

Preliminary remarks on the Vilm Statements on European Bison in German Landscapes

For some time already several efforts can be observed to reestablish European bison in German landscapes. These range from small enclosures with definite landscape management objectives to game parks and reserves for the breeding of this species, semi-open landscape projects and efforts to reintroduce European bison under semi-wild conditions. To discuss the perspectives and constraints of these concepts the working unit for biotope management and landscape ecology of the German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation (BfN) organized a workshop at the International Nature Conservation Academy on the isle of Vilm in June 2007. Experts with practical experiences in breeding and keeping European bison as well as scientists and some especially interested local officials and politicians were invited to this workshop. Following several sessions of lectures the participants of the workshop agreed almost unanimously on the following “Vilm Statements on European Bison in German Landscapes”. A dissenting opinion in one point is also documented.

These statements are considered by the authors as a contribution to the ongoing discussion in this field in Germany not as a final position paper. It has to be stressed that these statements are supported by the persons listed below. This does not necessarily implicate that these positions are authorized by the institutions these person come from.

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Annex: Vilm Statements on European Bison in German Landscapes incl. list of participants supporting these statements

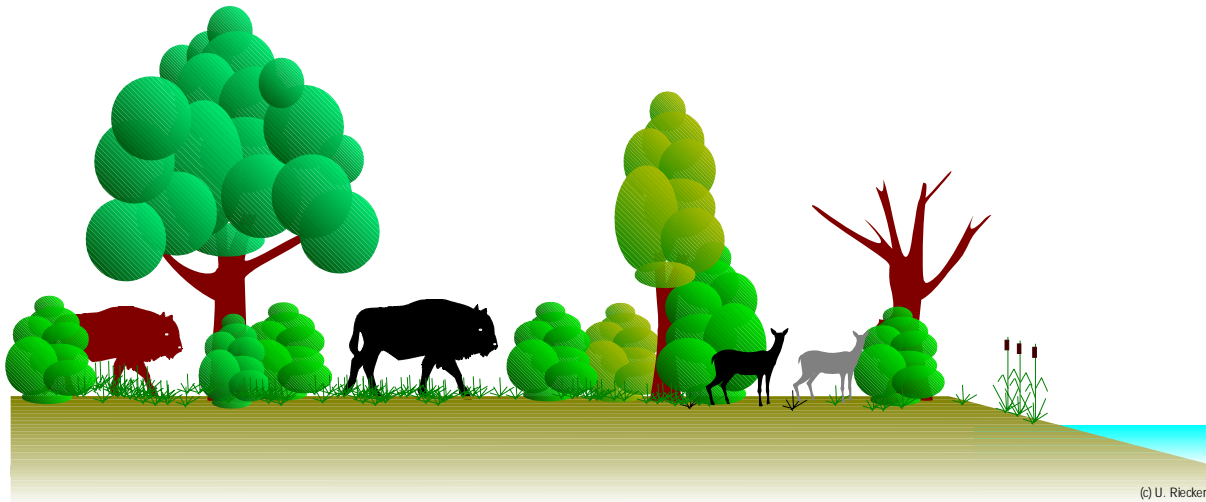
Vilm Statements on European Bison in German Landscapes

Prepared by the participants of the workshop

European Bison in Central European Landscapes

- Experiences and perspectives -

INA, Isle of Vilm, Germany, 25 to 28 June 2007



Preliminary remarks

After the European bison (*Bison bonasus*) had been extinct in the wild during the early 20th century a comprehensive breeding programme was initiated more than 80 years ago to save this species. Due to these efforts the population of this species recovered. Nevertheless the European bison is still severely threatened e.g. by genetic deprivation due to inbreeding.

Considering the special responsibility of the European countries for the preservation of the European bison, this species was put on the annex II of the European Habitats Directive.

Furthermore only a small part of its original range is covered by the efforts to release it back into the wild in the past. However these releasing projects e.g. in Poland and Lithuania showed that a coexistence of man and bison is possible even in those landscapes shaped by human culture.

Large herbivore species are an important element of many natural Central European ecosystems especially in woodlands. The present natural occurring large herbivore community in Central Europe however shows a marked deficit in grass-feeding species. These include bovine species (bison, aurochs) and wild horses, which actually are completely missing in the wild in Germany.

Society is therefore challenged to consider appropriate ways and means

- to preserve the European bison in its genetic range,

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- to give back to this species its function in ecosystems and
 - to ensure a reestablishment of this species in considerably parts of its original range. This should happen in suitable parts of the Central European cultural landscape as well as in new wilderness areas to be established also in Germany.

