



Conservation

Sustainability

Education

COMEBACK OF THE EUROPEAN BISON IN THE CARPATHIANS




**PROTECTING
3 WILDERNESS STRONGHOLDS
IN THE ROMANIAN
CARPATHIANS**

**INITIATING A NATIONAL
BISON REWILDING PLAN**



**185 FREE-ROAMING
BISON BY 2019**



**75 ANIMALS 3 NATIONAL
BISON BREADING CENTERS**



OUR VISION

WWF Romania, together with local, national and international partners are working to create a sustainable development model

in the Southern Carpathians by valuing the largest wilderness stronghold in Europe. We envision that local communities' wellbeing can be sustained through nature-friendly enterprises connected to the conservation initiatives in the area. WWF is leading a bison reintroduction program in the Tarcu Mountains, an environment where the European bison disappeared from over 200 years ago. The wisent is an umbrella species has a great impact in maintaining ecological processes specific to wilderness areas. A national bison reintroduction programme creates a unique opportunity for local community development, eco-tourism, research and education.

Thanks to dedicated conservationists concerned about its survival, the European bison didn't disappear completely during the 20th century. But it was just a very narrow escape. A hundred years ago the European bison went extinct in the wild and finally only a few dozen animals survived, all in captivity, originating from only twelve founder animals.

The 'Bison Comeback' concept will provide a key contribution to the return of the bison in Europe. WWF Romania aims to establish and strengthen three wild living, viable populations of this species and set up and enhance breeding stations to support reintroductions. This will be done in three different pilot sites, mostly in rewilding areas where we have been able to build local partnerships and secure areas for this purpose.

WWF Romania now sees the opportunity to make a breakthrough when it comes to the conservation of the European bison. We intend to do so in collaboration with a number of partner organisations, by establishing, reinforcing and protecting three, large, wild bison populations in the Carpathian Mountains, a region which still has the largest natural areas in mainland Europe and also by starting up an additional breeding programme that will help the reintroduction process.

In the Bison Rewilding Plan 2014–2024, which is attached to this proposal, WWF Romania, in partnership with Rewilding Europe, has described its strategy on how to get the European bison out of the danger zone. Central to this approach is the support of one of the free-living bison populations in Romania and the establishment of two new ones. The final goal is to support three long-term viable populations, all with the goal of at least 250 free-living bison. Because the bison is a species that had its original distribution both in the mountains and in the lowlands, we have been searching for suitable areas in both kinds of habitat.



185

BISON IN THE WILD, A
LONG TERM VIABLE,
GENETICALLY DIVERSE
POPULATION

3 LONG-TERM VIABLE, FREE-ROAMING BISON POPULATIONS BY 2024

Achieving this goal requires a focused effort of five years on the reintroduction sites, in which European bison are released in yearly groups, their behaviour and health are monitored, local stakeholders are involved in the reintroductions and the local economy is built around the bison project. After an investment of five years it is expected that the population will be of sufficient size to survive and the project can generate own resources for a sustainable protection of its growing bison population.

Bison experts in Europe have all agreed that the Carpathians should constitute the backbone of the future distribution and habitat of the European bison. This area stretches from the Serbian-Bulgarian border in the south through the mountain ranges of Romania and Ukraine into the mountains on the borders between Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. More than 50 million acres of more or less contiguous natural habitat connecting the main European bison countries with each other (see map).

However, the bison populations in this immense mountain chain are highly fragmented and consist only of small sub-populations, sometimes having an even smaller genetic base than the bison population taken as a whole.

In this envisioned stronghold of the European bison, there are today three (potential) hotspots for the future recovery of the European bison, in which WWF Romania and its partners intend to be involved: the Tarcu Mountains, Poiana Rusca Mountains and Vanatori Neamt.

Some inspirational quote



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1. TARCU MOUNTAINS

This is the first WWF Romania bison

conservation project and it has been initiated in collaboration with Rewilding Europe in 2012. The pilot site in Tarcu Mountains was selected through a feasibility study carried out in 2012 in the Western part of the Southern Carpathians. Several potential bison reintroduction areas had been assessed both from an ecological and human dimension point of views and Armenis area resulted in being the most suitable to kick-off such initiative.

OBJECTIVE

ESTABLISH THE LARGEST WILD AND FREE-ROAMING BISON POPULATION IN EUROPE,

IN 2024 A TOTAL POPULATION OF MORE THAN 500 ANIMALS.

