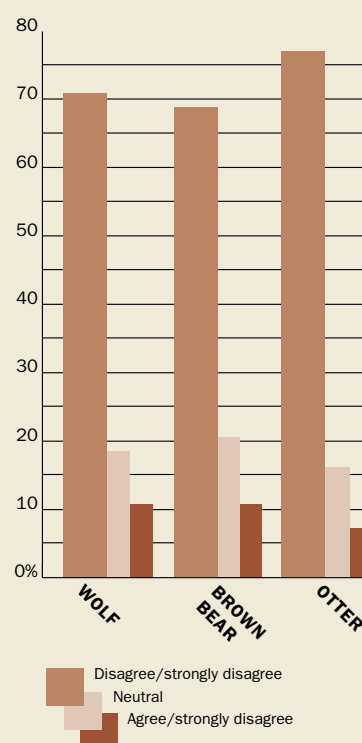
In the wolf areas of Zamora, Spain, 57 per cent of students liked the wolf, 40 per cent were neutral and only 3 per cent disliked the animal. Students in less rural parts of the province where there are few or no wolves, again held similar views to UK students with 46 per cent liking the animal, 42 per cent neutral and

12 per cent expressing dislike. Few statistically significant differences emerged between the north and south of England across the attitude questions, but there were several significant differences between London and the rest of England. While children throughout England held positive attitudes towards all three species, children in London were significantly less positive towards wolves, bears and otters. London students also showed

FIGURE 3

RESPONSE OF UK TEENAGERS TO THE STATEMENT:

“Because there are plenty of wolves in Canada and Russia and plenty of brown bears and otters in Russia, there is no need to have them in Europe.”



*“Take the soul of the moon, Take the essence of a voice, Whirl them through the caverns of space,
To make the wolf’s mournful howl, The deep gold eyes, That stare through the darkness,
To discover night’s secrets, Look away from man with fear...”*

Emily Ham, Cwmdy School, Powys

Beautiful Beasts competition, (Poetry 7-9 age group)

a less protectionist attitude towards carnivores, exploding another myth that those living in urban areas are likely to be most positive towards animals that can pose a threat to rural livelihoods, such as livestock farming. There were also marked variations in questions designed to measure fear factors towards the three species. For example, nearly two out of three students in Northern Ireland said they would be afraid to walk in woods where wolves occurred, compared to less than half of those in Scotland. More than one

in four students in Northern Ireland said they would also be afraid to swim in waters occupied by otters.

Where fear exists among Spanish students, it is least prevalent in areas where wolves occur. In the wolf areas of Zamora, for example, 35 per cent expressed fear of walking in the woods, compared to 41 per cent in a less rural part of the province. However, the Spanish general public was more wary of wolves with 61 per cent in the same rural area expressing fear, compared with just 53 per cent in the less rural area. Similar research in

