

A close-up photograph of a wolf's face, looking directly at the camera. The wolf has grey and brown fur, and its eyes are a striking yellow-green color. There is a layer of snow or frost on its fur, particularly around the eyes and on its nose. The background is blurred, suggesting a natural, outdoor setting.

## **UNDERSTANDING RURAL PERSPECTIVES**

A survey on attitudes towards large carnivores in rural communities

**Savanta:**

This survey was commissioned by Eurogroup for Animals, Humane Society International/Europe, Fondation Brigitte Bardot, Dierenbescherming, Djurskyddet Sverige, Deutscher Tierschutzbund, World Animal Protection Denmark, World Animal Protection Netherlands, World Animal Protection Sweden and LAV and conducted by Savanta in November 2023.

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## Background

This survey aims to explore the attitudes and perceptions of residents in rural communities towards large carnivores and hunting practices. It seeks to gather valuable insights into the complex relationship between rural populations and the coexistence with large carnivores (wolves, bears and lynx).

## Objectives

- Assess the alignment of rural communities' attitudes towards hunting and farming interest groups
- Assess the general awareness and knowledge of residents regarding large carnivores present in their region.
- Explore attitudes towards the coexistence of humans and large carnivores, considering factors such as safety concerns and environmental conservation.
- Investigate the role of wildlife management policies and conservation initiatives in shaping rural communities' attitudes towards large carnivores.

The findings of this survey will contribute to a better understanding of rural communities' attitudes towards large carnivores, aiding in the development of effective conservation and management strategies that align with their values and concerns.

## Methodology

The survey was conducted by [Savanta](#) in November 2023 among a sample of 10,000 inhabitants of rural areas in the following Member States: Germany, France, Spain, Netherlands, Italy, Belgium, Poland, Denmark, Sweden, Romania (1000 per Member State).

When entering the survey and prior to accessing the content and aims of the survey, participants were asked if they live in a rural area. If the answer was negative, they could not conduct the survey. This question allowed us to filter rural residents according to their perceptions, a crucial factor when assessing whether their viewpoints are accurately reflected in policy-making decisions.

The survey consisted in a structured questionnaire with a majority of closed-ended questions where respondents were invited to assess their attitudes towards a statement. For each of these questions, respondents could provide a “neutral” response.

The survey was administered through online platforms<sup>1</sup>.

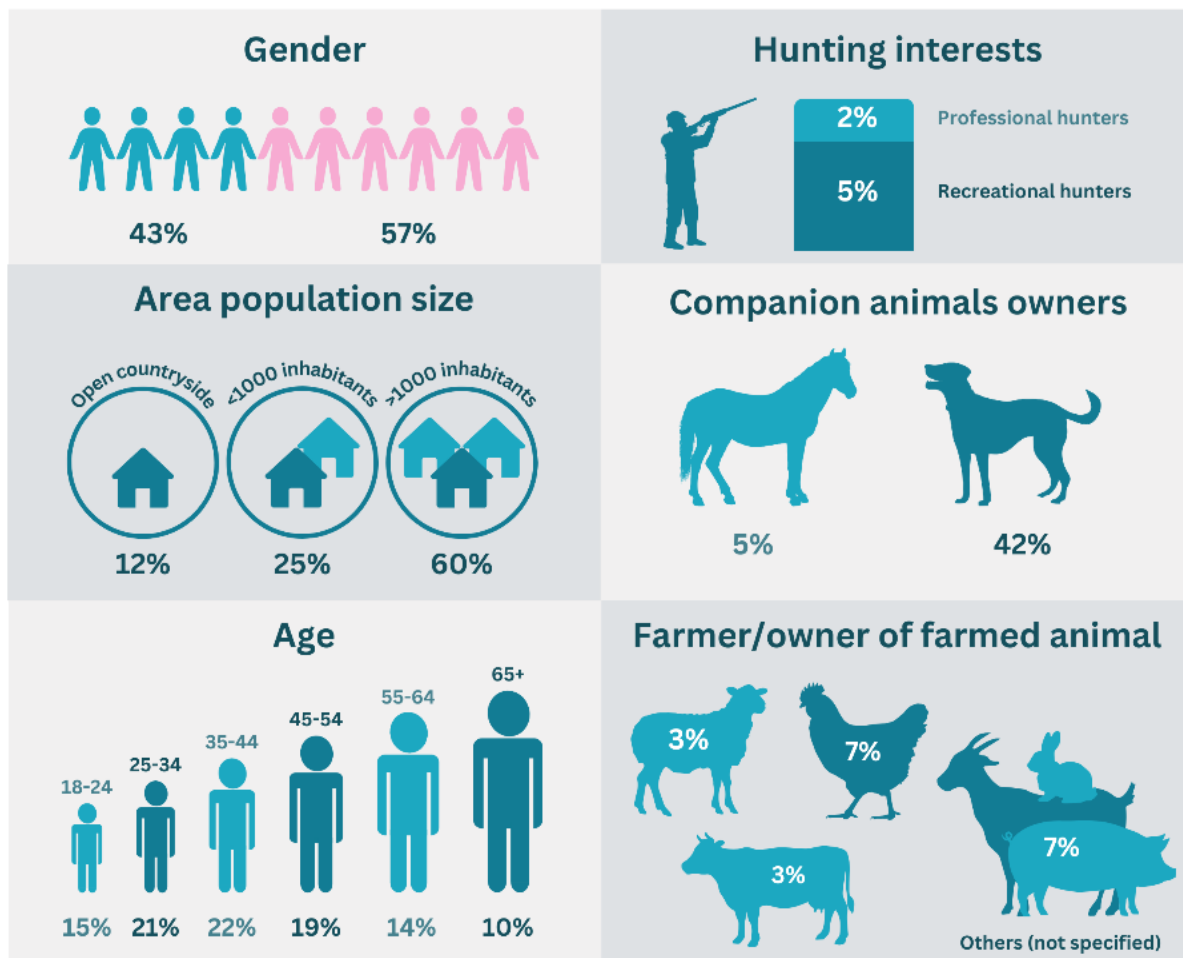
The following demographic data was collected:

