

PRESS RELEASE

COCO PROJECT

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TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE, NEW TOOLS

How Herders Are Learning to Share the Land with Wildlife Again

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Long before wolves, bears and other large carnivores became the subject of EU policy debates and conservation strategies, herders across Europe already knew them well. In the mountain pastures of Romania, the highlands of Greece and the rangelands of Spain, generations of pastoralists developed a practical understanding of large carnivore behaviour, and built their farming practices around it. Livestock guarding dogs, communal herding, night enclosures and carefully timed seasonal movements were not romantic traditions: they were survival strategies.

As large carnivores return to landscapes from which they had long been absent, that knowledge is more relevant than ever. The CoCo project is working to document it, learn from it and combine it with new tools and technologies – not to replace what herders already know, but to build on it.

A Knowledge Gap That Runs Both Ways

One of the recurring findings in CoCo's work across its 12 case study countries is that the knowledge gap around large carnivores is not one-sided. Scientists and policymakers often lack detailed understanding of how farming actually works on the ground – the daily rhythms, the economic pressures, the practical constraints that determine whether a protection measure is viable or not. At the same time, some herders in areas where carnivores have recently returned are navigating a reality their parents and grandparents never faced.

Bridging these two worlds –the experiential and the scientific– is central to CoCo's approach. The project brings together researchers, practitioners, farmers and wildlife managers not to tell each other what to do, but to build a shared understanding of what is actually possible.

What Traditional Practices Can Still Teach Us

In parts of Europe where large carnivores never fully disappeared –Romania, Greece, parts of the Balkans– herders have maintained practices that elsewhere have been largely forgotten. Livestock guarding dogs remain one of the most effective and widely used tools: breeds such as the Caucasian Shepherd, the Kangal and the Karakachan have been refined over centuries specifically for the task of deterring predators while remaining manageable for farmers.

But livestock guarding dogs are just one piece of a broader system. Communal herding –where multiple farmers pool their flocks and share the labour of protection– reduces individual exposure and spreads the cost of vigilance. Nighttime enclosures, carefully chosen grazing routes that avoid known carnivore territories and the reading of landscape signs that indicate predator presence: these are forms of knowledge that take years to acquire and cannot simply be downloaded from a manual.

CoCo is working to ensure this knowledge is not lost. By documenting practices across its case study areas and creating spaces for herders from different countries to exchange experience –as happened during a recent study visit to Asturias, northern Spain– the project is helping to keep a living body of knowledge alive and transferable.

Where Modern Tools Come In

Traditional knowledge alone is not always enough, particularly in landscapes where farming has changed dramatically, where labour is scarce and where carnivore populations are recovering rapidly. This is where modern tools can play a supporting role, not as replacements for experience, but as extensions of it.

CoCo's dedicated work stream on tools and technologies is reviewing what is available, what actually works in practice and under what conditions. The range is broad:

- GPS tracking collars on both livestock and carnivores, allowing herders to anticipate proximity and act before an attack occurs.
- Improved electric fencing designs that are more portable, more affordable and better suited to the mobile nature of extensive herding.
- Camera traps and remote monitoring systems that provide early warning of carnivore presence in a given area.
- Light and sound deterrents, some of which can be automated to reduce the burden on herders working alone or with limited staff.

Crucially, CoCo's approach is not to advocate for any single solution. What works in the dense forests of Latvia may be impractical on the open plains of Castile. What is affordable for a large cooperative in Romania may be out of reach for a smallholder in Slovenia. The project is building a toolkit –and the knowledge to use it– that can be adapted to the enormous diversity of farming contexts across Europe.

A Broader Picture

The focus on practical tools and traditional knowledge does not mean ignoring the wider context. There are ecological dimensions to the return of large carnivores to European landscapes, though their effects in highly modified habitats are complex and still being studied. There are also economic dimensions – both potential opportunities and real tensions, as discussions in some regions have shown, where activities like wildlife tourism can bring their own complications for local farming communities.

CoCo takes these complexities seriously. The project does not offer simple answers, because the situation does not have any. What it does offer is a rigorous, inclusive process for working through them, one that keeps the people who live and work on the land at the centre of the conversation.

Follow the project's progress and stay informed about new findings at <https://cocoproject.eu/>.

About the CoCo Project

CoCo (Cocreating Coexistence) is a Horizon Europe-funded research project working to develop sustainable solutions for human-wildlife coexistence across European pastoral landscapes. The project brings together diverse stakeholders to co-create knowledge and tools that support both thriving pastoral communities and healthy carnivore populations.