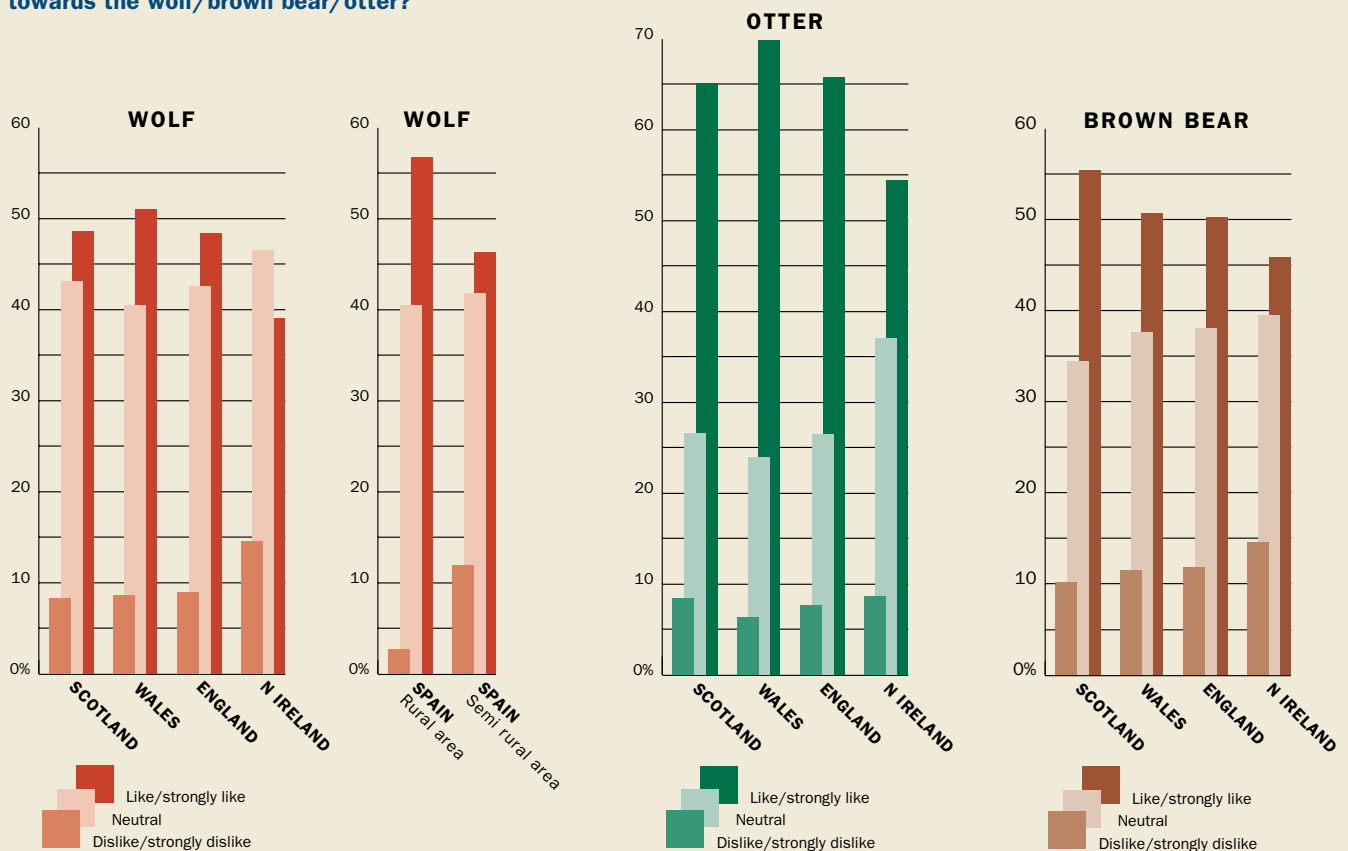
The UK survey uncovered marked national differences in beliefs about the threat posed by wolves to humans.

Croatia showed the reverse response among adults with 41 per cent of the general public living in wolf areas indicating fear, in contract to 53 per cent in areas where there are few or no wolves. While fear of wolves remains high, teenagers appear to be less afraid than adults.

FIGURE 4

RESPONSE OF UK AND SPANISH TEENAGERS TO THE QUESTION:

Which of the following best describes your feelings towards the wolf/brown bear/otter?



of results

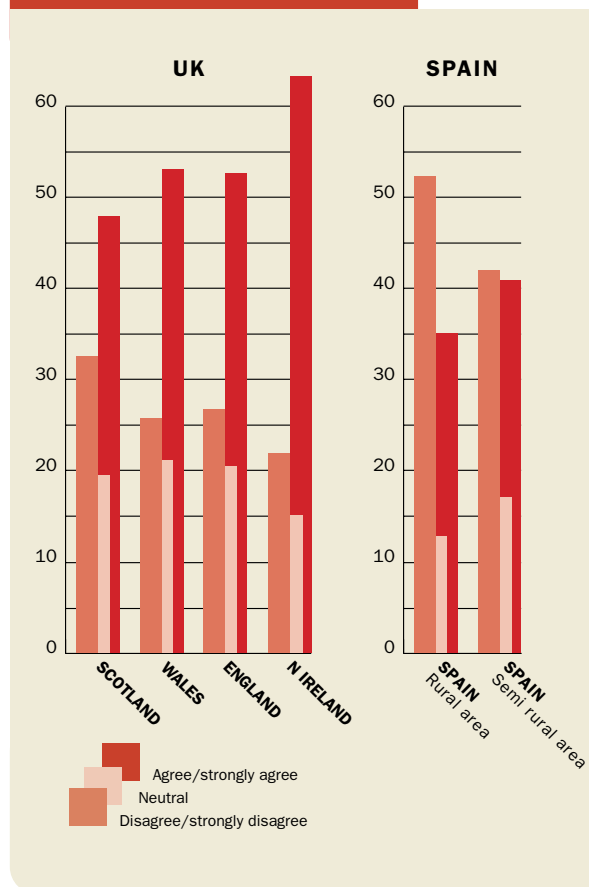
FEAR FACTORS

Much of the mythology surrounding wolves revolves around their relationships with humans. The UK survey uncovered marked national differences in beliefs about the threat posed by wolves to humans. While there have been no documented cases in recent history of a healthy, non-rabid wolf killing a human in Europe, this is not the perception among students. Nearly one in four students (24 per cent) in Northern Ireland believed attacks on humans by wolves were common, compared to the UK average of 18 per cent.