- Age range
- Gender
- Area population size
- Annual income
- Farming occupation (Farmer/owner of cattle, sheep, chicken, other farmed animal)

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<sup>1</sup> In 2022, 90% of rural households in the European Union had an internet access. As a consequence, this data collection method did not significantly impact the results. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1236336/share-of-households-rural-internet-access-eu27/>

- Hunting occupation (recreational or professional hunter)
- Companion animal ownership (dog or equine owner)



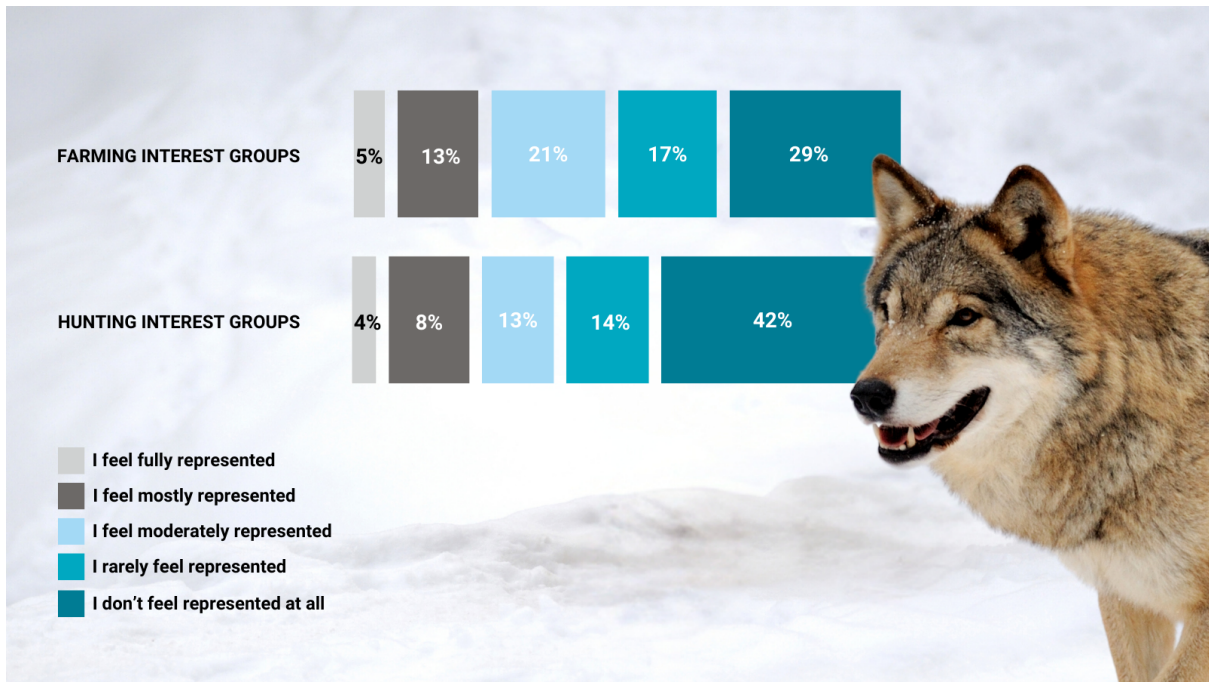
## Overall results

### *General lack of representation by farming and hunting interest groups*

Interest groups have been defined for participants to the survey as “a group of people that seeks to influence public policy and legislation on a particular issue, interest or concern”. When seeking to assess the representation of rural communities by hunting and farming interest groups, the survey results reveal that rural communities generally do not feel represented by such interest groups. Only 18% of respondents feel appropriately represented by farming interest groups and this number goes down to 12% for hunting interest groups. **Interestingly, only 1 in 3 farmers (33%) feel well-represented by farming interest groups. Less than half (46%) of hunters feel well represented by hunting interest groups.**

These results indicate that farmers and hunters also find themselves inadequately represented by interest groups claiming to represent the voice of rural communities. Representation by farming interest groups is highest in the Netherlands and Germany but the majority of respondents remains not sufficiently represented in these Member States. It

is important to note that results for both statements were consistent across respondents from the different population area sizes indicating that, contrary to some perceptions, support is not higher in the open countryside.



### *Overwhelming support for environmental protection and conservation*

This collective stance reflects a deep-seated commitment to environmental stewardship, as evidenced by the identified priorities of 80% emphasising environmental protection for future generations and 78% highlighting the importance of biodiversity conservation for the European Union. Interestingly, older generations were more likely to consider these issues important. This attitude was largely shared by farmers (77% and 75%).

