

# SHEPHERDING CULTURE IN SWITZERLAND: AN ANALYSIS OF MOTIVATION AND ATTITUDES

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## 1. Introduction

Switzerland is characterised by a diverse landscape, with the densely populated Plateau<sup>1</sup> and two mountain chains: the Jura Mountains in the northwest and the Alps in the south. Agricultural practices are shaped by this topography, with most intense agriculture in the Plateau and extensive agriculture and extensive animal husbandry in the mountainous areas.

The mountainous landscape and the coinciding of the most used agricultural area with the most densely populated area limits the size of farm holdings. Thus,

the transition into fewer, bigger holdings is less immediate in Switzerland than in other countries in Europe. While this trend is certainly happening, Swiss farms are on average still rather small (average of ca. 20 hectares) and there are in spite of everything many small holdings, especially in marginal, mountainous areas.

Alpine farming has its significance for farmers as it allows them to rear more livestock with additional grassland resources. As livestock grazes on alpine pastures in summer, they can conserve feed in lower altitudes for the winter. However, mountain meadows

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<sup>1</sup>The Swiss Plateau or Central Plateau is the area between Lake Geneva and Lake Constance, bordered by the Jura mountains in the northwest and the Alps in the south (Fig. 1). It is mostly flat or hilly, intensively farmed and densely populated.



are less nutritious and often steep and hilly. Traditional autochthonous breeds of cows, especially, were robust and well adapted to such landscapes. With agricultural intensification they were replaced by modern, more productive breeds. Since these breeds were less suited for Alpine pastures, this led to a decline in Alpine farming. However, as it is considered of cultural and environmental value, it is supported by the state through subsidies.

Intensification affected not only livestock breeds but also the structures of holdings. Small, peasant-like farms with diverse branches developed into specialised farms. As sheep were often kept as a supplementary income, sheep farming was increasingly abandoned, because it necessitated too much work for little income. At the same time, large carnivores had been extirpated (Breitenmoser, 1998), so sheep could be left to roam freely in the mountains without any protection. All these factors led to the abandonment of the ancient tradition of shepherding.

In traditional small-scale farms, knowledge about farming was passed on from generation to generation. With the declining number of small family farms and the tendency to have bigger flocks, the need for constant guarding through shepherds started to increase 25 years ago. This change led to a gap between supply and demand of shepherds. In the Swiss tradition, shepherds are strongly connected to rural and agricultural communities, therefore the “typical shepherd” is a man with an agricultural background. Increasingly, shepherds come from non-agricultural backgrounds and have different attitudes and knowledge. This trend has been known in Alpine farming for a long time and influenced the sociocultural exchange between cities and the countryside (e.g. Schütz, 2010). The proportion of female shepherds is steadily increasing too (Miller, 2016).

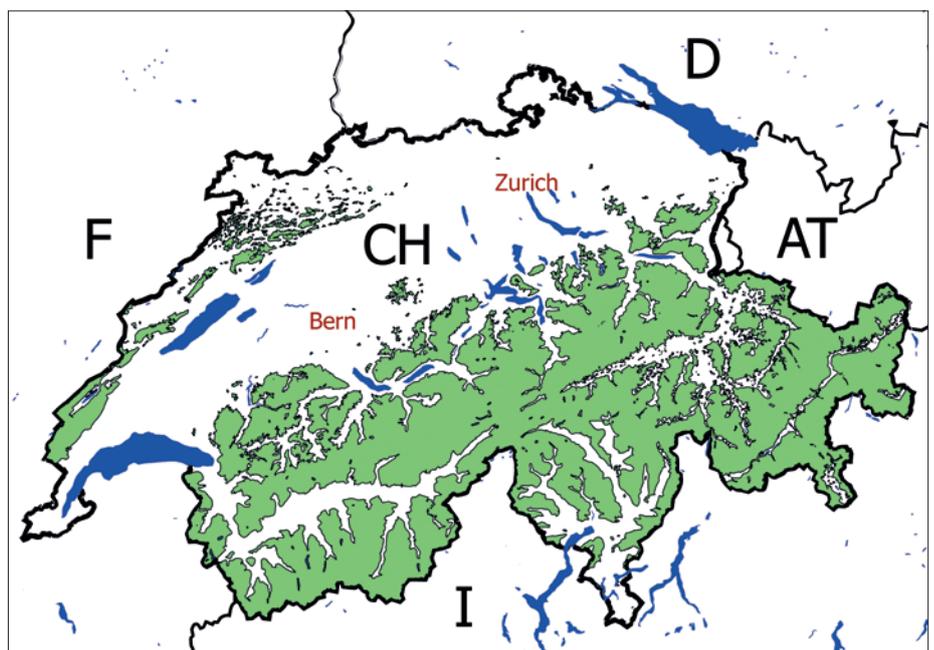
Thanks to the growing ecological consciousness of society, subsidies from the government and the return of wolf, bear and lynx, the shepherding profession has experienced an upswing in recent years. This means an increase in shepherds who have their background in non-agricultural professions alongside the “traditional shepherd”.