Around two-thirds (65 per cent) of students in the UK correctly identified the bear as more dangerous to humans than the wolf or otter. With the exception of teenagers in Northern Ireland, more students cited the domestic dog as dangerous to humans than they did the wolf. Only 10 per cent believed that none of the species were dangerous to humans.

The relationship between fear and attitude is revealing. Many students did indicate a fear of entering areas where large carnivores existed, with bears eliciting the most fear among students. Those students who held positive attitudes towards the carnivore (liking or strongly liking the animal) tended to be less afraid of it. In addition, students who were less afraid of the carnivore also tended to be more supportive of its protection. In most cases, those individuals who held negative attitudes towards the animal were also afraid of it and more inclined to oppose its protection.

FIGURE 5



RESPONSE OF UK AND SPANISH TEENAGERS TO THE STATEMENT: **“I would be afraid to walk in the woods if wolves were present.”**

KNOWLEDGE LEVELS

Questions designed to test knowledge levels of all three species and to explore how these guide attitudes, showed that knowledge was generally poor, particularly in the case of the bear where a number of myths were exposed contributing to less positive attitudes. For example only one in three students were aware that bears once occurred in the UK (36 per cent), and only 28 per cent acknowledged that their diet comprises mainly nuts, fruit and insects. Students from all parts of the UK averaged less than two out of six correct questions on the bear but were better informed about

wolves and otters, averaging more than 4 out of six correct questions on wolves, and around 3.5 out of seven on otters.

Knowledge levels correlated with attitudes, with greater knowledge contributing to more positive attitudes. Northern Ireland students, the least positive towards all three carnivores, also demonstrated the lowest wolf, bear and otter knowledge scores. Northern Ireland’s otter knowledge score was statistically significantly lower than all other countries while the bear knowledge score was lower than that of Welsh and Scottish students.

*“The hillside echoes with his mournful cries, But the villain still, he lies,
He rises up without a sound, Moving smoothly in shadowed bounds”*

Natasha Abraham, South Hampstead Junior School, London

Beautiful Beasts competition, (Poetry 9-11 age group)

A number of knowledge gaps were identified across all three species highlighting areas for possible education initiatives. For example only 56 per cent of students in Northern Ireland were aware that wolves once occurred in the UK. Across the UK, fewer students still were aware of the role of bears in the UK’s natural heritage. Only 36 per cent acknowledged that bears once occurred in the UK, with 45 per cent not sure, and 19 per cent disputing the fact. Students demonstrated a lack of knowledge

about the status of all three species with most believing that wolf and bear populations in Europe were in decline (62 per cent in both cases), while in fact in many areas both species are holding their own or even expanding their ranges. Likewise, while otters show signs of recovery in the UK, just 12 per cent of pupils thought otter numbers were increasing.

GENDER DIFFERENCES

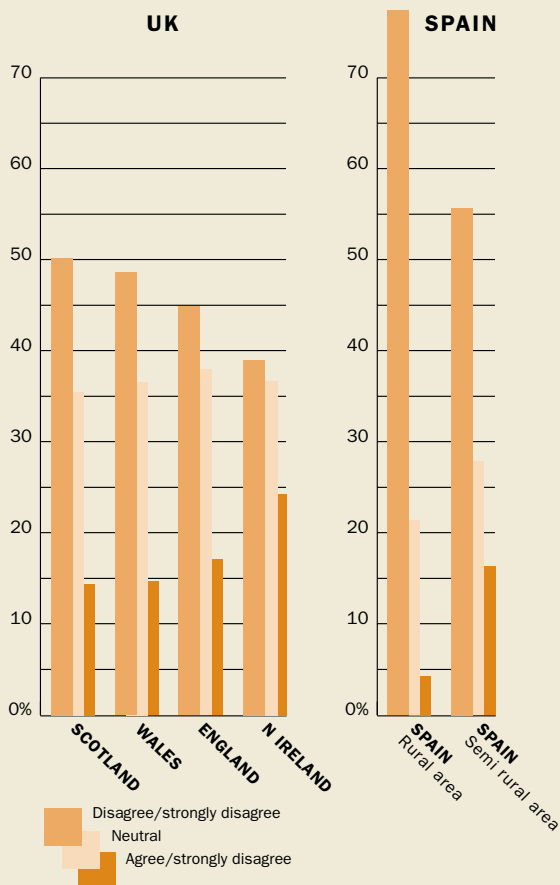
While males and females are both generally positive toward all three species, there are some statistically

