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CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE  
AND NATURAL HABITATS

**Standing Committee**

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**LHF & THE EUROPEAN BISON  
SPECIES ACTION PLAN**



*Document  
prepared by  
the Large Herbivore Foundation*

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## **SUMMARY (INTERIM) REPORT 2007**

### **Report to : Standing Committee Bern Convention/ COE**

#### **GENERAL INTRODUCTION**

Large herbivores, an unusual name for a charismatic group of animals, they include all hoofed mammals such as horses and asses, camels, wild bovines, deer, sheep and antelopes. Large herbivores are key species in the web of life. Many species directly or indirectly benefit from the presence of large herbivores. However the role of large herbivores in the ecosystem is generally not known and valued. As a result most large herbivore species throughout Eurasia are dramatically declining. The saiga antelope declined since 1993, from 2 million to less than 50.000 today. Another key-species of the steppes, the Mongolian gazelle, has declined from over 2 million to less than 0,5 million. Closer to Europe, the last Pyrenean ibex died, in Spain, in 1999, leaving this subspecies extinct forever!

#### **LARGE HERBIVORE FOUNDATION**

The critical situation of many large herbivores calls for specialised conservation action. Therefore, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) initiated the Large Herbivore Foundation (LHF) as an international programme in 1998. After five years of experience, the LHF was set up (by WWF and partners) as an independent (international) foundation in 2003. Conserving and restoring the essential role of large herbivores in nature is the goal of the LHF as expressed in the vision of the foundation:

‘An Eurasian continent where people value and enjoy the benefits of ecosystems and landscapes inhabited by viable populations of all the region’s large herbivores, living in the wild’

The backbone of the organisation is the LHF network. Over 200 experts representing different parties and disciplines from over 30 countries actively participate in the foundation. The foundation acts as a facilitator and catalyst, using a seed-money strategy to start and support initiatives and projects.

The logo of the foundation represents a European bison to symbolise the strength, the importance of large herbivores in contrast with the vulnerability, the skull of the Aurochs, extinct in 1627.

Together this symbolizes the goals of the Large Herbivore Foundation;

- to conserve and protect large herbivores and their ecosystems throughout Eurasia.
- to restore the natural ecosystems and the important role of large herbivores in these ecosystems.

#### **EUROPEAN BISON; INTRODUCTION AND FRAMEWORK**

The last European bison (*Bison bonasus*) in the wild was killed in 1927. The species survived only thanks to the effort of several European zoological gardens and wildlife parks. After World War II only 54 individuals survived, originating from 12 ancestors. After the war the restitution of the European bison started, by intensive breeding in zoological gardens, wildlife parks and specially created reserves. On 13 September 1952 the first bison were released from the breeding station in the Bialowieza forest in Poland. The total number of European bison in the world is now around 3.500 individuals, including about 1.800 free-ranging bison distributed among several herds in Poland (5), Byelorussia (7), Lithuania (1), Ukraine (9) and Russia (8). Genetic exchange between the different herds is currently not possible, due to long distances and ecological barriers. Only 4 herds are big enough that we can speak of a viable population and can call it demographically safe. The free-ranging herds in Russia have been declining rapidly due to poaching and their long term survival is uncertain, in spite of new reintroductions initiated by LHF and WWF Russia. In the Caucasus two herds (about 60 animals) were exterminated a few years ago, while two others dropped dramatically; one dropped from 1.300 (1984) to 550 (1999) another herd dropped from 250

(1993) to 18 (2001) and it is even uncertain if the herd still exists today. As the current bison situation for most of the free ranging herds in Russia is unknown, LHF and WWF Russia have launched a project to monitor all free ranging bison populations in Russia. This project has been started in 2007.

As a species the European bison is still very vulnerable and needs human help for its survival. The threats are numerous; loss of habitats, disturbance, inbreeding, poaching, diseases, etc.

