



**PROTECTING
THE LARGEST WILDERNESS
STRONGHOLD IN THE
ROMANIAN CARPATHIANS**



**INITIATING A NATIONAL
BISON REWILDING PLAN**



**ECO-TOURISM MODEL
MAGNIFIED ACROSS 2
REWILDING AREAS**

COMEBACK OF THE EUROPEAN BISON IN THE CARPATHIANS



**185 FREE-ROAMING
BISON BY 2020**



**GETTING THE
EUROPEAN BISON OUT
OF THE DANGER ZONE**



OUR VISION

WWF Romania
and Rewilding
Europe 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



185

BISON IN THE WILD IN 5 YEARS,
A LONG TERM VIABLE,
GENETICALLY DIVERSE
POPULATION

can be sustained through nature-friendly enterprises connected to the largest national bison reintroduction plan in Europe. WWF is leading a bison reintroduction program in the Tarcu Mountains, an environment where the European bison disappeared from, over

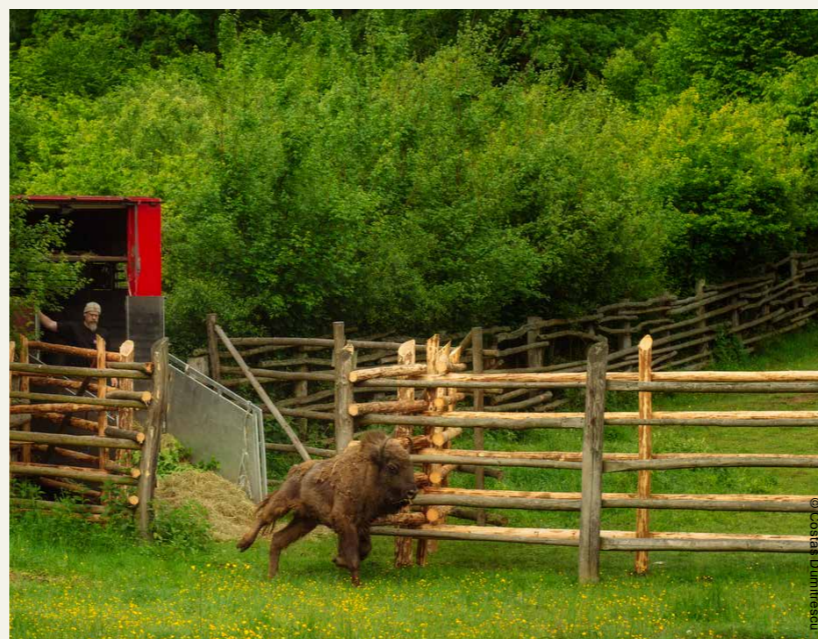
200 years ago. The bison is an umbrella species that has great significance for maintaining ecological processes specific to wilderness areas. A national bison reintroduction programme creates a unique opportunity for wildlife comeback, local community development, eco-tourism, research and education.

Few places in Europe where nature is still preserved in its wildest state remained untouched. This had a severe impact on the wellbeing of our natural environment, on which we depend.

Wilderness areas have an indispensable role in the health of our ecosystems. With the growing concern for the security of our natural resources and the impacts of climate change, our values are also shifting towards a closer relationship with nature and appreciation of the role that wilderness plays in maintaining balance in our ecosystem.

The value of wilderness areas is reflected in the European Commission policies and recommendations and many international organisations are implementing measures to protect and extend these areas - wildlife comeback is one such measure.

We have identified the European bison, *Bison bonasus*, the largest land mammal in Europe, as a key species for preserving wilderness strongholds.



The bison's browsing ability helps maintain a mosaic of forest areas and grasslands, much more valuable from an ecological point of view than any closed forests or open grasslands. It is a species that, if successfully re-introduced and its habitat effectively preserved across the entire Carpathian mountain range, will help maintain the ecological corridors on large scale, allowing natural processes to occur. Bison are much easier to communicate and promote as a flagship species than any other large carnivore species - which fascinate but also cause fear and conflicts. This umbrella species which needs large areas of prime quality natural environment, with very little or no human disturbance, will also help the conservation of other key species.

Rewilding Europe and WWF Romania have prepared a 10-year bison reintroduction plan, with a clear target to create a population of more than 500 free-roaming bison in the Southern Carpathians and a long term goal (25 years) to reach a meta-population of 1.000 bison, which will become by far the biggest free-roaming European bison population, which currently counts a total of 5.000 individuals, from which only 3.400 are living in the wild. *Bison bonasus* is rarer than the Black Rhino.

