

STUDY AREA DESCRIPTION

PICOS DE EUROPA

ASTURIAS, SPAIN



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1 INTRODUCTION

For centuries, the western slopes of the Picos de Europa have witnessed a remarkable coexistence. In the Asturian municipalities of Onís and Cangas de Onís, shepherds and their flocks have shared the mountains with one of Europe's most iconic predators—the Iberian wolf. This enduring relationship has shaped not only the landscape, with its patchwork of alpine pastures and Atlantic forests, but also a distinctive cultural heritage built on traditional pastoralism. Today, this heritage lives on in products like the PDO Gamonéu cheese (Ayuntamiento de Onís, 2020). The territory uniquely blends conservation—as part of the Picos de Europa National Park—with a vibrant rural identity that remains deeply connected to pastoral farming (OAPN, 2023).



Figure 1: Traditional mountain landscape in Onís, Picos de Europa, where transhumant herds of Asturiana de los Valles cattle move each summer towards alpine pastures. The open grasslands and stone cottages (majadas) reflect centuries of pastoral activity and the deep cultural link between livestock farming and the mountain landscape (Photo: Daniel Martín Collado).

2 OVERVIEW

- **Municipalities:** Onís and Cangas de Onís.
- **Geographical size:** The total area spans approximately 290 km².

- ▶ **Human population:** The 2 municipalities are home to approximately 7,050 residents.
- ▶ **Number of livestock farmers:** The area hosts approximately 222 livestock farmers. However, this figure likely overestimates the actual number of professional farms, as it also includes hobby farmers and holdings with only a few animals.
- ▶ **Livestock farming systems:** Extensive mountain grazing with seasonal transhumance (winter in valleys, summer in mountain pastures). Most farms today are pure beef operations, though traditional mixed herds of cattle, sheep, and goats remain.
- ▶ **Wild large carnivore species:** The wolf (*Canis lupus*) and brown bear (*Ursus arctos*, historically present, rarely today)
- ▶ **Wolf population:** According to official census around **44 wolf packs** are currently present in Asturias, with 4 packs residing within the Picos de Europa National Park.



Figure 2: Cattle grazing in the alpine pastures of Covadonga, Picos de Europa National Park (Photo Credit: Daniel Martín Collado).

3 SOCIOECONOMIC CONTEXT

- ▶ **Environment:** Onís and Cangas de Onís are located in eastern Asturias, a mountainous territory with an altitudinal range from 80 m in valleys to >2,000 m at the limestone peaks of the Cornión Massif. The climate is humid oceanic, with 1,000 – 1,200 mm of rainfall annually and frequent snow at higher elevations. Much of the southern area belongs to Picos de Europa National Park, a Natura 2000 site, covering 7,400 ha in Cangas de Onís and 2,080 ha in Onís.

- **Local economy:** The local economy has transformed over recent decades. Historically rooted in livestock and forestry, Onís saw more than 60% of its employment in the primary sector during the early 1990s. Cangas de Onís, with a larger population, serves as a regional service hub, diversifying into commerce, construction, and tourism. Tourism has become the dominant sector in Cangas de Onís, attracting almost 1.8 million visitors to the Picos de Europa National Park in 2022.

Tourism is seasonal but vital, supported by a dense network of rural lodgings and hotels. Cangas de Onís also holds symbolic value as the first capital of the Kingdom of Asturias, with heritage sites such as the Roman bridge and Covadonga sanctuary.

Pastoral culture remains central, exemplified by Gamonéu cheese (PDO). This artisanal cheese, made from raw cow's, sheep's, and goat's milk, comes in two varieties: Gamonéu del **Puertu**, produced only in summer in traditional cheese dairies located in alpine pastures, and Gamonéu del **Valle**, produced year-round in village dairies in the valleys.



Figure 3: Gamonéu del Puertu cheeses undergoing the smoking process, in a traditional cheese dairies located in alpine pastures. The process is a key step that gives the cheese its distinctive flavor and preservation qualities (Photo Credit: Daniel Martín Collado).

- **Social Context:** Onís and Cangas de Onís are small mountain communities facing the challenges of an ageing population and rural depopulation. Social life revolves around pastoral traditions, especially Gamonéu cheese production, which sustains family cooperation and a sense of local identity. In Cangas de Onís, tourism linked to Picos de Europa and Covadonga provides vital employment and services. The area balances preserving traditional rural mountain life with adapting to new economic and social dynamics.

4 FARMING CONTEXT

Pastoral farming is extensive, relying on seasonal transhumance between valley pastures in winter and alpine pastures in summer. The shared grazing of cattle, sheep and goats shapes the open landscape and maintains biodiversity. Cattle farming is predominant, with the Asturian local breeds (*Asturiana de la Montaña* and *Asturiana de los Valles*) being the most common. Sheep and goats are mainly associated with the production of Gamonéu cheese. Farms are small and family-run, often by aged farmers over the age of 55.



Figure 4: Flock of sheep grazing in alpine pastures of Picos de Europa National Park, a traditional system linked to the production of PDO Gamonéu cheese. (Photo: Daniel Martín Collado).

Main Challenges:

- ▶ Ageing farming population and low generational renewal.
- ▶ High production costs, low profitability, and dependence on CAP subsidies.
- ▶ Predation by large wolf and related emotional or administrative burdens.
- ▶ Sanitary and animal health regulations, particularly tuberculosis and brucellosis.
- ▶ Additional pressures arise from EU agricultural policy and land-use regulations linked to the Natural Park.



Figure 5: An Asturiana de la Montaña cow resting near a stone shepherd's hut (majada) in the misty alpine pastures of Cangas de Onís. (Photo: Daniel Martín Collado).