It is currently WWF Romania's top priority to fundraise for the continuation of the initiative in Tarcu Mountains, as there is a massive support from the local communities and authorities, there are also properly built soft-release facilities in place and an already existing 14 bison population transported in 2014 that will be released into the wild in May 2015, after a one-year acclimatization period. Unfortunately this is not yet sufficient to form a viable free-roaming population, which needs a minimum of 50 individuals.

A new group of bison of ± 20 individuals, originating from various breeding centres and bison reserves in France, Germany, Switzerland and Sweden, is waiting to be transported this year to the release site in Tarcu Mountains.

This herd can potentially grow into the largest wild bison population in Europe, because of the hundreds of thousands of hectares that are available for it to roam freely in this landscape of national parks, Natura 2000 sites and nature reserves.

Activities

- Annual release of 20 animals, during a 5 year period (2015–2019).
- Monitoring of the released animals by the University of Timisoara: satellite tracking collars and field-working students.
- Monitoring by veterinarians.
- Cooperation with Romsilva and the local hunting associations, to establish no-take/ breeding zones around the release sites. Enforcement of the agreements;
- Communications around bison releases, annual bison-day and similar events, and in support for bison watching tourism promotion.
- Help building up a new local economy around the bison initiative.



2. POIANA RUSCA MOUNTAINS

To turn the bison reintroduction process

into a real successful story in Southern Carpathians, it is needed to start a second bison release site. The reintroduction process should generate at least 3 different subpopulations that should be connected between through ecological corridors, to allow later migration and genetic exchanges. A second release site has been identified in Poieni, approximately 70 km north of Armenis reintroduction site presented above. As in the case of the first reintroduction site in Tarcu Mountains, here too there is a strong support from local associations of landowners and locals in general, for the starting of the initiative, with clear, written commitments to support it.

OBJECTIVE

CREATE A SECOND BISON SUB-POPULATION IN THE WESTERN PART OF THE SOUTHERN CARPATHIANS AND CONNECT IT WITH THE FIRST ONE IN TARCU

The second release site in Poieni is situated in Poiana Rusca Mountains and the reintroduction process will take place on 200 ha of land owned by a local association of landowners – Demsus. This area is located at approximately 60 km north of Armenis in Tarcu Mountains and there are possibilities to ecologically connect the two areas for further genetic exchanges between the two bison subpopulations that will be established in this part of the Southern Carpathians.

Activities

- Build a pre-release enclosure similar to the one existing in Tarcu Mountains, in Armenis;
- Annual transport and release of 20 bison;

Monitoring of the released animals;

- Conflict mitigation to keep the strong support of the local communities for the initiative;
- Monitoring by veterinarians;
- Explore possibilities to connect the two bison sub-populations in the western part of the Southern Carpathians (Tarcu and Poiana Rusca Mts.)
- Communications and community development around bison releases.



3. VANATORI NEAMT

Considering the existence of a bison reintroduction strategy,

approved by the Ministry of Environment in Romania in 2008, there is a favourable legal framework for a European bison comeback at national level. In order to make this initiative truly national and integrated, WWF Romania wants to involve in the near future other active partners that have initiated similar bison conservation – reintroduction projects.

OBJECTIVE

BROADENING THE GENETIC BASE OF AN ALREADY EXISTING, FREE-LIVING BUT STILL SMALL AND VULNERABLE POPULATION.

Among these partners, Vanatori Neamt is the most important one, being the pioneer bison reintroduction programme in Romania with the first releases of bison individuals into the wild back in 2012.

This is an initiative of Romanian National Forest Administration - Romsilva, and it counts, since 2012, with the first free-living population of European bison after the extinction of the species in Romania, about 200 years ago. There is a strong need for bringing in further animals to grow the population and to broaden the genetic base.

Activities

- Annual releases of at least 2–3 animals that bring additional genetic material to this population, during a 5 year period.

4 BREEDINGS SITES TO SUPPORT REINTRODUCTIONS



3

WE ARE PROTECTING
3 WILDERNESS
STRONGHOLDS IN
THE ROMANIAN
CARPATHIANS

To secure the availability of a sufficient number of quality animals for these and future reintroductions, WWF Romania will:

1. Do what ever in its power to stop all killing of surplus bison from the lowland-caucasian line and build up funds for transport. Yearly bison (a highly endangered animal) are being culled because of lack of co-ordination and/or lack of money for maintaining these populations in enclosed areas from reserves, zoos and even breeding centres, with no intention or possibility to release them into the wild.

