



European Bison Friends Society

ul. Ciszewskiego 8 pok. 42, 02-786 Warsaw

+48 (022) 593 65 80

www.smz.waw.pl,

bison@smz.waw.pl

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2011 EUROPEAN BISON FRIENDS SOCIETY, ACTIVITY REPORT

In 2011 like in past years, the European Bison Friends Society actively realized its statutory objectives. We acquired 34 new members, including 6 supportive members. Two people resigned from membership. Two members of the Society were honoured with the title of Honorary Member. By the end of the year 2011, EBFS counts 175 members, including 12 supportive members.

Last year, the Society actively participated in the development of breeding program and an exchange of animals between breeding centers, including:

- In January, three transports of E. bison were conducted: six cows from Białowieża and one bull from Smardzewice were transported to Czech Republic (4 cows and a bull, to the new enclosure Mimoň managed by the Czech Military Forests and 2 cows to a private breeding centre in Prachatice), two bulls (POTAN from Pszczyna and POLIMAR from Niepołomice) were transported to Białowieża as a part of the project “Bison *ex situ* conservation in Poland” and three bison were transferred from Schlosshof (Austria) to Prachatice (Czech Republic).
- In the summer a transport of 3 animals took place: a cow PODLASKA II from Pszczyna was transported to Smardzewice, bull POSTOLI from the Warsaw Zoo to the Forest District Borki and a bull POMAGIER from Smardzewice to the Warsaw Zoo.
- In May two new enclosures were opened at: Strzelinko, (Charlotta Valley - near Słupsk) and Bałtów (the Świętokrzyskie Province). The enclosure in Charlotta Valley became a new place to live for POMPELA II, POWINOWATA and POROSŁA from Białowieża and POWSTANIEC from Smardzewice. To Bałtów transported were: PONTIA and POLEJKA from wildlife sanctuary “Żubrowisko” in Pszczyna (the Forest District Kobiór) and POTWOREK from the Forest Park of Surprises in Ustroń.

Breeding successes regarding existing enclosures is also worth mentioning and relates to the getting of offspring. In Füzérkomlós (Hungary) there were born two calves. In private

E. bison breeding enclosures in Poland three bison were born (two calves in Kiermusy and one bull in Bałtów). In Pszczyna the youngest of the local cows gave birth to a bull. Soon a new breeding center in Hungary will be opened - in Budakeszi Vodaspark (Duna-Ipoly National Park). The breeding of European bison will be initiated with animals from Poland.

In September, with regard to the development of advisory activities and organization of the E. bison conservation a meeting of members of EBCC (European Bison Conservation Center) took place. The meeting was devoted to current issues concerning the protection of the wisent and international cooperation in this field. The meeting was attended by 14 people - members of the EBCC, representatives of the Regional Offices and the European Bison Pedigree Book.

In September, Mr. Maciej Januszczak - the representative of the Society, conducted an expert analysis of the sites proposed for reintroduction of E. bison in the eastern Rhodopes, Bulgaria. The visit was commissioned by the organisation - ARK Nature (Stichting Ark). Only one of the three sites analyzed (Mursalicy region) can be taken into consideration as suitable for the purpose of the E. bison release.

In the end of April, after many months of efforts, Warsaw University of Life Sciences signed a funding agreement concerning the project "In situ protection of E. bison *Bison bonasus* in Poland - the north-eastern part". The project will be realized in Białowieża Forest, Knyszyńska Forest and Borecka Forest. Activities will be focused on: improvement of living conditions for animals, construction of new feeding places, repairs of infrastructure in breeding centers, comprehensive monitoring (genetic, health, parasitology), protection against damages, and supplemental feeding of animals. Under the framework of this project analysed will be the possibility of E. bison reintroduction to the Augustowska Forest. There are also planned seminars and workshops for representatives of local governments and institutions interested in wisents. Project is financed by the Operational Program "Infrastructure and Environment". The main beneficiary is Warsaw University of Life Sciences. Partners of the project are eight forest districts: 3 in the Białowieża Forest (Białowieża, Browsk and Hajnówka), 4 in the Knyszyńska Forest (Krynki, Supraśl, Waliły and Żednia) and 1 in the Borecka Forest (Borki). The beneficiary will be also the Białowieski National Park, where will be conducted various repair works in the Bison Breeding Centre, provision of the veterinary care, additional forage for wisents, etc.