### 1.1. Transhumance in Switzerland

The most common livestock in Switzerland are cattle, sheep and goats. Cows and goats are more commonly kept for milk production, so they tend to be closer to houses and do not move in transhumant herds. In the Swiss context, transhumant flocks are bound to the seasons and traditionally follow three stages in different altitudes. Herds are moved following the vegetation towards higher altitudes. From the homestead they first move to the spring pastures, mostly fenced and relatively small unities at lower altitudes, and later to the alpine pastures where they spend four months from June to September. In autumn, they move the same way back. First, they graze in the autumn pastures (which can be the same as the spring pastures) and then they return to the homestead for late autumn and winter. For sheep, there is another stage in the transhumant cycle: transhumant migratory herding in winter.

#### 1.1.1. Summer grazing

Pastures for Alpine farming are in the Jura Mountains and the Alps (Fig. 1). Since cows and goats are



**Fig. 1.** Livestock summering areas in Switzerland (green) (AT=Austria; CH=Switzerland; D=Germany; F=France; I=Italy) (Adapted from: FOAG, 2016).

traditionally kept for dairy production while sheep are not milked, there is a division of pastures. Dairy cows and goats are handled twice a day for milking and therefore graze on pastures closer to the shed compared to the sheep who do not need this. Therefore, sheep pastures are traditionally the most remote, steepest and highest. Additionally, sheep alpine meadows had accommodation with little comfort and small salaries. This division of pastures as well as accommodation are apparent till today (Gilli et al., 2016).

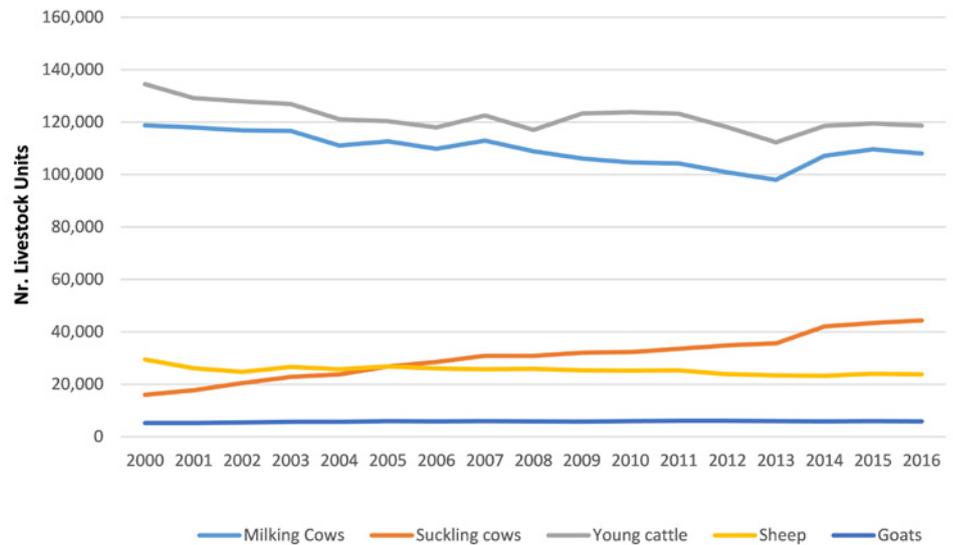
Switzerland has about 7,000 alpine farms on which about 300,000 livestock units<sup>2</sup> – about one quarter of the total livestock – are summered (FOAG, 2016). While the biggest proportion by far in terms of livestock units are cows, in terms of number of heads there are almost as many sheep as cows (Fig. 2).