The survey underscores a widespread consensus among participants, with **66% expressing a strong desire for decision-makers, including EU institutions, to prioritise the conservation of biodiversity and large carnivores.**



### *Clear call for ambitious EU policymaking for large carnivores protection*

Only 10% of respondents disagree that the presence of large carnivores is an essential component of the EU's natural landscape. In a resounding endorsement of coexistence, 72% of participants firmly believe that large carnivores deserve their place in the European Union. This sentiment is not only about acknowledging their right to exist but extends to a call for protection, with a significant 68% advocating to maintain the strict protection status of large carnivores. Importantly, 65% of farmers support this strict protection, including 61% of sheep farmers. **This demonstrates that the strong consensus towards a strict protection of large carnivores, including wolves, is shared by the farming community.**



This support for large carnivores extends to management strategies. The large majority of respondents (75%) say that farmers should implement available measures to protect their animals from large carnivores, including farmers themselves. **A substantial 65% of respondents believe that the killing of problematic individual large carnivores should only be considered when it is proven that protective measures were implemented and failed.** This statement is supported by 65% of farmers, including 62% of sheep farmers. This cautious approach speaks to the importance of balancing conservation efforts with the need for responsible management.

Furthermore, a noteworthy **69% of respondents stress that decisions related to the management of large carnivores should take into account the benefits and functions these creatures provide.** This holistic approach recognizes the ecological and socio-economic roles played by large carnivores.





### *Need for more education and information*

The majority of respondents stated that they know only a little or nothing about the status of large carnivores in the EU (71%), their behaviour (58%) and what to do in case of an encounter (64%). The proportion for all statements did not significantly differ between area population sizes. These results indicate that respondents have the least awareness about the status of large carnivores in the EU. This calls for additional awareness raising on the policy decisions surrounding the management of large carnivores.

