



*Bison release in Poiana Rusca, the second release site in the Southern Carpathians.*

# Carpathian Coexistence

*IN THE SOUTHERN CARPATHIANS REWILDING AREA IN ROMANIA, COMMUNITY OUTREACH MEASURES ARE BUILDING POSITIVE RELATIONS BETWEEN PEOPLE AND EUROPEAN BISON.*

Supporting wildlife comeback is a pivotal part of our work at Rewilding Europe. It is therefore fantastic to see populations of so many European wildlife species – from the beaver and Balkan chamois to the brown bear and white-tailed eagle – stage a welcome recovery across Europe over the last four decades.

One of the most heartening wildlife recovery stories is that of the European bison. Once widespread across Europe, this magnificent animal was driven to the edge of extinction in the early twentieth century by hunting and habitat loss. When the last wild European bison was shot in the Caucasus in 1925, there were less than 60 individuals alive in zoo and private parks.

Building on a history of reintroductions in other countries, Rewilding Europe and WWF Romania have been working to reestablish free-roaming populations of European bison in the **Southern Carpathians** of Romania for the last six years. Following annual releases near the village of Armeniș since 2014, 2018 saw another 23 bison released into the wild, includ-



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ing 14 animals at a second rewilding site in the Poiana Ruscă Mountains to the north. This took the total number of reintroduced animals (and their offspring) to 53.

"Thanks to the largest ever bison reintroduction programme in the Southern Carpathians, we are now well on our way to establishing a demographically and genetically viable population," says Southern Carpathians rewilding team leader Marina Drugă. "Nobody has attempted what we've done here before. It has been a learning experience, and we've had to overcome more than a few challenges to get where we are today."

### A proactive approach

Unsurprisingly, wildlife doesn't recognise the boundaries and borders that humans draw on maps. When rewilding leads to the recovery of wildlife populations – either naturally, or through measures such as reintroductions – this means there is often great potential for human-wildlife conflict, despite careful feasibility studies and community involvement during the planning phase.

Discussions of human-wildlife conflict or coexistence are often a matter of semantics. But in terms of solutions, it is better to focus on proactive mechanisms for coexistence, rather than mitigating conflict after it has happened.

Rewilding Europe's goal is to develop and support coexistence models, where people can benefit from wildlife comeback, thereby boosting pride in and support for local rewilding measures. In the Southern Carpathians, our goal is to use wild nature – with a particular focus on the reintroduced bison – as an engine for developing the region. Today such development involves nature-based tourism, community-based and educational initiatives, scientific research and technological innovation. In this respect a large, free-roaming bison population is a big drawcard, complemented by a rich local history and culture and dramatic landscapes.



Bison loaded for transport to Romania from Parco Natura Viva in Verona, Italy.



Bison from Zoopark Berlin arriving in crates in Armenia in 2018.

### Inspiring young rewilders

Overseen by the Southern Carpathians rewilding team and WWF Romania, an ambitious education programme is now involving a growing number of young Romanians with the wild nature on their doorstep. The programme, which has seen youth clubs known as "TANZ" created in a number of schools at both bison release sites, is helping to strengthen bonds with local bison populations. Regular workshops and other activities aid the students' personal development and kindle their love for and interest in wild nature.

In September 2018, all TANZ students began working on projects that can help nature and their community. The TANZ club in the town of Sarmizegetusa, for example, is planning an

### BY THE NUMBERS



**53** free-roaming bison living in the Southern Carpathians rewilding area by the end of 2018. **6** bison calves were born in 2018, of which **2** later died. **4** bison rangers in the field, monitoring the animals' health and movement.





*A meeting of the TANZ youth club in Teregova.*



*Bison rangers in the Southern Carpathians carry out work to aid the reintroduction programme.*

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extended recycling campaign in partnership with the local authorities, who have already installed recycling bins. The TANZ club in Teregova are focusing their efforts on keeping rivers clean, while in Densus the students are designing nests for both local and migratory birds.

"It's really gratifying to see so many young Romanians enthused by wild nature," says Catalina Murariu, WWF Romania's Coordinator of Education for Sustainable Development. "Rewilding is helping the children to grow and connect with the environment around them, which in turn is having a positive effect on the whole region. It's a win-win proposition."

### Safety first

Until they become fully acclimatised to their new environment, reintroduced bison may be tempted to approach farms and villages looking for food, especially during periods of harsh weather. As members of the Southern Carpathians rewilding team, bison rangers (locals from the Armeniş and Poiana Ruscă rewilding areas) – working together with representatives of WWF Romania – operate in the field to monitor the movement and health of the animals. They also keep in touch with residents, recently distributing a brochure and poster in both rewilding areas featuring information about the monitoring process and tips to avoid bison conflict.

In the winter of 2017/18, a female bison reintroduced at the Armeniş rewilding site became separated from her herd and came down into the village of Feneş. Having been transported from a zoo in 2015, she was accustomed to the presence of humans and initially found it difficult to adapt to the wild.

"The local bison rangers intervened several times and guided the animal safely back towards the herd," explains Bianca Stefanut, a communications officer attached to the Southern Carpathians rewilding team.

In extreme winter weather conditions rangers also distribute hay, concentrate and mineralised salts in areas usually frequented by the bison, which means they are less likely to wander into villages. Electric fences have also been installed, but only in very high-risk locations.





"Over time, as the bison herds become wilder and wilder, we will gradually stop employing such measures," continues Stefanut. "But to foster coexistence at this early stage of the reintroduction programme, these measures are critical. We are also careful about selecting bison for reintroduction – this ensures strong social hierarchies and animals that are already as wild as possible."

### **Towards an enabling environment**

Apart from its important ecological role as a keystone species, Rewilding Europe believes that European bison can make a positive change for rural development in remote corners of Europe experiencing rural depopulation and land abandonment. This is why we chose the bison as one of our flagship species for rewilding activities.

And we understand that if bison rewilding efforts are to have the best possible outcome, we need to really connect local people with these unique and hugely impressive animals, and to ensure they benefit from rewilding efforts in a variety of ways, including economically.

It is a hugely encouraging sign that in 2018, 350 people (both from Romania and overseas) chose to experience a guided bison safari in the Southern Carpathians rewilding area. As

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#### **BY THE NUMBERS**



**100** Romanian students involved in TANZ clubs at the end of 2018. **150** conflict prevention brochures and posters distributed.

In 2018, **350** people took guided bison safaris – a unique experience in Europe.

a result, several new guesthouses were established by local people. This shows that wild European bison, in addition to their ecological role, can become a unique driver for economic development in the region.

In the Southern Carpathians, it is not only improved legislation that will help reintroduced bison herds to thrive, but the continuation of community outreach, educational programmes and wildlife tourism development. Despite the challenges and many lessons learned, we believe that returning this iconic species back to the region will not only act as a showcase large-scale landscape restoration, but generate significant long-term benefits for local communities and beyond.