Considering this background the following statements have been developed and agreed on almost unanimously by the participants of the workshop 'European Bison in Central European Landscapes - Experiences and perspectives' at the International Nature Conservation Academy on the isle of Vilm (25 - 28 June 2007).

1. The release of European bison in the wild (e.g. in Germany)

The participants of the workshop support the following statements:

- Those who call for the preservation of large mammals in the developing countries should go ahead with good examples in their own wealthy countries of the developed world.
- The European bison is an important part (grass feeder niche) of natural Central European (woodland) ecosystems.
- Even in Central Europe there are suitable areas for the reestablishment of free roaming herds of European bison.
- The reestablishment has to be seen as a process to bring back this former indigenous species into the awareness of the people and to raise confidence.
- The establishment of further herds of (free roaming) European bison widens the genetic basis of this species and contributes to risk spreading e.g. in case of epidemics. Its typical behaviour can thus be studied and preserved.
- Additional (free roaming) populations reduce the extinction risk of European bison.
- Free roaming herds of European bison can enhance the touristy attractiveness of an area and thereby contribute to the added value of the sustainable development of a region.
- The European bison may serve as a flagship species for new wilderness areas in Germany.

The participants of the workshop consider the following requirements to be essential for any projects to release the European bison into the wild in Germany:

- A minimum of 20 - 25 animals is considered essential for a free roaming herd.

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- Areas in which the European bison will be released have to be of adequate size and suitable in terms of ecological requirements. Depending on the habitat quality a minimum area of 4000 - 5000 ha is considered essential for these projects.
 - The project area should be little fragmented and relatively low in human disturbance.
 - Considering wildlife management e.g. in African national parks even the release of herds in very large scale fenced areas can be considered as release into the wild¹.
 - The herd management should meet the requirements of the European bison conservation action plan including guidelines for the maintenance of genetic variability.
 - The attempts to establish a European Advisory Board/Bison Centre should be supported.
 - A scientific monitoring of the animals` behaviour in time and space and its impact on the habitats is recommended.
 - A compensation fund for the regulation of property damage should be established.
 - Any release project of European bison should be prepared by extensive public relations work including visitor management to
 - inform the public about the objectives of the project
 - enhance the acceptance of the project
 - diminish the possibility of any risk for the public
 - minimize the disturbance of the animals in the wild
 - In general a combination with an informative exhibition reserve is recommended.

2. European bison and landscape development

The participants of the workshop support the following statements:

- The European bison can render an important contribution to the development of landscapes in terms of structure and diversity of forests and open habitats and all kinds of transitions including pasture woodland structures with their high level of biodiversity. By resettling European bison therefore a key-function in ecosystems will be recovered.

¹ This wording was supported by a great majority of the participants. However the following dissenting position in this point was put forward (e. g. by the Large Herbivore Foundation) during the discussion: From a strictly scientific as well as ecological point of view fenced populations must always be considered as semi-wild populations.

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- European bison projects under fenced conditions also contribute to landscape development and to the preservation of this species and can help to clear the way for free roaming populations.
 - European bison are a major touristy attraction and can thereby contribute to the added value of the sustainable development of a region.

The participants of the workshop consider the following requirements to be essential when using European bison in landscape management projects:

- Future landscape developing projects with European bison have to be of adequate size. To give consideration to the character of European bison as a wild animal a minimum area of 200 ha² is considered essential for these projects.
- Social structures and the requirements of the landscape management determine the animal density and number in these projects.
- To avoid a tendency of domestication European bison should not be kept like farm or livestock animals in landscape management projects.
- The herd management should meet the requirements of the European bison conservation action plan including guidelines for the maintenance of genetic variability.
- The attempts to establish a European Advisory Board/Bison Centre should be supported.
- Surplus animals should be used for building up of additional herds or for the exchange with other stocks.
- In large project areas an informative exhibition reserve with animals suitable for breeding is recommended.

Objectives of this paper

This paper presents the results of the discussion at the workshop 'European Bison in Central European Landscape' held at the International Nature Conservation Academy on the isle of Vilm, 25 to 28 June 2007.

Its purpose is to contribute to an object-oriented discussion.

The participants of this workshop thus hope to promote the permanent preservation of the European bison, the reestablishment of this species in many parts of its former range and as an integrative part of our ecosystems.

² except for strict breeding projects

This paper is supported by the following persons:

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