2. Establish contracts with existing best breeding centres to continue their work, and increase their bison breeding and guarantee a good future for these bison within the WWF Romania bison programme.

3. Set up new breeding centres and help improve two existing breeding centres in the Carpathians.

The objectives 1 and 2 will be achieved by giving priority to long-term contracts for selecting quality animals for reintroductions from existing quality breeding centres that today struggle to survive, like Avesta in Sweden.

This selection will be done in cooperation with internationally recognized bison experts. The costs related to this selection procedure are part of the budget below for 'expert assistance'.

To fulfil objective 3 WWF Romania seeks funds through this concept to help set up two new breeding centres in Hunedoara and Resita Zoos, and to improve the existing breeding centres in Hateg, close to the Tarcu Mountains and Vama Buzau in the eastern part of the Southern Carpathians.

1. Hateg Bison Reserve

An initiative of the State Forest Administration (Romsilva) in order to breed European bison and to communicate the key role of European bison in the Carpathian ecosystems.

Objectives

- Breed bison and collect bison also from other breeding centres, and build social and genetic diverse herds that are ready to release into the wild.

Activities

- A yearly collection of at least 4–5 animals, to bring here in the period 2015–2020.
- To build a pre-release site in which each respective new group can adapt to more natural circumstances. This is possible to combine with the existing pre-release site in Tarcu Mountains.

One of the breeding sites will later also be transformed towards a collecting/ breeding centre with pre-release enclosures. This centre will have:

- Small pre-release sites and one or more re-wilding zones.
- Its own transport (a tailor-made truck) to collect available animals from European zoos and other bison breeding centres.
- A good handling area so that tranquilisation is no longer needed.

By having this infrastructure, good and solid social groups can be selected, established, adapted to more natural conditions and finally transported as one group to a release site, making the chance of success much higher, since the animals are then better adapted to living with each other and living in the wild as one group.

Rusca Mountains (Hunedoara) two of the reintroduction sites in the Southern Carpathians.

2,3 HUNEDOARA ZOO, RESITA ZOO

These two zoos are located close to Tarcu Mountains (Resita) and Poiana Rusca Mountains (Hunedoara) two of the reintroduction sites in the Southern Carpathians.

Objective

These two small breeding sites could play a support role for Hateg Bison Reserve and for reintroduction processes in the Tarcu and Poiana Rusca Mountains.

Activities

- Transport of at least 3-5 bison/zoo to start up the breeding process;

Build a proper enclosure and good handling area for the breeding of the bison.

- The truck and trailer mentioned above should be also used to transport the surplus bison individuals to the reintroduction sites in Southern Carpathians.



4. VAMA BUZAULUI

This is an initiative of Brasov County Council and Brasov County Sustainable Development Agency, in collaboration with EBCC (European Bison Conservation Centre) and Vanatori Neamt Nature Park. The breeding centre has been developed in 2008 and it has currently a population of 23 individuals. Due to a lack of funds in the last years the centre didn't manage to develop anymore, as there were plans for extending the existing enclosure of 100 ha with 80 ha more and even to release bison into the wild. The centre is now run by the Municipality of Vama Buzaului with a minimum budget available, which is sufficient to pay the salary of a bison caretaker, to ensure food for bison and to maintain the enclosures.

Although this centre is not currently in a good financial situation and it works on stand-by mode, it has a huge potential to become a top breeding centre that could support Vanatori Neamt reintroduction site and even to become a reintroduction site itself.

Objective

Breed bison and collect bison also from other breeding centres across Europe, and build social herds that are ready to release into the wild.

Activities

- A yearly collection of at least 4-5 animals, to bring here in the period 2015-2020.

The surplus bison will then be transferred to the release into the wild sites located within Vanatori Neamt Nature Park in the Romanian Eastern Carpathians. They will also be transported with the above mentioned tailor-made truck and trailer.





COMMUNICATION

The European bison is a charismatic animal with a longstanding heritage in Romanian history and culture, loved by the general public.



