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Press Release

European Bison on a Major Journey

Tierpark Berlin and WWF implement the largest European bison relocation since the project began

A logistical challenge of global significance for species conservation: As part of their joint reintroduction project, WWF Germany and Tierpark Berlin have once again relocated European bison to the Caucasus. With 18 animals, this is the largest single relocation since the project began in 2019 - and another milestone in one of the largest and most ambitious reintroduction projects of its kind worldwide.

The reintroduction project Return of the European Bison to the Caucasus is internationally recognized as an outstanding example of successful wildlife reintroduction. The aim of the initiative is to establish European bison, most of which were born in zoological institutions, permanently in their historical range in the Caucasus.

The animals were transported by cargo aircraft from Frankfurt/Hahn to Baku in the Caucasus and were accompanied by an interdisciplinary team of experts. "Before such a transport, every step - from selecting the animals and conducting medical examinations to preparing and carrying out the transport - requires expertise in veterinary medicine, wildlife management, and logistics," explains Christian Kern, Zoological Director of Zoo and Tierpark Berlin. "We accompany the European bison throughout the entire process until they arrive safely at the national park."

The animals - nine cows and three bulls - originate from zoological gardens across Europe¹ and were already brought together as a herd at Tierpark Berlin. In addition, six European bison from the bison project in the Rothaar Mountains in North Rhine-Westphalia are part of this year's relocation. Selection is carried out by the European Endangered Species Programme (EEP), coordinated by Dr. Jennifer Hahn at Zoo Berlin. The key criteria are excellent health and suitable genetic backgrounds.

The expert team from WWF and Tierpark Berlin accompanied the European bison from collection through airport handling, the flight, and subsequent transport by truck to Shadagh National Park in northern Azerbaijan. There, rangers and local experts from WWF Azerbaijan and the responsible authorities take over the care and long-term monitoring of the animals.

"The return of the European bison to the primeval forests of the eastern Greater Caucasus is an important contribution to achieving national, regional, and international conservation goals for biodiversity," says Aurel Heidelberg, Project Manager and Caucasus Ecoregion Officer at WWF Germany. "Only close cooperation between conservation organizations, zoological



institutions, research facilities, and authorities across national borders makes a reintroduction of this scale possible.”

Since the start of the collaboration in 2019, a total of 64 European bison have been relocated to Azerbaijan, where they are reproducing successfully: nine calves were born last year alone. With the current relocation, the number of European bison in Shadagh National Park - where they had been extinct for over a century - has increased to around 90 animals. The park, one of the largest protected areas in the Caucasus, offers ideal conditions for a stable long-term European bison population with its extensive mountain, forest and open landscapes.

“The European bison disappeared from the wild in the 1920s and survived only in zoological institutions, including Zoo Berlin. The fact that we now once again have European bison in the forests of Europe and Asia is a milestone that required almost 100 years of conservation work. The return of the European bison to the Caucasus is therefore a collective success we are very proud of,” adds Dr. Andreas Knieriem, Director of Zoo and Tierpark Berlin.

“The return of the European bison after a century is of particular importance for our region. Local communities, schools, and visitors are involved in our work and experience firsthand how ecosystems function and what role endangered species play within them,” explains Zeynab Khalilova, Project Manager at WWF Azerbaijan.

In addition to exchanges with international expert bodies such as the IUCN Bison Specialist Group and the European Bison Friends Society, the NGO Rewilding Europe also supports the international project. “Large wild herbivores like the European bison shape the landscapes they inhabit, to the benefit of many other plant and animal species,” says Sophie Monsarrat, Rewilding Landscapes Manager at Rewilding Europe. “Protecting bison habitats in the Caucasus will deliver wide-ranging ecological benefits across the entire region. We are very pleased that the European Wildlife Comeback Fund can support this complex translocation for a second time.”

Background: European Bison

With the shooting of the last European bison in the Caucasus in 1927, Europe’s largest land mammal became completely extinct in the wild in the early 20th century. Today, these wild animals — weighing up to 1,000 kilograms — once again roam forests in Europe and Central Asia. Males can weigh up to 1,000 kilograms, females up to 700 kilograms, and they can reach a shoulder height of up to two meters. European bison were eradicated from the wild in Europe in the 19th and early 20th centuries and survived exclusively in zoological institutions. Thanks to intensive conservation and breeding programs, around 10,000 European bison now exist worldwide, in zoological institutions, nature reserves, and in the wild.

1Origin of the European bison



The animals come from Tierpark Berlin, Wisentgehege Springe/Sosto Zoo, Tierpark Neumünster, Tierpark Chemnitz, Alpenzoo Innsbruck (Austria), and from Prague Zoo and Zoo Olomouc in the Czech Republic.