Portrait

JOAQUIM NUNES
PORTUGAL
52 YEARS OLD

1. *How long have you been working as a shepherd?*

For the last 42 years, since I was 10 years old (excluding 15 months of mandatory military service, when I was 19 years old).

2. *How did you become a shepherd?*

I had no specific training focused on shepherding, apart from the one given by my grandfather and father, and the experience gained so far. But I took a course for young farmers, provided by a local farmers' association, when I was 38 years old. These courses are necessary to apply for financial support by the state, thus enabling considerable investments in livestock breeding or agricultural activities, but I never applied for it.

3. *Please describe your flock and herding system.*

We have a flock of 260 sheep, mainly crosses of the *Berrinchona* breed, as well as from/with the *Manchega*, *Merina* and *Bordaleira da Serra da Estrela* breeds; plus two goats and one buck. The flock is currently divided into three groups: 130 sheep with no lambs; 110 ewes with older lambs and 20 ewes with younger lambs. No milk is collected; revenues come from selling the lambs. The lambing sheep flocks are confined for the night in stables and grazed in pastures closer to home, with less surveillance. The other flock is shepherded 5h per day, and then kept in fenced pastures with the dogs during the rest of the day and night, sometimes far from the village.

No seasonal movements are made.

I have four livestock guarding dogs (LGDs) of the *Estrela Mountain Dog* breed (short-hair variety): two males (one castrated, and another one from the LIFE MedWolf Project) and two females (one very old – 14 years old). He also has four herding dogs (cross breeds of Spanish origin): two males and two females.

4. *Where do you graze the flock?*

I live in the county of Sabugal, NE central Portugal. There are mainly plains, some with a gentle slope, at around 800 m a.s.l.. The pastures are mainly clear with sparse oak trees, and some with medium-high bushes (e.g. broom, lavender, rockrose) but not very thick. The climate is warm and temperate, with an average temperature of 12.6°C and 983 mm of annual rainfall.

5. *What is your main motivation to work as a shepherd?*

I always liked to herd sheep, since I started very young, and liked to help my family. Furthermore, since my family was large (10 brothers) it was hard for my parents to send all of us to school and some had to stay and help. I stayed and continued to shepherd since I always enjoyed it.

An advantage of shepherding my own flock is having the freedom to decide how and when to do things, of being my own boss and having to account to no one, which is not common in other jobs/professions.

6. *What difficulties do you face working as a shepherd?*

The main difficulties are related with the long working hours every day, with no chance of holidays or timeout, making it difficult to be away to take care of other issues. The cold weather can also be hard to bear, but we get used to it. Moreover, the difficulties in selling lambs during half the year (less demand and lower prices): most are sold from June to the 1st January, and then at Easter. Finally, diseases, frequent in lambs, can cause high costs and sometimes the treatments don't work. This activity is only possible due to the subsidies provided by the EC, which compensate for the costs and low selling prices.

7. *What kind of large carnivores do you have in your area?*

Wolves are present, but also smaller carnivores like red foxes.

8. *What are your experiences with them?*

Since we always had LGDs we have no losses to foxes or smaller carnivores in flocks guarded by the dogs. We had some losses to wolves a few years ago after wolves returned to the region (after an absence of almost 30 years) because at the time we only had one LGD. After that we got more dogs and since then had no damages in the flock guarded by them, but we had two attacks in the other flocks. In the past, before the wolves disappeared 30 years ago, we frequently saw one or even two wolves together and even though we had three LGDs, the wolves managed to attack on several occasions and kill several sheep: they were more then. Now, since we have the dogs we have not seen them close to the flock but they are seen crossing nearby roads. Foxes don't get close to the flock but we frequently hear them calling in the night.

9. *Please describe one experience with large carnivores.*

Thirty years ago, during the summer time, we used to sleep in the pastures with the sheep (they grazed during the night because it was too hot during the day). During one of those nights the sheep startled but continued to graze when the three LGDs we had at the time started to bark and run off chasing something in the night (their metal spike collars rattled as they bolted away). We started to gather the sheep in the dark and found one sheep injured in the throat, and another one in the belly, still another sheep dead with fang marks on the throat. On the trail closer to home I stepped into a dead sheep from which a wolf had been feeding - a neighbour that passed by in a car a few minutes earlier scared it off, thus saving me from another scary encounter that night.

10. *Which measures do you take to prevent damage and what are the pros and cons?*

We have always used LGDs and since wolves returned we increased their number. We also built two large metal fences, one 1.6 m high and the other 2 m high, donated by the LIFE MedWolf Project. We use these to confine the sheep during the night and sometimes during the day when they are not shepherded.

LGDs are very helpful since they keep predators away and alert us to the presence of strangers and so prevent thefts of livestock, which can be common in some regions.

The problems of using LGDs are related with the maintenance costs (food, vaccines, licences), the risk of injuring people that may approach the flock and of causing car accidents (when pastures are close to roads and when the flock is crossing roads, mainly at night), although we had no such problems so far. Having insurance is important to account for any legal liability.

Fences are effective but very costly to build to be predator-proof which limits their number and size.

11. *Do you get subsidies or counselling support?*

Yes, by the government, for the pastures, livestock production and the maintenance of two LGDs to protect against wolf attacks. I also received two LGDs and one metal fence from the LIFE MedWolf Project.

12. *What are the main challenges when dealing with large carnivores in your area?*

In relation to wolves, the main issue is the damage they cause to flocks and the fact that compensation is below the value of the animals and some are not compensated at all (the animals are not found or there are not enough signs of predation to be eligible). Support for the building of fences and the maintenance of LGDs should be continued and expanded to other farmers. The compensation values and processes should be reviewed to make it easier and fairer.

On the other hand, I recognize that some people can appreciate seeing wolves in the wild, as I expect my family would, and I would too.