WE WILL WORK TO ENABLE
GENERAL, LOCAL AND
SPECIALIST SUPPORT FOR
INITIATING A NATIONAL
BISON REINTRODUCTION
PLAN AND BRING BACK
THIS FLAGSHIP SPECIES IN
THE WILD CARPATHIANS IN
ROMANIA.

Still, many forgot about the largest land mammal in Europe and its vital role in maintaining natural ecological processes and preserving wilderness areas. The comeback of Europe's bison is a story which will undoubtedly strike a chord with many people either because the bison was part of their historical landscape or that its return to the wild will help promote and preserve precious wilderness landscapes. There are fewer bison in the wild than there are black rhinos, so there is a true urgency to bring back this symbolic animal into its old haunts.

People's support to save the "Black Rhino of Europe" is essential as they are the ultimate beneficiaries of conservation efforts worldwide. This is an important part of "the story", the bison comeback is a symbol of an environment where people and nature thrive. This flagship species has proved to attract huge media interest nationally and internationally, as well as researchers and tourists alike.

The bison release in the Southern Carpathians (Tarcu Mountains) in May 2014 indicated the level of interest in this iconic species – world media rallied to a remote village in Romania and reported about the fabulous experience, news reaching at least 150 mil. people. The local community's involvement in helping bring bison back into the wild exceeded our expectations, proof that efforts to make Europe a wilder place are appreciated in the local and public sphere.



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Objectives

- Local stakeholders are actively involved in the preservation of their natural heritage and are in favour of the European bison comeback;
- The outstanding value of wilderness areas are understood and promoted by local communities on regional level;
- The general public at European level has an increased awareness about the „Black Rhino of Europe” and is enthused by the bison rewilding initiative;
- Increased visibility of pro-active conservation efforts is generated in national and international media;
- The wellbeing of local communities living near reintroduction areas increases, with higher interest for low-impact tourism in those areas and new sustainable entrepreneurial opportunities enabled;

In our communication efforts we will nurture ambassadors for nature by forming long term relationships with key target audiences: local communities, educators, writers, photographers, researchers, green economy specialists and more.



Activities

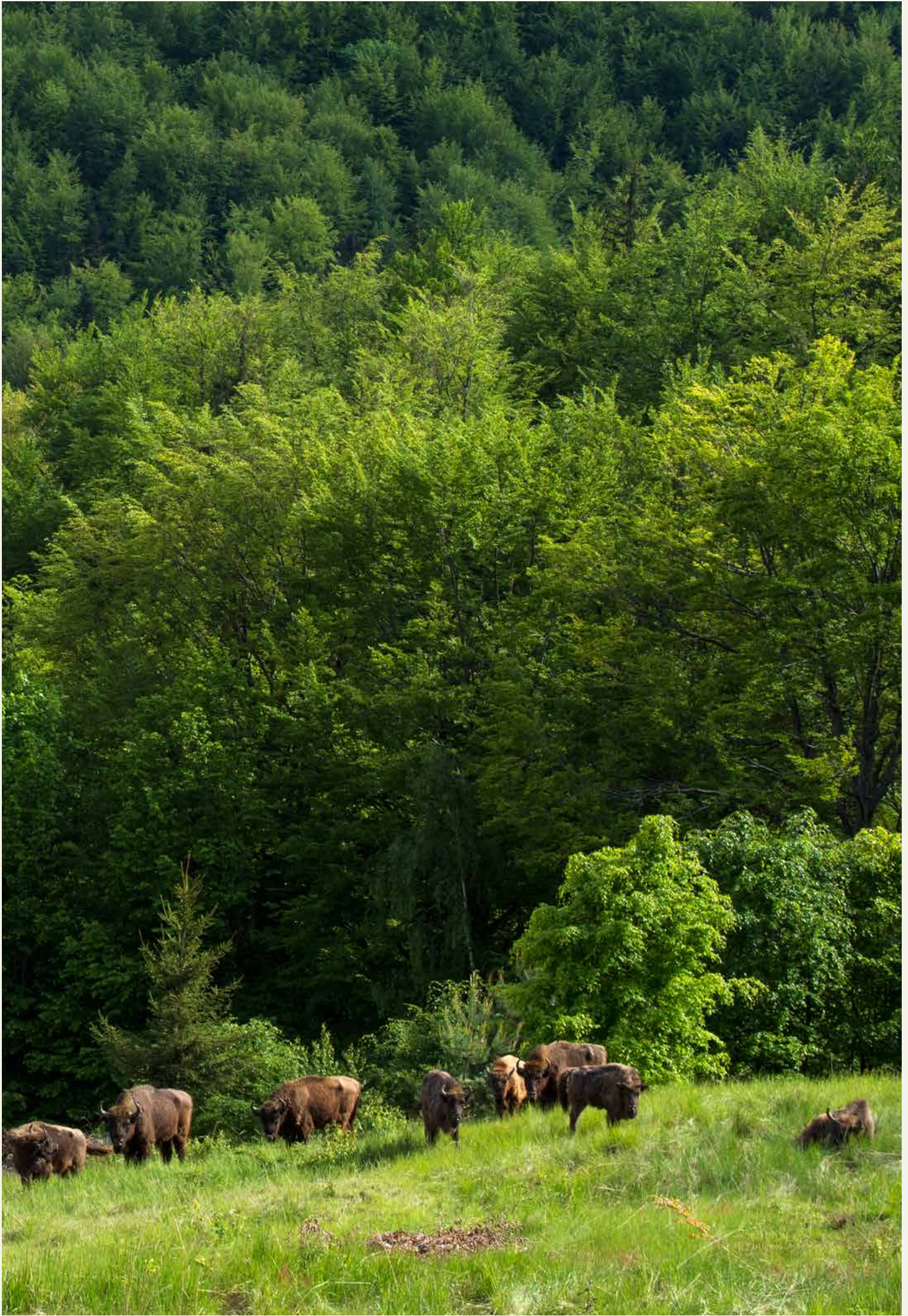
- Create a pipeline to bring research and conservation science to the people (coordinating university exchange programs, setting up citizen science activities and interactive exhibitions in local visitor centres);
- An online platform built, offering regular real time interpretation of research data of the impact of bison rewilding - human and conservation dimension
- Press trips and visits with key amplifiers organised, according to a strategic content plan;