Of the total of 400,000 sheep in Switzerland, about half are summered (FSO, 2016). The majority of sheep holders are in mountainous regions. The widespread practice of free grazing risks ecological damage to Alpine pastures and therefore the government supports the improved management of summering practice with subsidies. Since 2003, rotational grazing and constant guarding by a shepherd are rewarded with higher subsidies compared to continuous grazing (Foppa et al., 2013; Vogel, 2003). Increased subsidies as well as the need for more supervision of flocks due to the return of large carnivores has led to a constant increase in herds under rotational grazing and permanent guarding. Consequently, the need for shepherds has increased since 2003.

### 1.1.2. Winter grazing

Though part of the seasonal cycle, winter transhumance is less common than the summering of sheep. Traditionally lambs, which were not ready to be butchered by the end of summer, were herded in large flocks in the Plateau and Jura to graze on leftover grass or crops.

The Swiss winter transhumance was shaped through north Italian shepherds who used to herd their sheep



**Fig. 2.** Livestock units on Alpine farms in Switzerland in 2000–2016 (Adapted from: FOAG, 2016).

through the Swiss Plateau until the beginning of the 19th century (Wirth, 1951). Only after the Second World War did Swiss sheep owners start to herd their animals on pastures in the Plateau. The number of migratory herds has been constant for decades. Nowadays between 25 and 30 migratory herds (ca. 20,000 sheep) graze on the Plateau and Jura every winter (Hoffet and Mettler, 2017).

## 1.2. Shepherd training

As a response to the growing demand for shepherds by sheep owners and the growing interest in the profession by persons with non-agricultural backgrounds, AGRIDEA – Swiss Association for the Development of Agriculture and Rural Areas, launched the Swiss shepherd training in 2009 (see Shepherd Training in Switzerland, this issue). It is not only a traditional shepherd type who herds sheep in the mountains but a more diverse group of people can now be assumed to work in this area, and thus there was a need to provide them with the necessary skills.

## 1.3. Aim and research questions

This study aimed to understand what kind of people are shepherds nowadays, what motivates them to tend a flock of sheep year after year under simple if not harsh circumstances, and what are their attitudes towards nature and livestock. Furthermore, the existence of differences between the experienced and unexperi-

<sup>2</sup> One livestock unit (=Grossvieheinheit) equals one dairy cow or 12 sheep.

enced, and of different types of shepherds, was also investigated. Our motivation was to improve the training through a better knowledge and understanding of the heterogeneous backgrounds of today's shepherds.

## 2. Methods

Data were collected in 2016 from sample groups of participants of the shepherd training and experienced shepherds. The following questions were asked:

1. What is your motivation to work as a shepherd?
2. What is your attitude towards nature?
3. How is your relationship to the animals under your care?

Based on the responses we received to the above, we tried to answer the following two summarising questions:

1. Is it possible to identify different types of shepherds?
2. Are there any differences between experienced and unexperienced shepherds?

As the main focus of this study was on attitudes and perceptions, qualitative methods were used. Data were collected through an online questionnaire-based survey, developed after several preliminary interviews with experienced shepherds.