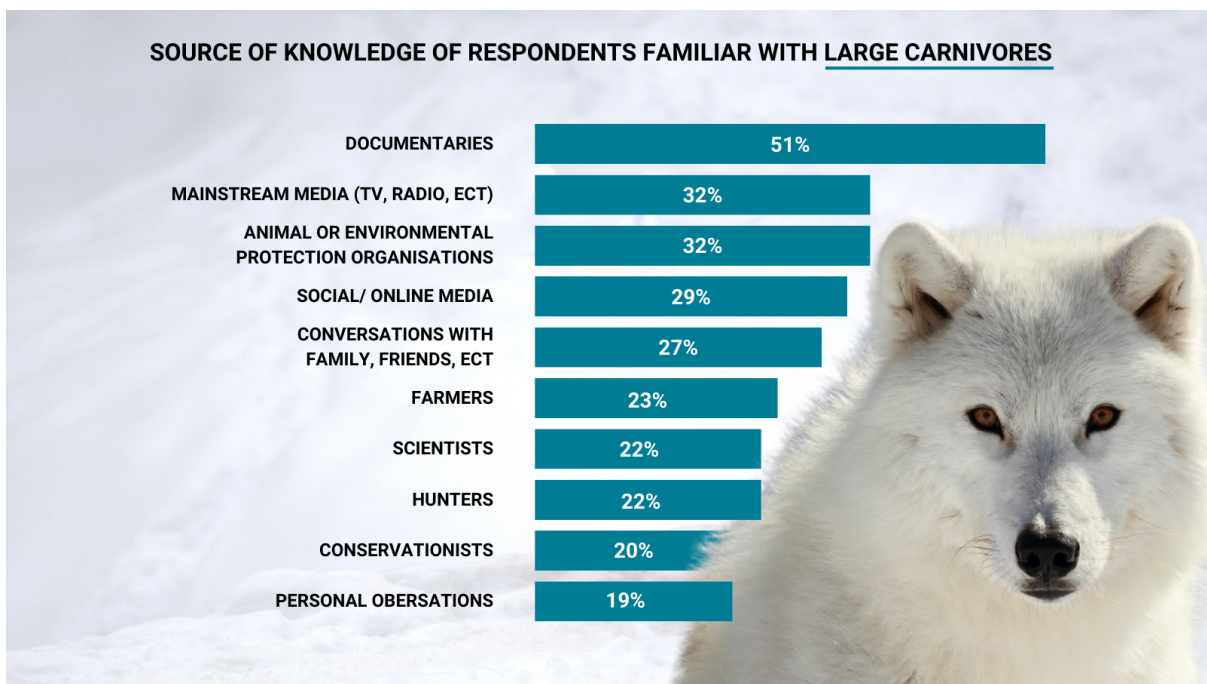
Poland (57%), Romania (52%) and Sweden (52%) stand out as having the most knowledge on the behaviour of large carnivores, including 13% of respondents from Romania saying they know a lot about it. This is aligned with the fact that these Member States have an important large carnivores' population.

62% of participants express a desire for education on large carnivore behaviour, emphasising that understanding how wolves and bears behave and learning how to safely deter them in case of an encounter would contribute to their sense of safety. **Even 64% of respondents who know a lot about the behaviour of large carnivores said that they would feel safer if they understood how wolves and bears behave and how they can scare them off in the event of an encounter.** This highlights a critical lack of measures in place to appropriately inform citizens on the appropriate human behaviour in areas populated by large carnivores and an opportunity for educational initiatives to bridge the gap between fear and knowledge, fostering a more informed and secure coexistence. This aspiration for education underlines an opportunity for community engagement and outreach programs that empower residents with the tools and insights needed to coexist harmoniously with these apex predators.

Interestingly, **only 18% of sheep farmers stated they knew a lot on what to do in case of an encounter and 62% would feel safer if they knew how to behave in**

**this instance.** Similarly, only 44% of dog owners said they were equipped with knowledge on what to do in case of an encounter and 72% would feel safer if they knew how to behave in this instance to keep their animal safe. These results call for additional targeted education material and campaigns.

The source of knowledge is however another important concern. Most would turn to documentaries and animal and environmental protection organisations to build their knowledge on large carnivores. Documentaries are the most important source of knowledge for both respondents that are familiar (51%) or unfamiliar (42%) with large carnivores. Worryingly, scientists appear as a minor source of knowledge with respondents turning more to farmers or hunters for information. This situation indicates the crucial need to mainstream independent scientific information.



### *Safety as a minor concern*

Besides the clear need for information, **only 32% of respondents stated that the presence of large carnivores in their area makes them feel unsafe and an additional 27% have no opinion**, indicating that this is not a major concern. Respondents living in the open countryside were 4 points more likely to feel unsafe compared to respondents living in a larger town of minimum 1000 inhabitants. 63% of dog owners and 64% of hunters say they feel safe outside with their companion and/or hunting dog regardless of the wildlife living in their area. People with knowledge on the behaviour of large carnivores were more likely to feel safe with their animal (64% for those who know a lot compared to 40% for those who know nothing). Similarly, 68% of respondents who know a lot about what to do in case of an encounter stated that they feel safe going outside with their companion animals regardless of the wildlife living in their area.