Field journals from bison rangers in rewilding areas;

- Develop a photo-tourism product near rewilding sites, building photo hides and organising wildlife photography camps and intl. photography assignments
- One natural history documentary film produced;
- Local communities supported to market eco-tourism products near bison rewilding areas;
- Support for wilderness inspired school clubs in local schools;

All events and products (small and large) will be communicated in traditional, online and social media through targeted outreach, production of short film and photography, blogs and guest blogs, reports and scientific papers.

The ultimate goal, is to build strong support across Europe for the comeback of the European bison and protection of wilderness.



BUDGET

Conservation activities

Priority European bison reintroduction sites in Southern Carpathians

Tarcu Mountains

Purchase and transport of a group of 20 bison/year, 5 x 63.000,-	€ 315,000.00
Two local rangers/guides to guard the pre-release sites, 5 x 12.000,-	€ 60,000.00
Costs for rangers (equipment, transport, fuel), 5 x 4.000,-	€ 20,000.00
Veterinary support, 5 x 3.000,-	€ 15,000.00
Monitoring of collared bison, 5 x 15.000,-	€ 75,000.00
Research activities (academic exchange programme & citizen science activities)	€ 13,500.00
Data interpretation, analysis and specialised studies	€ 22,800.00
Expert assistance for collecting animals and (pre) release of every new group	€ 80,000.00
Project leader, 5 x 20.000,-	€ 100,000.00
Two Field officers, 5 x 26.000,-	€ 130,000.00
Costs for Project leader, field officers (equipment, transport, fuel), 5 x 35.000,-	€ 175,000.00
Maintain the pre-release site	€ 10,000.00
Electric fences to avoid damages to crops and gardens	€ 50,000.00
Mobile corral	€ 25,000.00
Enterprise officer, 5 x 15.000,-	€ 75,000.00
Communication officer, 5 x 12.500,-	€ 62,500.00
Food for bison during the acclimatization period, 5 x 10.000	€ 50,000.00
Medicine for bison 5 x 2.000	€ 10,000.00
Feeders for bison 4.000	€ 4,000.00
Quad for rangers 1 x 4.000	€ 4,000.00
Maintenance of truck and quad 5 x 2.500	€ 12,500.00
Photographic hides, camera traps and wildlife observation stations (build and maintenance)	€ 9,200.00
Local community facilitation, awareness and information sessions	€ 18,000.00
SUBTOTAL	€ 1,336,500.00