### 2.1. Qualitative interviews

Experienced shepherds were selected according to their experience (10 years or more) from AGRIDEA's shepherd network, which includes 30 shepherds. Selection was made in order to include representatives from different ages and genders, rather than a random sample. They were interviewed using guided interviews: interviewees were given the freedom to vocalise his or her own opinion and to express feelings. The guideline was a set of open questions covering all the themes but not dictating the structure of the interview.

Fourteen shepherds were interviewed: five women and nine men, aged 20–65 years. The interviews, conducted by a female AGRIDEA technician, lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. Whenever possible they were held at the farmstead in the mountains, but three interviews were held at the shepherds' homes or other places besides the Alpine farms.

### 2.2. Questionnaire

The questionnaire was set up according to the guideline and was revised and adjusted according to the answers and themes covered in the interviews. It comprised 24 mainly closed questions using 4-level Likert scales. This is the most widely used approach to scaling responses in survey research. When responding to a Likert item, respondents specify their level of agreement or disagreement on a symmetric agree–disagree scale for a series of statements.

The questionnaire comprised three sections: the first collected socio–demographic data (e.g. gender, age, nationality, occupation, roots, education, family); the second included a series of questions to evaluate the shepherd training; and the third had a series of questions focusing on the same themes mentioned during the interviews.

Attendees of the shepherd training were invited to fill in the questionnaire online. From the 102 e-mail addresses to which an invitation was sent, complete responses were received from 39 (38%).

## 3. Results and discussion

### 3.1. Socio–demographic and professional background

Most participants of the shepherd training program who responded to the questionnaire were from Switzerland (88%), but a few came from Germany, Austria and Italy (Fig. 3). More than half were women (59%), usually lived alone (40%) or in a relationship (36%), with only 20% having children. Almost half had a university degree and 46% an apprenticeship. Only slight more than half (59%) had rural roots, but the majority (70%) had a personal interest in agriculture (Fig. 3).

As shepherding is a seasonal occupation, shepherds must find another occupation for the remaining six to nine months of the year, which is difficult and straining. This issue was mentioned by both experienced and unexperienced shepherds as one of the main challenges facing them and one of the reasons why they might quit working as shepherds in the long run.

Comparing experienced and unexperienced (trainee) shepherds, there was a striking difference in their professional backgrounds and winter occupations. The majority of experienced shepherds found their winter occupation in agriculture, including as