The Society won two tenders regarding organization of educational workshops. First contract was signed between EBFS and the Zachodniopomorskie Towarzystwo Przyrodnicze, concerning: "In situ protection of E. bison in Western Pomerania". The second contract was signed between EBFS and the Regional Directorate of State Forest in Krosno, concerning: "In situ protection of E. bison – southern part". In the last year there were conducted the following workshops:

In March, a workshop organised in the Forest Culture Centre in Gołuchów was devoted to the protection of the wisent population in Western Pomerania. There were presented five lectures regarding: activities of the Forest Culture Centre in Gołuchów, the threats and situation of E. bison in Poland and Europe, the successful reintroduction of E.

bison to the Bieszczady Mountains, the results of telemetric monitoring of wisents in area of the West Pomerania, the genetic monitoring and its implementation in proper management of animal populations (e.g. to avoid inbreeding). Conference room was full mostly because of the students from Poznań universities. Unfortunately, representatives of local governments did not come, despite the invitation.

In June, a workshop was organized in Złocieniec (Drawskie Lakeland). Workshop gathered a large group of foresters, employees of the Regional Directorate for Environmental Protection in Szczecin and students of Szczecin universities. Presented lectures concerned: the protection of species and the situation of European bison in Poland, genetic testing, situation of free living population in the Bieszczady Mountains and the north-western Poland. Participants were also interested in Life+ program and possibilities for the creation of new free living herds in Polish forests.

In July, a workshop took place at Muczne (the Lutowska commune). It was attended primarily by employees of: the National Forests, the Bieszczady National Park as well as students from the Jagiellonian University and the Wrocław University of Environmental and Life Sciences. Unfortunately, local institutions and governments did not show an interest in E. bison issues. Representatives of the Regional Directorate for Environmental Protection in Rzeszow were also absent. During the meeting much was said about the health of the Bieszczady herd, especially about the tuberculosis harassing one of them. In addition, a lot of time was devoted to Polish-Ukrainian cooperation, especially since the animals do not recognize national borders, and only united efforts can provide them with adequate protection and care.

In August, a workshop was organized in Sycowice (the Lubuskie Province). The agenda included presentations on the general knowledge of the E. bison, the protection of the species in the wild (in Western Pomerania and Bieszczady Mountains) and the protection of wisent gene pool. In this workshop participated: foresters, employers of the Drawa National Park, representatives of local governments, and PhD students from universities of Szczecin and Zielona Gora.

As in previous years the EBFS participated in the Warsaw University of Life Sciences Days, so-called a Big Spring Time Outing. Great picnic took place on May 20 and 21. In our stand presented were artistic photographs of the forest king in its natural environment, taken by Mr. Janusz Sochacki. Displayed were also skulls of adult E. bison and a calf, which raised an interest of both adults and kids. Members of the Society were providing information concerning the E. bison body build, behavior, breeding conditions and about areas of occurrence of those animals in the wild. Adults and older children could demonstrate their knowledge on the E. bison by solving short tests. It must be admitted, that perspective of rewarding winner with one of the E. bison photographs taken by Mr. Sochacki, made those quizzes very popular. The youngest kids had also possibility to demonstrate their artistic talents while coloring the images of the bison. In addition, everybody could buy souvenirs with the image of the wisent - bags, shirts, magnets, pendants and postcards.

On Saturday, August 13, the European Bison Friends Society participated for the second time in the European Bison Day at Lutowska. This festival was organized in the

Bieszczady Mountains for the fifth time. EBFS presented there its own promotional stand, where tourists and residents could learn about the bison, receive special leaflets and buy the original souvenirs: pendants, fridge magnets, reflective bands and t-shirts. Also the quiz on the wisent was very popular there. However the most popular was the inventing of names for newborn bison. This game had one rule: the name had to begin with the letters "PO" (as Poland) and the number of applications was unlimited. The most creative person proposed 22 names.