## **SPECIES ACTION PLAN EUROPEAN BISON**

The European bison has been one of the key species for conservation of LHF in Europe, since the first LHF founding meeting in Bialowieza, Poland in 1998. It started with an inventory of the coordination structure of the different bison activities through EAZA. It turned out that no organization was responsible Europe wide, so LHF took the initiative to coordinate Bison conservation. LHF started to stimulate and initiate co-operation amongst all parties involved in bison breeding and bison conservation. In 1998 LHF had the first contacts with Prof.Dr.Pucek (PL), at that time chair of the IUCN Bison specialist group, to discuss the preparation of a Species Action Plan (SAP). It was agreed that a Species Action Plan (SAP) for European bison , with an official IUCN status was urgently needed.

LHF financed the following SAP working meetings and the production/printing of the SAP. LHF made a request to the Bern convention in 2002, for adoption and endorsement. In 2004, under the new chair of the IUCN bison specialist group, Dr. Wanda Olech(PL), the SAP was finalized and printed.

In the same year the SAP was approved and adopted by the SC of the Bern convention/Council of Europe. The European bison was also in 2004 adopted by the EU commission, as indicator species for Natura 2000 sites. This signified the beginning of a more coordinated bison restoration program in Europe. In the same year, 2004, the LHF participated in a WCMC/ UNEP monitoring study/report in which the European bison was selected as a PAN European biodiversity indicator.

An important issue in the SAP is the plan to set up an international centre for European bison, to coordinate all European bison restoration/information/logistic, activities. This would include a (genetic) data base (in cooperation with the EBPB, Pedigree Book), selection of sites and animals for reintroduction, support of breeding stations, etc. The International Centre for European Bison (ICEB) will be set up in an international cooperation with Warsaw University, possible partners being e.g. Artis ZOO, Amsterdam. Funding for the ICEB will be sought a.o. with the European Community/ Commission.

## **BISON CONSERVATION**

### **General**

Simultaneously with the work for the SAP that LHF initiated, LHF coordinated and/or supported a wide range of bison conservation activities, starting in 1999 with the financing of bison transport to Okskii breeding station and the Orel-Bryansk-Kaluga oblast 'ecoregion' in Russia. Five more transports followed, with the last transport in 2002. In total 57 animals were transported in a 3 year period. Since 1999 the LHF director Drs. Fred Baerselman made several assessments together with different experts (e.g. K. Perzanowski, M. Krasinska, A. Krasinski, C. Okolow, J. van de Vlasakker) to explore potential reintroduction sites in Europe; e.g. Lake Pape/ Latvia, Lieberose/Germany, Horsterwold/Netherlands, Sumava/Czech republic, Poloniny/Slovakia, Massif-Central/France and Beskidy/Bokovina, Ukraine.

LHF addressed the separation and the lack of genetic exchange between the Polish Bialowieza herd and the Belarusian Bialowieza herd, both in meetings with the Bialowieza NP management as well as in a meeting with the Belarussian ambassador in London in 2002. LHF also addressed the issue of lack of natural grazing in Bialowieza by the region's natural large herbivore community in their natural densities. This should include the role of (substitutes) for the extinct aurochs and wild horse as grazers and important facilitators, e.g. for the European bison in the Bialowieza forest.

## **Baltic**

In 1999 LHF started together with WWF Latvia a pilot project at Lake Pape (SW Latvia), on ecological restoration and sustainable rural development, to address the issue of large scale abandoned agricultural lands. Restoring the natural role of large grazers, including the native European bison is one of the key elements of the pilot project. In 2003 the first bison were brought to Lake Pape to start the establishment of a breeding group, prior to release into the wild.

In the neighbouring country Lithuania, LHF was informed in 2003 by one of its network members that the Lithuanian government intended to cull all free-living bison, before accession to the EU.

LHF immediately took action and had a meeting with the Ministry of the Environment in Vilnius and with support of the Secretariat of the Bern Convention/COE, mobilized pressure to cancel this plan. The LHF Network meeting 2003 was organised in Lithuania, to bring the issue to (inter)national attention, followed by the next LHF Network meeting in 2004 in Latvia. The action was successful, but, in spite of several meetings, again in Vilnius with the LT Ministry in February 2005 and again in June 2005, the LT bison are still not safe as the Ministry has the intention to fence in these free living animals. Their future is still uncertain!! The LHF has proposed to help with the translocation of these animals from the agriculture area where they are now, to a 'less' conflict area with better opportunities to establish a sustainable population. Several potential translocation sites were assessed in the field by LHF in Lithuania in 2005, where at least two sites have been rated as promising.