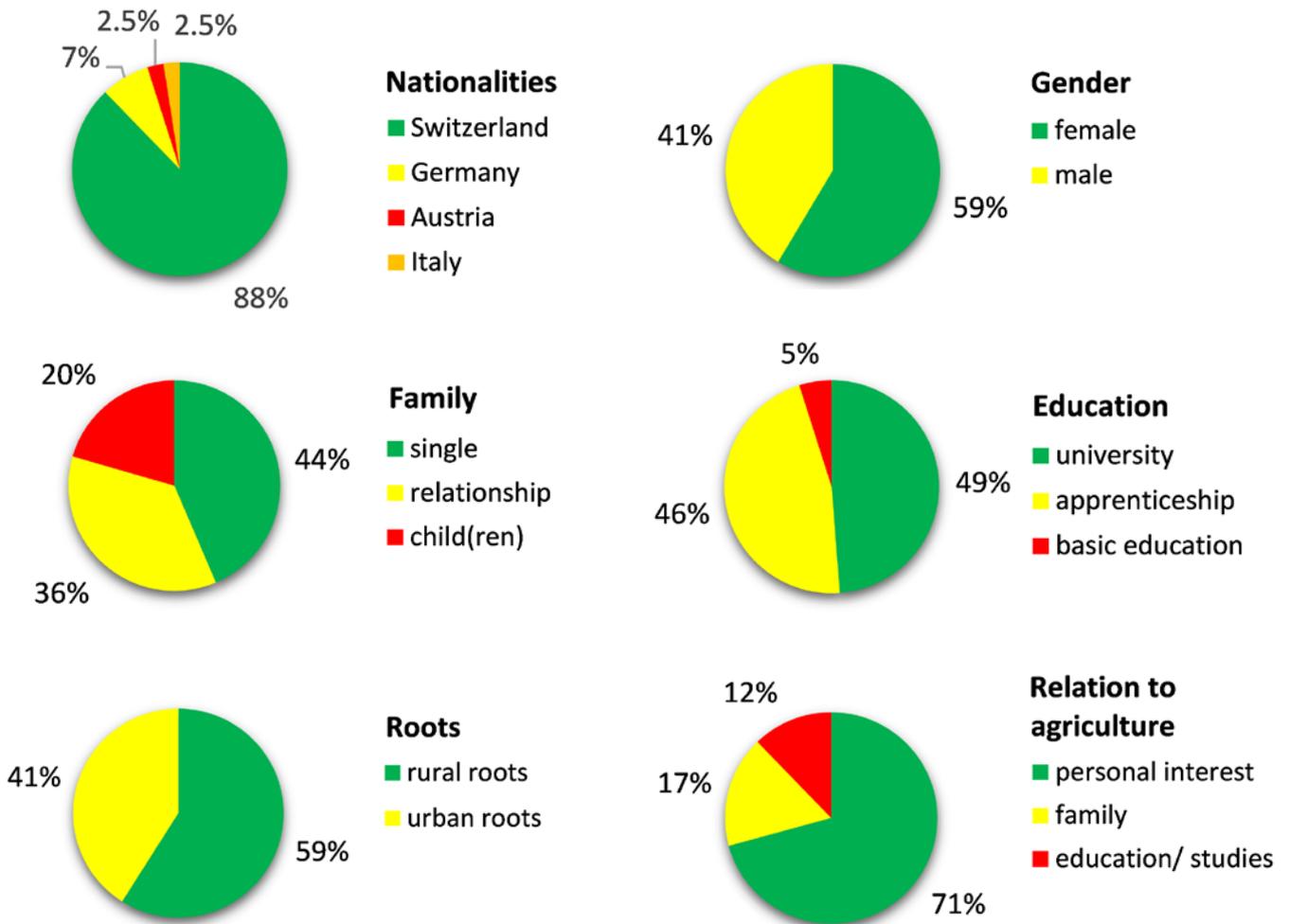


Fig. 3. Socio-demographic characteristics of shepherd training participants in 2009–2016 that replied to the questionnaire.

transhumant shepherds (Fig. 4) while only around 17% of the unexperienced did (Fig. 5). Unexperienced shepherds came from different backgrounds and found their employment in public services, agriculture, technical professions, health and the environment. Some of them followed a life of simplicity and survived on casual jobs or spent their time travelling.

The reason why so many of the experienced shep-

herds found employment in agriculture for the whole year might be either that they had agricultural backgrounds or that this is one of the few sectors where one can find seasonal employment. Many of the experienced shepherds had a non-agricultural background and therefore it can be assumed that in the long run, shepherding can be combined best with a year-round occupation in agriculture.

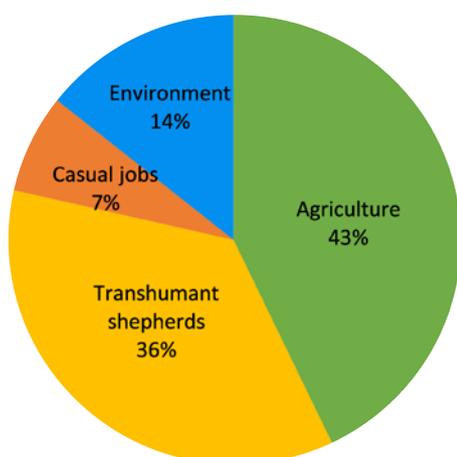


Fig. 4. Occupations during winter of experienced shepherds (Hoffet and Mettler, 2017).