On Wednesday evening, September 21, the eve of the IXth International Conference "Wisents, Forests, Lakes", took place the General Assembly of members of the European Bison Friends Society. Present were 53 members, so according to the Statute of the Society the second term of the General Assembly could have been conducted. The Assembly was chaired by Dr. Wojciech Bielecki. The Board report regarding activities of the Society on behalf of the outgoing Board, was presented by prof. Wanda Olech, The Audit Commission report was presented by Dr. Barbara Osińska. After discussion, the members approved the report and gave a discharge to the Board. Subsequently, in a secret voting, Prof. Wanda Olech was re-elected as the president of the Society. Re-elected were also the new Board and the new Audit Commission. During the General Assembly Dr Jan Raczyński and Mr. Tadeusz Natkański were awarded with the titles for honorary members of the Society.

On September 22-23, in Malinówka near Ełk, the Society organized the IXth International Conference "Wisents, Forests, Lakes". In the conference participated representatives of Belarus, Czech Republic, Spain, Holland, Germany, Russia, Slovakia, the United States, Sweden, Hungary, and of course the Poles. For the second time the title of the "Bison Friend" and bronze statuettes of the wisent were awarded. Honoured were: Director of Regional Directorate of State Forests Ryszard Ziemblicki, Mr. Krzysztof Wyrobek from Forest Inspectorate Borki, The Regional Officer for the Conservation of Natural Environment in Olsztyn Maria Mellin, prof. Małgorzata Krasieńska and Dr. Zbigniew Krasinski from Białowieża, and Viola and Lothar Härtelt from Damerower Werder (Germany). During the conference 27 papers and 14 reports were presented. Presentations concerned the conservation and management of E.bison populations in Belarus, the dynamics and population status of bison in the Belarussian part of Białowieża Forest, and migration trends in the Polish part of the Białowieża Forest. Very interesting were results of telemetry monitoring in Western Pomerania. The application of telemetry made possible the better understanding of the behavior of females during parturition, maternal care of the calves, and the behavior of animals after traffic collisions. Other presentations concerned an influence of land use and terrain features for the area use by wisents in Bieszczady Mountains. The issue of unresolved legal status of E. bison in many European countries was also taken under consideration. Several papers concerned the state of health of the E. bison, paying special attention to the problem of tuberculosis in the Bieszczady Mountains.

On the second day a trip to the forest, was organized by the Forest Inspectorate Borki. Conference participants could hear about the devastation of forest stands and see the effects of their restoration after the hit of the hurricane, several years ago. Presented were also living conditions of about 80 individuals of the wild herd dwelling in Borecka Forest.

The last reporting session concerned the *ex situ* conservation of E.bison. During this session discussed was the project "Bison *ex situ* conservation in Poland".

As in the previous years the EBFS has published already fourth edition of bilingual European Bison Conservations Newsletter, containing scientific papers presented at the conference and various reports on European bison. Opinions of the participants about the organizational and scientific level of the conference were very positive. We are very thankful for the financial support to the National Forest Information Center, Forest Inspectorate Borki and Regional Directorate of State Forest in Białystok.

In the past year on the website of the Society (tab: Publications) released was a new publication – "EBFS NEWS", which is published every six months and includes expanded information on the activities of the Society and other materials, specially prepared for the EBFS community.

Appeared also the publication "Bison *ex situ* conservation in Poland", in the course of the project bearing the same name. This project is financed by the Operational Program Infrastructure and Environment and co-financed by the National Fund for Environmental Protection and Water Management.

Traditionally there were organized "Around the European bison" meetings on following subjects:

- in January, Dr. Jan Śmiełowski presented issue "It all began in Poznań", about the beginning of the E. bison restitution,
- in March, Mr. Lukasz Poławski was talking about his travels with the bison,
- in April, prof. Wanda Olech was talking about her journey to the north of the Iberian Peninsula as a potential place of living for E.bison,
- in October, a meeting was devoted to this year's conference - "Wisent, Forests, Lakes," and it was illustrated with the photographs taken by Mr. Janusz Sochacki,
- in November, it was planned to meet with Mr. Tadeusz Natkański, unfortunately at the last minute the meeting was canceled due to indisposition of our guest.