The way large carnivores are depicted in the media significantly influence attitudes of respondents as more people (35%) indicated that the more negative media attention large

carnivores receive, the more unsafe they feel (compared to 32% disagreeing with this statement). This is very important as 32% of respondents are informed on large carnivores by mainstream media and 28% would turn to mainstream media for information.

It is interesting to note that 44% of respondents indicated feeling unsafe going out during hunting season (as opposed to 31% feeling safe). These results indicate that **survey respondents expressed a greater sense of insecurity associated with hunting activities compared to encounters with large carnivores.**



## Key results per country

### Germany

A large majority (78%) of citizens living in rural areas in Germany consider environmental protection for future generations as being important or very important. 4 out of 5 people (80%) are committed towards the conservation of biodiversity and species as an important EU priority.

The protection of wolves and other large carnivores is broadly supported by more than two thirds of the respondents. The implementation of livestock protection measures is seen as a key instrument and supported by 3 out of 4 (76%) citizens in rural areas in Germany. More than two thirds (68%) think public authorities should provide funding for such measures.

Two out of three (67%) respondents see the killing of individual wolves only as an option if livestock protection measures were implemented and have failed. In contrast, only 1 out of 10 (10%) people do not agree with this line of action. This is a strong statement against constant claims for wolf-free zones and hunting quotas for wolves in Germany.

People in rural areas in Germany do not only show a strong support for conservation in general, but for large carnivores and their strict protection as well. The results also make it clear that livestock protection measures are the key for coexistence, not the killing of wolves.

### *France*

Respondents from France are the most likely to say they don't know anything about large carnivores (across the subject areas) with results significantly lower than other Member States (only 19% stating they know at least moderate amount in France against 36% average). The general sources of knowledge did not significantly differ from other Member States but it is important to note that only 2% of respondents stated that they would turn to scientists for information (compared to the 12% average). There is therefore an alarming need for scientific education on nature and large carnivores in France.

Importantly and despite this lack of knowledge, France is the Member State where respondents feel the safest with the presence of large carnivores (48% feeling safe against 24% feeling unsafe). Rural citizens in France are also the most likely to feel safe (59%) with their companion or hunting dogs which is the same result as Spain. However, respondents in France are also the most likely to avoid going out during hunting season (54%) and to feel unsafe going out during hunting season (62%). These results demonstrate that safety issues in the country arise from lethal management of large carnivores rather than their presence.

France also stands among the Member States where respondents feel the least represented by farming interest groups as only 16% feel well-represented. French respondents are also among the most likely to support environmental protection (86%) and conservation (83%) as important priorities for the EU. Finally, they are also among the most supportive of the strict protection status for large carnivores (74%).

### *Spain*

Spanish respondents are among the most supportive of the presence and protection of large carnivores with 78% considering they have a right to exist in the EU and 73% advocating for their continued strict protection. Similarly, they consider environmental protection (84%) and conservation (80%) as high priorities for the EU.

Spain presents very similar results to France on safety issues surrounding large carnivores and hunting with 31% feeling unsafe from the presence of large carnivores while 53% avoid going out during hunting season. Yet, they are more informed than French respondents as only 25% stated knowing nothing about large carnivores.

### *Netherlands*

Respondents from the Netherlands (28%) are more likely than respondents from other Member States to feel well-represented by farming interest groups. Yet, only 16% of Dutch respondents believe that the presence of large carnivores is not an essential component of the EU's natural landscape and even less state that large carnivores do not have the right to exist in the EU (13%). In addition, only 9% disagree with the fact that farmers should implement available measures to protect their animals from large carnivores and only 12%

disagree with the fact that killing of individual problematic large carnivores should only take place if it is proven that adequate protection measures were implemented and have failed.

Dutch respondents also support environmental protection and conservation as high priorities for the EU with only 7% and 5% respectively considering it unimportant. Only 8% disagree with the fact that benefits and functions provided by large carnivores should be considered in decisions related to their management.

A little bit less than 50% of the respondents claim that they know little about 1) the status of large carnivores in the EU (48%), 2) their behaviour (46%) and 3) how to scare them off (48%). 67% disagree or have no opinion on the statement that the presence of wolves and other large carnivores makes them feel unsafe. Besides, only 14% disagree that if they knew how to scare them off in the event of an encounter, they would feel safer. These results clearly show that policymakers should focus on education instead of lethal management.

These results align with [previous surveys](#) on the general population showing that 57% of the Dutch have a positive attitude towards the resettlement of the wolf, and 65% view the wolf as non-threatening.