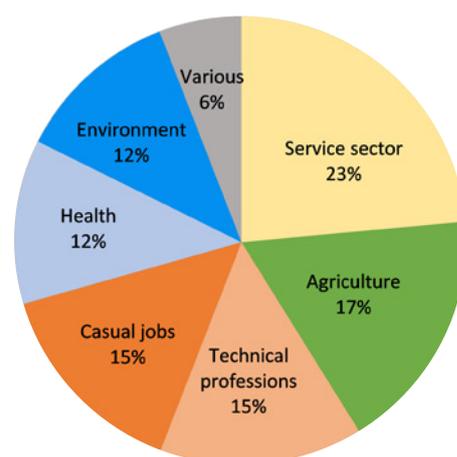


Fig. 5. Occupations during winter of participants of shepherd training (Hoffet and Mettler, 2017).

### 3.2. Motivation to work as a shepherd

Independent of being unexperienced or not, the most important motivations to be a shepherd were to work with dogs and sheep as well as to work outdoors in nature. Other important motivations were personal development (89% of respondents), a simple way of life (94%) and physical work (92%).

For many shepherds, it was a dream since childhood to become a shepherd. They were deeply fascinated by sheep and the way of living. Their parents were often displeased with their wish to become shepherds and made them do an apprenticeship first. They, however, started working as shepherds as soon as they finished their training.

Spending the summer months guarding a flock of sheep leaves shepherds with less things to deal with compared to the life they lead in the valley during the rest of the year. They focus on the essential things of life. It was clear from their responses that an im-

portant aspect of the work was also the personal experience and the feeling of living in harmony with nature. Many of the shepherds tried other professions before but found that “something was missing”. In shepherding they found an occupation that really satisfied them.

Financial pressure was another reason to be a shepherd. The decreasing price of cow milk, for example, can be an incentive to find an alternative to dairy production. However, the financial pressure that led to this decision does not mean that they are less passionate about their profession. Being a shepherd is more of a way of living than about income generation.

### 3.3. Attitude towards nature

Apart from being the basis for sheep rearing, nature has various other values for shepherds. Nature can also be a place to relax and do leisure activities even though they work outside all day. For the un-



experienced shepherds it is even more common to see nature as a place for leisure activities. Some of the experienced shepherds said that they used to be interested in nature for leisure activities but that their view changed since working as shepherds.

Nature is the basis of life and the basis to sustain livestock. At the same time it can also make work more difficult and strenuous. Storms, predators such as wolves, bears and lynx as well as diseases and parasites that affect livestock all hinder the work of a shepherd tremendously. The challenge is to neither tolerate it passively nor to fight it. This leaves shepherds with a pragmatic attitude towards nature with little room for romanticism.

The tradition of animal husbandry in the Alps has altered the environment over centuries and created the Alpine pastures as we know them today. If not grazed, they would mostly turn into shrub land and, eventually, forests. While they can be high in biodi-

versity, Alpine pastures are manmade landscapes rather than wilderness. However, they are often seen as natural and they are strongly anchored in the Swiss understanding of mountains and nature. Shepherds value Alpine pastures, too, and most of them see their influence on nature through their work as shepherds as having a positive influence.

Along the same lines, most of them find cultural landscape more valuable than wilderness. As wild animals do not respect borders between wilderness and cultural landscape they cross it freely, which can cause conflicts. Still, 84% of survey respondents (equally experienced shepherds and unexperienced) said that livestock and wild animals have the same right to exist and that they wish for coexistence of cultural landscape and wilderness.

### 3.4. Relationship with animals

Looking at a flock of sheep, one can either see the flock as a whole or as a multitude of individual animals. The bigger the flock, the more likely it is to perceive the flock as a whole and not the individual animals. As sheep flocks are usually several hundred or thousand animals, shepherds often relate to the flock as a unity. This also means that the well-being of the flock is put above the well-being of the individual animal. The loss of an individual animal is therefore not a big concern for them but rather to maintain the herd as a whole and accept a certain percentage of losses. Nevertheless, 20% of shepherds valued each animal and saw the flock as a multitude of individual sheep.