5 LOCAL CONFLICT ASSOCIATED WITH LARGE CARNIVORES

Number of attacks:

- ▶ Wolf presence causes recurring damage to cattle, sheep, goats, and horses. According to official data, 3,256 head of livestock were confirmed to have been killed by wolves in Asturias in 2023.
- ▶ The number of casualties in the area has remained stable over the past 15 years. Significant losses have been recorded in mountain grazing areas, such as the Picos de Europa National Park, where extensive and scattered herds are highly vulnerable.

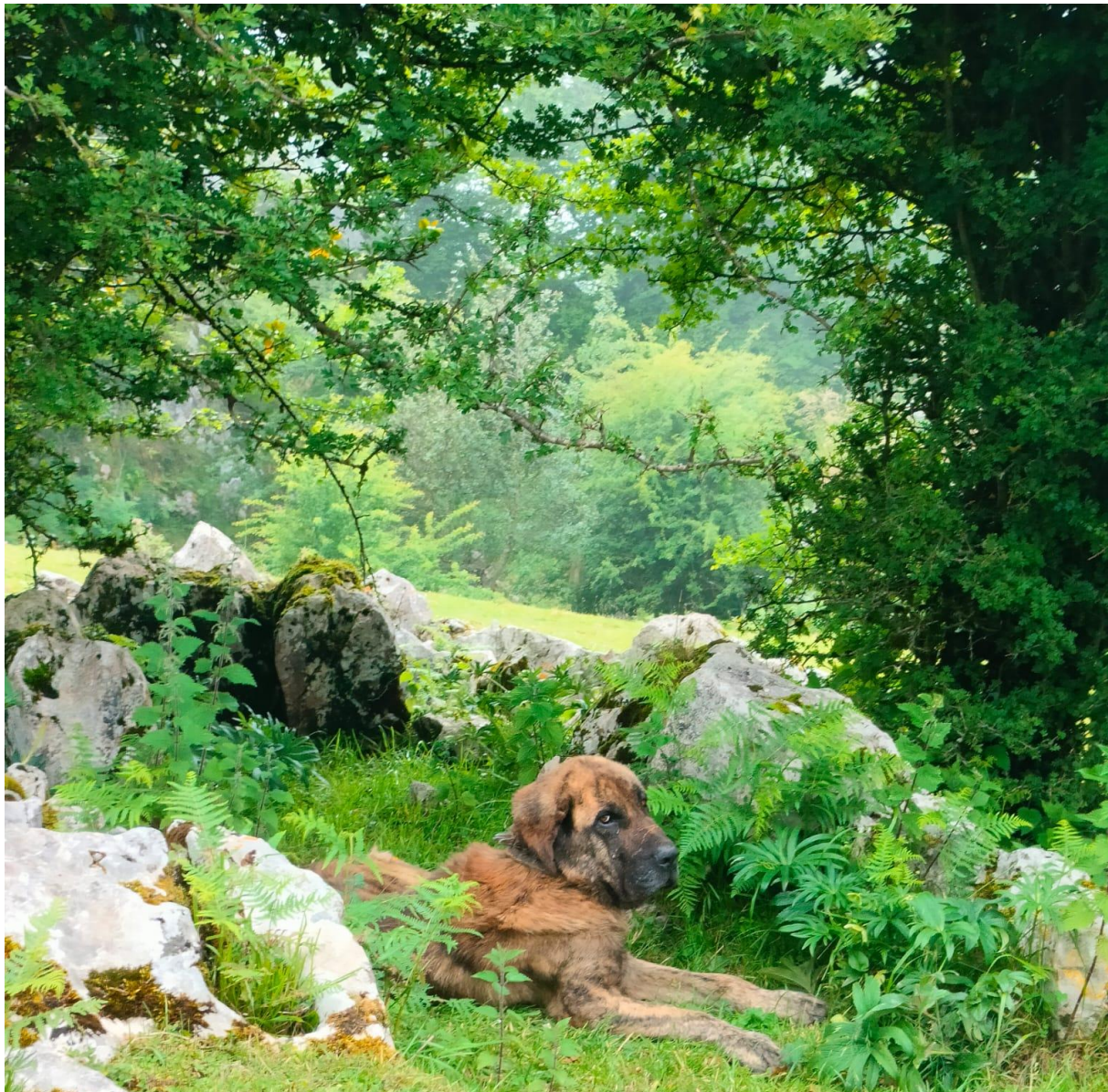


Figure 6: Spanish Mastiff resting in the alpine pastures of Picos de Europa National Park. This traditional livestock guardian dog is essential to protect herds of sheep, goats, and cattle from wolf predation. (Photo: Daniel Martín Collado).

Social conflict:

- ▶ **Emotional and psychological stress among farmers:** Feelings of frustration, fear, and helplessness are widespread.
- ▶ **Perceived insufficiency of compensation systems:** Payments are perceived as slow, incomplete, or unfair, and as not fully reflecting real losses on the ground.
 - Many attacks remain unregistered or unconfirmed due to the rugged terrain the removal of evidence by scavengers.
- ▶ **Limited effectiveness or feasibility of preventive measures:** Guard dogs and electric fences are often unsuitable in extensive mountain systems, with terrain and costs limiting feasibility.
 - Terrain limits the use of preventive tools, reinforcing the sense of vulnerability
- ▶ **Rising polarisation and tension between social positions:** Tensions go beyond material damage, mirroring broader societal divides between control-oriented and protection-oriented approaches.
 - Conflict intensified after legal changes: prohibition of lethal control (2021-2025) and new management authorizations (2025–2026).

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