EU action and support is needed, as the bison is in the Habitat Directive under annex II and IV, and since the Lithuanian government is obliged by EU law to protect their European bison population.

LHF also initiated the idea for the establishment of two meta-population in the Baltic ecoregion; in the border area Poland-Belorussia-Lithuania and in the border area between Lithuania and Latvia. Both sites on the Lithuanian border are promising for translocation and nomination as Natura 2000 sites, mainly consisting of forests, meadows and moors and with limited human occupation and use.

## **Carpathians**

Based on advice and assessment by the bison experts (members of the IUCN BSG) in the LHF network, it was decided to nominate the Carpathian Mountains, as a hotspot for bison conservation and restoration, with better (short term) perspectives than the PL/BR Bialowieza area.

The intention is to establish 2 meta-populations; one in the UNESCO/MAB 'Beskidy Biosphere Reserve' in Slovakia, Poland and Ukraine (Western Carpathians) and one in the Bokovina / Ukraine and Northern Romania border region (Eastern Carpathians). Preparations for re-introduction were made in Slovakia, by LHF in cooperation with experts and SK officials, but also focussing strongly on consensus with local people and foresters. The first 5 bison could be released in May 2004, simultaneously with the official 'public + media' launch of the LHF as an independent NGO in Poloniny NP/ NE Slovakia. Soon after release, the SK bison group was joined by 4 free ranging bison from Poland. Currently discussions are ongoing with the local community, hunters and foresters in Poloniny to introduce additional animals to create a viable population.

In Poland some financial support was given by LHF to introduce additional captive bred bison to broaden the gene pool of the Bieszczady herd.

In 2004, LHF organised a workshop in Vanatori Neamt NP, Romania on the restoration of the European bison in both the Baltic and the Carpathian ecoregions. LHF became a partner in the bison reintroduction project in Vanatori Neamt NP. Bison have been transported from different locations in Europe to VNNP and total number is now 20 animals. They are kept currently in a 180 ha enclosure prior to release. LHF has provided radio telemetry equipment for monitoring the bison after release.

Following a field assessment in 2005 the LHF has provided money to build an enclosure in Beskidy NP in Western Ukraine to introduce captive bred bison prior to release, in a project in

cooperation with the Academy of Sciences UA, University of Lviv and the Ukraine government. Here it is needed to expand the gene pool and improve the sex/age ration in the free-living herd. Numbers had decreased to as low as only 11 animals. Preparations are now ongoing for transport of animals from Belgium, Sweden, Germany, and Lithuania to W. Ukraine. The LHF assessment in the Bokovina region revealed several severe problems; e.g. destruction of habitats, clear-cutting of forests in vast areas, opening up of forested (remote) areas by a network of roads for timber transport. This is followed by intensive human disturbance, including poaching, because of new accessibility. Semi-legal and illegal hunting turned out to also be an issue that negatively affected the herd numbers and sex/age ratio. This region is very important for future connection/linkage with Romanian free ranging herds. These issues have been/will be discussed with Ukraine authorities, but it seems, that also (inter)national action needs to be taken, to address these issues.

#### **UPDATE OF EUROPEAN BISON ACTIVITIES 2007**

Important progress has been made in 2007, with the foundation by Polish partners of the European Bison Advisory Centre (EBAC) at the Agricultural University of Warsaw. The EBAC is planned to be broadened with international partners, to become the international bison centre, as advised in the IUCN/ COE Species Action Plan on European bison. ( see above).