Although shepherds mostly perceived the flock as an entity and with large flocks it was more difficult to establish contacts with each individual animal, they always have emotional bonds to some individuals. These are usually ewes that stay in the flock for several years. Lambs, on the other hand, especially those destined to be slaughtered, are treated with emotional distance. Working with livestock often causes inner conflicts since at the end of the season the animals that shepherds care for will be slaughtered. A common strategy to deal with this conflict is to keep an emotional distance from them.

Other than slaughter, shepherds are also confronted with killing animals if they are sick or injured. In this matter, there is a difference with the experienced shepherds being mostly used to put down animals and unexperienced shepherds having issues with it. Half



the unexperienced shepherds said that they could not put down an animal if they had to.

Tending to animals is the core of sheep herding and if there are sick or injured animals in the flock it means more work for the shepherd and often an emotional burden. Shepherds feel a strong responsibility to keep animals in their care healthy and to hand them over in good condition. This sense of responsibility is especially strong for shepherds tending to animals that belong to other people.

Asked about the workload and concern caused by natural hazards such as storms, diseases or predators, diseases were said to cause most work and concern, followed by large carnivores. Naturally, this can change between regions and presence of carnivores. However, overall, even with presence of large carnivores, diseases (especially foot rot) were still considered a bigger burden.

When asked about herding dogs, it was frequently said that they are essential for the work of a shepherd. While for some shepherds they are mere working

animals they are more often valued for their companionship and can be a mental support in difficult situations. This is why many dogs are allowed to stay even if they are not the best working dogs.

### 3.5. Shepherd types

The following classification is based on responses given during interviews and to the questionnaire. The “types” of shepherd described below should not be seen as rigid nor comprehensive. Rather they are meant to give an idea of the diversity of people working as shepherds in terms of their motivations and attitudes. Answers to the questionnaire and interviews were clustered by topics and priorities. The typology is an essay to classify different attitudes towards nature and animals. Other Swiss studies attempted to classify summer seasonal workers on Alpine pastures. These qualitative studies clustered the answers from interviews by different factors to classify identity and roles as a guide to the social and cultural backgrounds of people working on Alpine pastures (Gennaio, 2004; Schütz, 2010).





### 3.5.1 The traditional shepherd

The attitude of the traditional shepherd type towards nature is rather pragmatic. They accept the positive as well as the negative sides in a practical and rational manner, meaning they use nature but find a way to deal with negative aspects such as storms and predators. Since nature is the source of their livelihood, they are aware of their responsibility and the sustainability of grazing.

They often have an agricultural background and tend to have been shepherds since they were children or they grew up on farms with other animals. They herd their own animals and are often transhumant shepherds over winter or tend their animals on their own farms. Traditional shepherds usually include their whole family in the work which means that the family has a high significance for them.

They do not necessarily like the solitude or remoteness of being shepherds, but rather value that they can decide over their lives themselves. Other motivations are the preservation of the shepherding tradition and the production of nutrition. But the biggest motivation is to work with sheep. They are deeply fascinated by this animal and they can hardly

imagine working with a different kind of livestock. They value their robustness and flocking instinct. As they own their sheep, they depend on them financially which means that they need to balance the profit of the animals.

There are individuals to which they have emotional bonds (usually ewes) but in general they are rather distanced from their animals, especially lambs which are going to be slaughtered. Dogs are an essential part of their work; without them the shepherd “team” would be incomplete.

### 3.5.2. The nature-loving shepherd

The most important thing for the nature-lovers is to live in harmony with nature. Many among them would like to live on a farm in the mountains throughout the whole year because this is where life makes sense to them. It is limited to the essential and they can be in nature every day. The main motivation of the nature-loving type is hence the desire to work in a natural environment and to live in harmony with nature.