OUR CONSERVATION OBJECTIVES

- By 2025 Southern Carpathians wilderness thrives and rewilding is replicated in other areas in Romania as a solution/model for protecting natural and cultural heritage;
- Local stakeholders are actively involved in the preservation of their natural heritage and take pride in supporting the bison comeback in their area;
- Local community benefits from bison comeback and related tourism opportunities which boost local economy and alleviate pressure on natural resources;
- The general public at European level has an increased awareness of the bison and takes interest in the bison rewilding initiative; Romania is acknowledged as a prime wilderness destination;
- The area of Armenis is a living laboratory for conservation of rare species and enables ecology, sustainable development, conservation to become priority areas of interest for youth and young professionals

RESULTS

- **Conservation:** 2 stable and interconnected bison sub populations are established in the Tarcu Mountains, Bison Hillock area and Poiana Rusca Mountains;
- **Education:** A multi disciplinary research programme developed with national and international universities and think tanks;
- **Eco-tourism:** An innovative product is developed for tourists worldwide, based on scientific research of the impact that bison rewilding has on the preservation of wilderness areas;
- **Local community:** people living near reintroduction areas benefit from low-impact tourism activities, new sustainable enterprises, through the community hub (meeting place for young researchers, the local community and the wider public);
- **Professional:** development opportunities created for young people interested in natural sciences, social sciences and ecology both locally and nationally;

A FLAGSHIP SPECIES

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



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.

A founder herd of 14 bison were brought to the Țarcu Mountains in 2014, from breeding centers and zoos all over Europe. Since then the herd adapted to the area is now roaming freely. Two new groups of bison were relocated to the Southern Carpathians in the following years and after undergoing a soft-release process, acclimatizing to their new home for several months and re-learning to live freely, they are released into the wild. The European bison reintroduced come from breeding centres, zoos and nature parks across Europe: Parco Natura Viva (Italy), Wisentgehege, Neumünster, Springe și Kiele (Germany), Han-sur-Lesse și Bellewaerde (Belgium), Thierpark din Bern (Switzerland), Thoiry, La-Haute-Touche, Le Breil sur Méryze (France), Avesta (Sweden), Hațeg (Romania).

The number of European bison with genetic diversity coming from breeding centres, zoos and nature reserves all over Europe plays an important role out vision to start a large scale reintroduction all across the Carpathians. The whole process of selection is coordinated by EBCC – The European Bison Conservation Centre, which is the main body that has the responsibility to improve the genetic diversity of the European bison. The comeback of the bison in the wild is European is truly a trans-European effort where civil society, scientists, naturalists, public authorities, local communities are coming together in a common cause.

This flagship species has proved to attract huge media interest nationally and internationally, as well as researchers and tourists alike. With each bison release event in the Southern Carpathians we see more and more interest in this iconic species – world media rallies to a remote village in Romania and reports about the fabulous experience, news reaching over 150 mil. people.



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NEXT STEPS

- Ongoing reintroductions in the Țarcu Mountains – Armeniș pilot area, two bison herd transport/year for 5 years;
- A second bison reintroduction site started in Poiana Rusca Mountains;
- Work to enhance ecological connectivity between Țarcu and Poiana Rusca Mountain, to allow migration and genetic exchanges between the two bison sub-populations;
- Support in upscaling low-impact tourism infrastructure in neighbouring communities;
- A multi-disciplinary research programme on the bison's impact in maintaining wilderness areas; the programme will be developed with national and international universities and think tanks;

ACTIVITIES

- High visibility bison release events involving the local communities, local and national media, opinion leaders;
- Community and visitor centre in Armeniș commune; Eco-tourism infrastructure near bison rewilding areas;
- Wildlife watching and photography hides built in second release area, Poiana Rusca Mountains;
- An innovative tourism product developed with data and learnings from bison monitoring, bringing research and conservation science to the people;
- An online platform, offering regular real time interpretation of research data of the impact of bison rewilding;

The concept of wilderness is a new vision for conservation and rewilding is an effective way to help nature heal itself.



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WWF is the world's leading independent conservation body and our mission is to build a future in which people live in harmony with nature. Founded in 1961, we work in more than 100 countries, 5 continents and have more than 5 mil supporters worldwide. www.panda.org

Rewilding Europe, founded in 2011, is an initiative that seeks to inspire a broad popular movement to shape a new, wilder version of Europe. Rewilding Europe is about making Europe a wilder place, with much more space for wildlife, wilderness and natural processes, bringing back the variety of life for us all to enjoy and exploring new ways for people to earn a fair living from the wild. www.rewildingeurope.com