#### **CURRENT STATUS / ACTIVITIES 2007 IN EUROPEAN RANGE COUNTRIES**

*(A number of (LHF)bison activities (transport, reintroduction, etc.) planned for 2007, had to be postponed, because of the veterinary situation regarding 'blue tongue' in W. Europe. With the pending EU decision to allow vaccination against 'blue tongue', the planned activities will be resumed, late 2007/ early 2008).*

##### **Germany**

No free ranging population. Re-introduction of a free living population is under preparation in the Rothaar Gebirge, coordinated by the German NGO Taurus. LHF is partner and has financed a Human Dimensions study. Positive decision by D Federal/Regional authorities expected fall '07. Several other introductions under preparation in enclosures/ fenced - in areas

##### **Denmark**

No free ranging population. Introduction of a 'free-living' population on the island of Brandsoe, is under preparation. Assessment of LHF/ Aage V. Jensen Foundation 2007, for ecological restoration including introduction of European bison in (future) NP 'Lille Villose' / Jutland.

##### **Netherlands**

First (experimental) introduction in enclosure (summer 2007), group of 12 bison, dune area 'Kraansvlak'; NP 'Kennemerduinen' / Haarlem. First 'visions' of 'real' bison re-introduction in Horsterwold area, Flevoland/ Oostvaardersplassen area.

##### **Poland**

Several free ranging populations (see SAP). Only two populations can be considered viable; Bialowieza and Bieszczady. Ecological networks are needed; as well as more natural management of the bison herd to allow migrations and linkage between the different herds.

Introduction of some captive bred animals, to broaden the gene pool has taken place in the Bieszczady herd. Additional animals will be brought 2007/08. A pilot project, initiated by the Polish Academy of Science and the LHF started in 2005, to restore the ecological processes of natural grazing by the large herbivore community, also to facilitate for bison. An education program, for the public, on the role of the Aurochs and wild horses by means of semi wild domestic substitutes in the Bieszczady mountains is part of the program.

##### **Slovakia**

One small free-living population of 9 individuals has been (re)introduced in 2004, free-ranging in Poloniny NP, (NE Slovakia) linking with Polish herds. LHF is working closely together with the

Federal Slovak authorities on this project. Discussions with local community, hunters and foresters are ongoing, to introduce additional bison to build up a viable population. (foreseen 2008).

### **Lithuania**

One population ( $\pm$  30 individuals) is still free-ranging in the centre of the country, in an urbanised agricultural area. This population is still under serious threat, also because the Lithuanian government, wants to exclude the European bison as free living in the Lithuanian nature. Negotiations are on-going, but no progress has been made. EU commission on request of LHF, has made an inquiry spring 2007 to the Lithuanian Government. But this has not (yet) resulted in the needed actions and cooperation in support of translocation, etc. Further EU / COE action and mediation is urgently needed to come to a positive solution, also in view of the EU obligations by the Lithuanian government in regards to the IUCN/COE SAP E. bison and the EU habitat directive.

### **Latvia**

No free living bison, however a re-introduction program initiated by a private NGO, with wide public support, is under preparation. The breeding group, in a temporally enclosure of 250 ha, is further expanded to build a genetic broad breeding group prior to release. (planned for 2007). The first bison, under semi-wild conditions, were born in 2006. EU support is needed for negotiations with Latvian ministry for permission to release bison to the wild, in accordance with the advice of the IUCN bison specialist group in the SAP.

### **Ukraine**

As one of the most important range countries for European bison (see above), LHF is focusing to try to improve the situation and status of bison, together with Ukraine authorities and Ukraine partners (e.g. Ukraine Academy of Sciences). For the Beskydy area (NP Skoliviski Beskydy, W. Ukraine), the enclosure for the bison to re-enforce the existing herd was completed and some 12 animals were planned to arrive this year, 2007. Unfortunately, this had to be postponed, due to the 'blue tongue' situation. At the 2007 LHF Annual Meeting in Lviv UA, the general status of bison in UA, and in particular in Bukovina was discussed with UA experts and authorities. This will lead to new initiatives regarding the re-enforcement of bison herds in the Bukovina area.

### **Russia**

As mentioned above, this year 2007 an assessment study of status/ situation of bison herds in Russia has been started. The study will be done in cooperation of WWF Russia and (bison experts of)LHF. Results and proposals are expected in 2008.

For more information:

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