### *Italy*

Italy is the Member State where most respondents indicated not feeling represented by farming interest groups (55% compared to only 14% being well-represented) and also stands very high on the lack of representation by hunting interest groups (66% compared to only 10% being well-represented).

Respondents from Italy were also significantly more likely to find environmental issues important priorities for the EU (88% for environmental protection, 85% for conservation). In addition, it is the MS that agrees most that the presence of large carnivores is an essential component of the EU's natural landscape (77%) and that large carnivores have the right to exist in the EU (80%). It is also the most supportive Member State of the continued strict protection of large carnivores with 77% of respondents in favour.

### *Belgium*

The responses from Belgian participants generally align with average responses showing a strong support for the protection of large carnivores. It stands among the most supportive Member States towards the strict protection status of large carnivores (73%). On all grounds, Belgium appears as highly representative of the general attitude of the EU population based on responses from the ten Member States covered by the survey.

### *Poland*

Interestingly, 73% respondents, the highest representation of all Member States, indicated that they would feel safer with their companion animals if they understood how to react in the case of an encounter with a bear or a wolf.

Poland is the second Member State where respondents stated feeling the most unsafe due to the presence of large carnivores (39%). However, similarly to Romania, this attitude does not affect the general support of respondents towards the protection of large carnivores. 73% of

participants support the strict protection of these animals, which is higher than the average response (68%). Polish rural citizens are also the second most likely to endorse the right of large carnivores to exist in the EU (79%).

### *Denmark*

Denmark appears to have very similar results to the Netherlands. Interestingly, only 64% of Danish respondents believe that farmers should implement available measures to protect their animals which is significantly less than average (75%). Similarly, 53% of respondents agree that public authorities should provide full funding to farmers to protect their animals (compared to 69% on average). This also translates to Danish respondents' attitude on the protection of large carnivores where 61% are in favour of the strict protection status which is significantly less than the 68% average). However, it is worth noting that only 12% of participants are against the continued strict protection status demonstrating a broad support despite more moderate results than other Member States.

### *Sweden*

Only 9% of Swedish inhabitants of rural areas do not agree with the statement that large carnivores are an essential part of the EU's natural landscape and only 6% oppose large carnivores remaining strictly protected in the EU, to ensure their survival over time.

29% of respondents feel unsafe due to the presence of large carnivores in the immediate area. This indicates that the information about animal behaviour and coexistence is not sufficient. Similarly, 61% would feel safer if they knew what to do when encountering a large carnivore.

Only 18% of respondents feel well-represented by farming interest groups, and only 16% feel well-represented by hunting interest groups. Despite the fact that such groups are advocating towards the downgrading of the protection status of wolves, 67% of rural citizens support the strict protection of wolves and other large carnivores. In addition, 76% find the conservation of biodiversity and species very important or important priorities for the EU.

### *Romania*

Romania is one of the two Member States where the majority of respondents indicated feeling unsafe because of the presence of large carnivores in their area (46%). However, this is to be considered in perspective with the fact that 63% indicate they would feel safer if they understood wolves and bears and would know how to scare them off. More importantly, only 15% of respondents disagree with this statement. In addition, 45% emphasise that their sense of safety is negatively affected by negative media reports (only 21% disagree). As Romania inhabits a large population of large carnivores, it should be considered a priority for information and awareness raising campaigns to spark coexistence. This is especially important as only 10% of Romanians believe that large carnivores should no longer be strictly protected in the EU, with 68% agreeing that killing of problematic large carnivores should only take place if it is proven that adequate protection measures were implemented and have failed.

Romania also appears as the Member State where the most respondents indicated that environmental protection for future generations and conservation of biodiversity is not important but this remains insignificant with respectively 15% and 16% (compared to 75% and 65% considering it important).

## **Conclusion**

These survey results paint a comprehensive picture of public sentiment in rural communities, revealing a majority endorsement for the right of large carnivores to exist, coupled with a call for their stringent protection and a plea for informed and considerate management practices. The findings underscore the importance of integrating rural communities' perspectives into policy decisions, especially those related to the conservation of large carnivores in the European Union.

As we navigate the complex landscape of human-wildlife interactions, these survey results provide a compass pointing towards a path of coexistence rooted in understanding, conservation, and a shared responsibility. They implore decision-makers to consider the collective voice of rural communities calling for the protection and preservation of large carnivores in the European Union as integral components of a thriving and interconnected ecosystem.



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Savanta: