



Full citation: Frioux, Stephane. Review of *Histoire du méchant loup: 3000 attaques de loup sur l'homme en France, XVe-XXe siècles* [History of the big bad wolf: 3000 attacks on human beings in France, fifteenth–twentieth century] by Jean-Marc Moriceau. *Global Environment* 3 (2009): 254–7.
<http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/4626>.

First published: <http://www.globalenvironment.it>.

Rights: All rights reserved. Made available on the Environment & Society Portal for nonprofit educational purposes only, courtesy of Gabriella Corona, Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche / National Research Council of Italy (CNR), and XL edizioni s.a.s.



Library

Jean-Marc Moriceau
Histoire du méchant loup: 3000
attaques de loup sur l'homme
en France, XVe-XXe siècles
[*History of the Big Bad Wolf:*
3000 attacks on human beings
in France, 15th-20th century]
Editions du Seuil
Paris 2007, pp. 623

Stéphane Frioux

This book deals with an animal, which, along with the bear, has been at the core of environmental conflicts in France since its reappearance around 1992. The topic of wolves has become fashionable in the social sciences. The focus is on the perception of this predator and on management policies allowing its coexistence with the herds within the pastoral system of the Alps. Nowadays any negative discourse on wolves provokes immediate suspicion and criticism.¹ The originality of Jean-Marc Moriceau's book lies first of all in the author's area of competence. Moriceau is a well-known modern French rural historian, editor of the review *Histoire et Sociétés rurales*. This *Histoire du méchant loup* is a good example of the recent trend of integrating the environment in social history. Other disciplines and some regional scholars have been studying wolves for a quarter of a century. Moriceau himself presents his work as a "first synthesis" which should be followed by further works. He borrows some ideas or methodological approaches

¹ The author actually had to persuade his editor to change the initially proposed title *Le procès du loup*, which translates to "The Trial of the Wolf". Colleagues who would like to see some of these critiques can read the book review and the following debate on the website www.loup.org

mainly from previous studies by French researchers Claude and Gilles Ragache, Daniel Bernard, Alain Molinier, and François de Beaufort, as well as some works by non-French authors, such as the Linnell report.² Thanks to the wide range of documentation he has managed to put together, Moriceau has been able to confirm some of these scholars' hypotheses. Another relevant feature of his book are its numerous, well-chosen examples and illustrations. *Histoire du méchant loup* comprises all of 44 documents, 48 tables (the last one listing hundreds of wolf attack cases), 27 maps and 22 pictures.

The first two chapters are devoted to the sources of the book's historical investigation. Quoting Marc Bloch ("comment puis-je savoir ce que je vais vous dire?"),³ Moriceau insists on this methodological dimension ("discours de la méthode"), probably because he is aware that a large number of his readers will not be historians and will need to familiarize themselves with historical documentation. The wide range of sources examined by the author includes medieval and modern chronicles, administrative inquiries, newspapers, hospital admittance archives, and, above all, burial records compiled by parish priests since the sixteenth century. This last category is particularly interesting for the nation-wide coverage it provides, and is susceptible to further investigation, in collaboration with genealogists. Burial records are especially useful sources for quantitative research and spatial analysis. According to Moriceau, these sources actually underestimate the actual number of wolf attacks. On the other hand, the acceptability of burial records as evidence has been questioned. In many the killer animal is designated as *bête* ("beast") and not *loup* ("wolf"), an ambiguity that is stressed by proponents of the idea that the deaths could have been caused by dogs rather than wolves.

In chapters III to VI, the author draws a chronology of wolf attacks over the centuries, with special emphasis on crucial moments, such as crises provoked by wars (end of 16th century; 1630s; 1652-1654, etc.). When the elites go to war, they do not hunt wolves, which proliferate.

² J. Linnell, R. Andersen, Z. Andersone, L. Balciauskas, J.C. Blanco, L. Boitani, S. Brainerd, U. Breitenmoser, I. Kojola, O. Liberg, J. Løe, H. Okarma, H.C. Pedersen, H. Sand, E.J. Solberg, H. Valdmann, P. Wabakken, *The Fear of Wolves. A Review of Wolf Attacks on Humans*, Norsk Institutt for Naturforskning, Trondheim 2002.