Poiana Rusca Mountains

Purchase and transport of a group of 20 bison/year, 5 x 63.000,-	€ 315,000.00
Support monitoring of collared bison, 5 x 15.000,-	€ 75,000.00
Expert assistance for collecting animals and (pre) release of every new group	€ 30,000.00
Building the pre-release sites	€ 80,000.00
Maintain the pre-release site	€ 10,000.00
Mobile corral	€ 25,000.00
Two local rangers/guides to guard the pre-release sites, 5 x 12.000,-	€ 60,000.00
Veterinarian expertise 5 x 3.000	€ 15,000.00
Costs for rangers (equipment, transport, fuel), 5 x 4.000,-	€ 20,000.00
Food for bison during the acclimatization period, 5 x 10.000	€ 50,000.00

Medicine for bison 5 x 2.000	€ 10,000.00
Feeders for bison 1 x 8.000	€ 8,000.00
Quad for rangers 1 x 4.000	€ 4,000.00
Pick-up truck for rangers 1 x 20.000	€ 20,000.00
Maintenance of truck and quad 5 x 2.500	€ 12,500.00
Monitoring of collared bison, 5 x 15.000,-	€ 60,000.00
Photographic hides, camera traps and wildlife observation stations (build and maintenance)	€ 9,200.00
Maintenance of truck and quad 5 x 2.500Research activities (academic exchenge programme & citizen science activities)	€ 13,500.00
Local community facilitation, awareness and information sessions	€ 18,000.00
<i>SUBTOTAL</i>	€ 835,200.00
General activities	
<i>Overall communications</i>	
Photographic missions to 3 sites (including camps and post production) = 3 sites x 7.500.-	€ 22,500.00
Bison resarch centre (Tarcu Mountains)	€ 34,500.00
Production of documentary film (over 3 years)	€ 10,500.00
Print production for 4 breeding centers and 3 rewilding sites	€ 28,000.00
School programme development (5 years)	€ 19,000.00
Online platform for interpretation of bison and wilderness research data	€ 8,800.00
<i>SUBTOTAL</i>	€ 123,300.00
<i>Overall scientific activities</i>	
Genetic support and coordination monitoring, 20.000.-/year	€ 100,000.00
<i>Management WWF Romania</i>	
10 % of 2.410.000,-	€ 241,000.00
General activities	
€ 1,800,800.00	
<i>Vanatori Neamt (Romania)</i>	
Purchase and transport of 10 animals/year, 10 x 4.000,- (combined with Tarcu)	€ 40,000.00
Expert assistance for collecting animals and (pre) release of every new group	€ 10,000.00
Explore opportunities to scale up the bison area, practical study:	€ 10,000.00
Monitoring of collared bison, 5 x 15.000,-	€ 60,000.00
Data interpretation, analisys and specialised studies	€ 21,000.00
Photographic hides, camera traps and wildlife observation stations (build and maintenance)	€ 9,200.00
Local community facilitation, awareness and information sessions	€ 9,000.00
Communications and enterprise development around the bison initiative	€ 25,000.00
<i>SUBTOTAL</i>	€ 184,200.00

Breeding centers	
<i>Hunedoara Zoo</i>	
Purchase, transport and release of 10 animals	€ 20,000.00
Expert assistance for collecting and (pre) release of animals	€ 10,000.00
SUBTOTAL	€ 30,000.00
<i>Resita Zoo</i>	
Purchase, transport and release of 10 animals	€ 20,000.00
Expert assistance for collecting and (pre) release of animals	€ 10,000.00
SUBTOTAL	€ 30,000.00
<i>Hateg</i>	
Collection and transport of 20 animals	€ 40,000.00
Expert assistance for collecting and (pre) release of animals	€ 15,000.00
Building pre-release site (ca 15 ha)	€ 15,000.00
SUBTOTAL	€ 70,000.00
<i>Vama Buzaului</i>	
Purchase, transport and release of 10 animals	€ 20,000.00
Expert assistance for collecting and (pre) release of animals	€ 10,000.00
Explore opportunities for a free ranging population in the Western Rhodopes	€ 25,000.00
Communications and enterprise development around the bison initiative	€ 25,000.00
SUBTOTAL	€ 80,000.00
TOTAL	€ 394,200.00