A meeting of the European Bison Conservation Center board members took place in September. The issue of an appropriate status of European Bison in captivity and in the wild in every European country, was debated. The European bison (wisent) is, according to international law, an endangered species, listed in IUCN Red Book, and in the IInd appendix to Bern convention. The species occurs in freedom only in few EU countries (Poland, Slovakia, Lithuania) but there are also numerous breeding centers and zoos, where sometimes few, but sometimes even over 50 individuals of this species, are kept. In a number of countries, there is an initiative to reintroduce this species to the wild. The establishment of the proper legal status of the wisent in all European countries is very important for achieving success in wisent conservation and breeding programs, because depending on a country wisent is sometimes treated as cattle (e.g. transportation rules, vaccinations, treatment of carcasses), and sometimes as an exotic animal.

During the EBCC meeting a text of the letter was prepared, appealing for implementation of an equal status of wisent *Bison bonasus* within whole EU, as an endangered species and priority species in the Habitats Directive.

The letter calls also for defining the principles for the possibility of legal culling (under specified conditions), and commercial use, if it will be justified by a contribution to species conservation. This condition should prevent introductions undertaken purely for hunting purposes.

The letter declared that EBCC as pan-European network that includes many specialists on the species from various countries, would like to prepare rules for the conservation and management of the species in Europe, and consequently it will take responsibility for the supervision, monitoring and introduction of good practices, ensuring proper conservation of free ranging part of the population, and well-being for individuals bred in captivity.

Moreover during the meeting discussed was the preparation of an application to LIFE+ project - Nature and Biodiversity component. The proposal concerned the development of the network, dissemination of the knowledge on the species and the enlargement of E. bison population. Associated beneficiaries in the project application were apart from EBFS: Zachodniopomorskie Towarzystwo Przyrodnicze, Centro de Conservación del Bisonte Europeo en España, Vanatori Neamt Nature Park, EBCC – Scandinavia, Regionalforstamt Hochstift/ WIZ Hammerhof (NRW) with Wisentgehege Hardehausen, Forstamt Nossentiner Heide (MV) with Wisentreservat Damerower Werder, Donaumoos – Zweckverband (Bayern) with “Projekt Donaumoos” (NGO), Nds. Forstamt Saupark – Springe. Mr. Lech Dąbrowski summarized difficulties with preparation of the application, and gave detailed guidelines regarding possibilities of applying to future LIFE project. Regarding the application of EBCC to future LIFE project, members of the meeting agreed to arrange support letters from IUCN and breeders as application appendices.

In relation to the call for applications for financial support for the Non-governmental Organizations activities in EU, there was discussed a possibility of submitting the second application for the LIFE project in 2011, and a decision about entering the application procedure was undertaken. At the meeting there were scheduled some actions to systematize the work on a proposal and appropriate adaptation of EBCC structure. It has been decided that every Regional Office should become the EBFS member.

Another important issue that was raised at the meeting was complicated employment status of EBFB workers. Since EBCC was for many years cooperating closely and successfully with present employees of EBFB, members of the meeting decided to prepare a letter to the director of Białowiecki National Park, expressing their fears regarding further fate of the EBFB and its editorial staff.

In the last week of September, the President of Society has participated in the meeting of Chief Veterinary Officers from EU countries. That meeting took place in Krakow under the Polish Presidency of the European Union. Professor Olech presented there the current situation of E. bison, the protection of the species and plans for the development of its population and increase of its numbers. She distributed relevant informational materials

among the audience. The participants had the opportunity to visit the Bison Breeding Centre in Niepołomice, which aroused great interest.

The European Bison Conservation Center - EBCC and all its activities are supported by the EBFS as a part of a long-term program of our organization.

One of important activities of EBFS is raising funds for the protection of European bison. This year has been very generous in this respect - we received donations from:

- Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) from USA, which substantially supported three activities:
 - the development of European bison Advisory Center,
 - transport of Lowland-Caucasian European bison for the improvement of genetic variability in metapopulation of East Carpathians,
 - collection of tissue samples and DNA studies.
- Once again, educational activity of EBFS was supported by Bank PEKAO S.A.

All the time we are also financially supported by Warsaw University of Life Sciences.

We wish to thank all our sponsors and active members of the Society!
The Board of EBFS