³ "How can I know beforehand what I am going to tell you?", in M. Bloch, *Apolo-gie pour l'histoire ou métier d'historien*, Armand Colin, Paris 1949, p. 25.

A useful chronological summary can be found on page 91. The reader can find a list of several hundred cases of attacks in the annex. The peak number of attacks was recorded in the 1690s; curiously, it was during this decade that the French writer Charles Perrault wrote his fairy tale “Le petit chaperon rouge” (“Little Red Riding Hood”). Not surprisingly, one whole chapter in Moriceau’s book (V) is devoted to the most famous case of wolf attacks, known as the incident of the “Bête du Gévaudan” (the “Beast of Gévaudan”), which occurred in the 1760s and about which several books have already been written, including one by Moriceau himself in 2008.⁴ An exceptional documentation built up around this case, which almost immediately gained a broad European audience. After the disappearance of the “Bête du Gévaudan”, the number of anthropophagous attacks decreased, and attacks by hydrophobic wolves became the main risk.

In a series of thematic chapters (VII to XI), Moriceau reviews, in succession, the geography of attacks (ranging in scale from a nation-wide overview, illustrated by maps, to the reconstruction of local topography from references found in burial records); the time when they occurred; the nature of the predator according to historical records; the manner of killing; and the social characteristics of the victims. The first two chapters of this set show that the risk of being attacked depended less on the animal itself than on the nature of human activities in the agropastoral space. Summer was the season of highest risk, because herds and human beings spent the greatest amount of time outside (as shown in the calendar on p. 287). Chapter XI predictably depicts a world where peasants and destitute rural inhabitants – above all children and elderly people – were the most frequent victims. Children were commonly employed to guard livestock and could easily encounter a wolf. Sometimes the cattle would protect them from the animal’s attack.

Chapter XII illustrates the characteristics of a rabid wolf’s attack, clearly identified and distinguished, according to Moriceau, in the records themselves. The last chapter of the book (XIII) looks at attitudes towards hydrophobia as a disease (that could be transmitted by dogs as much as wolves) against which medical science remained powerless until Louis Pasteur found a treatment in 1885. Moriceau finally insists on the hor-

⁴ J-M. Moriceau, *La Bête du Gévaudan, 1764-1767*, Larousse, Paris 2008, p. 284.

rific dimension of death following a rabid wolf's attack, as the symptoms and death could occur several days later. Such a fate could affect every social category, contrary to the attacks of normal wolves.

These last two chapters synthesize the differences between the attacks of "normal" wolves and those of rabid ones, already discussed in the thematic chapters. Indeed, while Jean-Marc Moriceau has produced an exceptional study that shows a real concern with accuracy, it can also be remarked that his essay is on occasion a little repetitive. Some demonstrations are a bit long-winded, especially when the author discusses facts that are easily predictable for a trained historian: "normal" wolves attack children and elderly people, whereas rabid wolves will attack any human being; normal wolves eat parts of the victim, whereas rabid wolves attack their prey and leave it without consuming it.

The first part of the book, a sort of preliminary historical synthesis of known episodes of wolf attacks, appears more convincing and could stimulate further research, in provincial French archives as well as foreign countries, in order to build a European comparative chronology. Judging by the impact of the *Histoire du méchant loup*, which has found a far larger reading public than the restricted community of historians, it is easy to expect that the topic of wolves will offer us many books in the near future. Let us hope that international programs will be funded and allow colleagues to dig more deeply into details and gain a broader scope, at least at a European scale. Finally, J-M. Moriceau has chosen to write a history of wolf attacks on humans rather than an exhaustive history of the relationships between men and wolves. These cases, he argues, serve as a "bio-indicator of rural space management". His work is thus far removed from the approach of "zoohistory" launched by Robert Delort in the 1980s, which is centered on the history of the animal itself rather than that of human beings.⁵ Still, with this book Moriceau has undeniably taken a promising step in the direction of interdisciplinary cooperation between historians and ecologists.⁶

⁵ R. Delort, *Les animaux ont une histoire*, Fayard, Paris 1984.

⁶ An example of such a cooperation is Julien Alleau and Eric Fabre, "La disparition des loups ou essai d'écologie historique", in *L'animal sauvage entre nuisance et patrimoine (France, XVIe-XXIe siècles)*, Stéphane Frioux and Emilie-Anne Pépy (eds), ENS Editions, Lyon forthcoming.