Knowledge levels correlated with attitudes, with greater knowledge contributing to more positive attitudes.

significant differences in attitudes between the sexes. For example, in Scotland, males are more positive towards wolves than females, although no differences were observed in attitudes towards bears and otters. In Wales, on the other hand, females hold significantly less positive attitudes towards all three species. In England, the female students held significantly less positive attitudes than males towards wolves, and also towards bears. In Northern Ireland where attitude scores for males and females were amongst the least positive of all UK children towards the three species, there was only a statistically significant difference between sexes in attitudes towards the wolf. In all countries, males held generally more positive attitudes towards the three species than females, although the differences were small.

There were fewer gender differences to emerge from the knowledge scores. In Scotland, male students had higher otter knowledge scores than females, as they did across all three species in Wales. There were no notable differences in knowledge scores between sexes in Northern Ireland, and in England the only significant difference was that males scored better than females on otters.

FIGURE 6



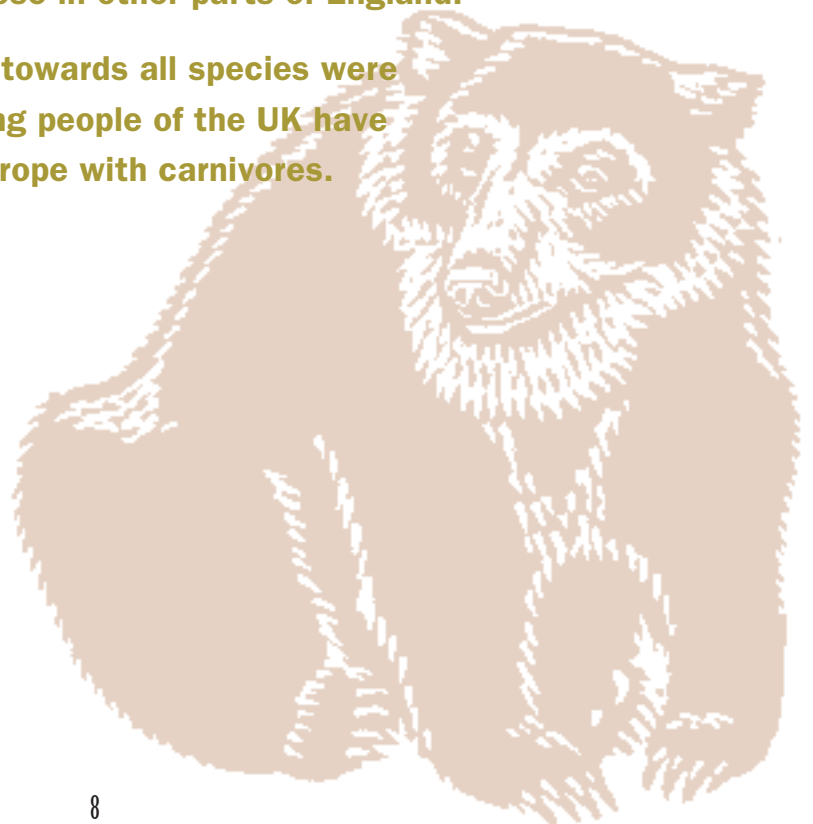
RESPONSE OF UK AND SPANISH TEENAGERS TO THE STATEMENT: **“In areas where wolves live in close proximity to humans, wolf attacks on humans are common.”**

Conclusion

Knowledge of carnivores among UK students is generally poor, particularly in the case of brown bears. Better knowledge of all three species would improve current attitudes. Fear remains an important issue in determining attitudes towards carnivores with significant numbers of students registering fear of wolves and bears, and a surprising number, a fear of otters especially in Northern Ireland. This finding suggests a loss of connection between young people and their natural heritage, particularly when compared with fear factors among Spanish children living in wolf areas.

The survey revealed significant national differences between attitudes among students in the UK and between UK and Spanish students. Children in Northern Ireland were the least positive towards all three species, while children in London were less positive than those in other parts of England.

Overall, all attitudes towards all species were positive and the young people of the UK have a clear vision of a Europe with carnivores.





WWF conserves wildlife and the natural environment for present and future generations.

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