They feel a great responsibility towards nature. While they agree that nature can and should be utilised, this has to be in a responsible and sustainable manner. This



makes herd management especially important. With their flock, they are part of the natural cycle: they take something but also give something back.

Nature is a cycle where life and death are close to each other. Death can be difficult but it is as much a part of life as is birth. For them, slaughtering is therefore, although not pleasant, a part of life. To the nature-lovers it is important that animals live a good life. They share the view that intensive farming and excessive meat consumption is bad for the environment and animals.

### **3.5.3. The animal-loving shepherd**

The animal-lovers work as shepherds because they want, more than anything else, to work with animals. They seek contact and emotional bonds with them. Animal-lovers usually grew up in non-agricultural environments but, in time, some of them started working in the agricultural sector the whole year. Apart from work with animals, freedom and a simple life away from society are especially important for them.

The animal-loving type has a distinctive sense for

animal welfare. They care more than the other types that animals are taken care of well. Slaughter is difficult for them but a certain distancing from lambs that are going to be slaughtered helps them. They would prefer to keep all their animals and not slaughter any of them.

More than the other types of shepherd, they feel a strong responsibility to keep all animals well. This means that a dead animal often causes a feeling of emotional loss and sometimes they even experience feelings of guilt.

For the animal-lovers, dogs are very important and their relationship with them is more than a working relationship. They value their dogs even more for their companionship than for their work. Even though they often started working with dogs because of shepherding, now they could not imagine life without them.

### **3.5.4. The self-fulfilling shepherd**

Shepherd seeking self-fulfilment enjoy working in nature and with animals just as much but their main motivation is a different one. They spend their

summers on alps or their winters outdoors as transhumant shepherds because they value the personal experience. Shepherding gives them something that other professions do not. They want to do meaningful work which satisfies them. Before working as shepherds, they tried other professions but did not find them fulfilling and felt that “something was missing”.

Being a shepherd can also balance the life they lead the rest of the year. When working as a shepherd they feel at peace with themselves, that their work is honest and that it makes sense for themselves and the en-

vironment. It is a life in harmony with nature as well as work with animals that makes the work meaningful and satisfying for them. The simple life lets them focus on essentials. They seek an emotional bond to their animals. For them, the sheep is an intelligent animal with fascinating social behaviour.

They have an even closer relationship with their dogs. They are not only valued working animals but can be just as important as emotional support. Especially in difficult situations they are rather mental support than working animals.



## 4. Conclusions

This study provided an insight into the diverse motivations and attitudes of shepherds in Switzerland. The “typical” profile of a man with roots in agriculture is no longer representative as there are many shepherds with different social, educational and professional backgrounds as well as more women. Today’s shepherds are a diverse group of people as our classification of shepherd types shows. There are many career changers among the experienced shepherds and as more people change to work as shepherds the transfer of knowledge will be especially important.

Despite a trend towards bigger and more intensive farms which would not necessarily favour shepherds there is a good prospect of shepherding in the future. The general trend in society in terms of food production and environmental consciousness favours extensive animal husbandry. Furthermore, the interest of non-agricultural people in this profession shows that,

despite a decrease in farms and sheep keepers, there is a growing interest in this form of animal husbandry and lifestyle.

The new types of shepherd will contribute to developing the profession in the future. Professional shepherds are the backbone of sheep rearing in the mountains while the other types play important roles in the dynamic seasonal job market. This also means that the often challenging seasonality of the profession might have to be adjusted as many shepherds mentioned the difficulty of combining shepherding with other work and their family in the long term.

Finally, the increasing number of large carnivores, especially wolves, calls for alterations in herd management and shepherds are often needed. This, together with the societal trend for extensive food production and environmental consciousness and an increased interest in “green” jobs, makes good prospects for this age-old tradition to survive in a modern world.

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The photographs illustrating this article, as well as those on the front and back covers of this issue, are of flocks shepherded by Markus Nyffeler and Jens Schöndorfer, two transhumant shepherds who graze their sheep during winter in the region of Berne.

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