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Press release

Bringing back the bison

Tierpark Berlin and the WWF are returning European bison to the wild

A shaggy giant trots surefootedly through the high grass, snorting softly as it makes its way towards the herd. European bison can once again be found in the remote forest areas of the Caucasus. This sight is a very special one, as for over 90 years Europe's largest land mammal was extinct in the wild. Tierpark Berlin is committed to saving the European bison and has teamed up with the WWF again this year to reintroduce more individuals into their natural home.

Zoo and Tierpark Berlin released several bison into the wild in Romania last year. On 29 May 2019, four more animals left Berlin – this time headed for Azerbaijan. Two of the four bison had lived at the Tierpark for several years, while the other two arrived from Czech zoos in Prague and Plzeň in early May in preparation for the journey. Before the animals left for their new home, they were equipped with modern GPS and VHF tracking collars. "This technology will enable us to trace their whereabouts and accompany them on their journey through life," explains the Tierpark's Zoological Director Christian Kern. This summer, the small herd will be released along with bison from other European zoos into Azerbaijan's Shahdag National Park, located at the foot of the Caucasus Mountains. The wild cattle are currently getting used to their new surroundings in a fenced area. "The reintroduction of species that are threatened with extinction or that have already become extinct in their natural habitat illustrates very clearly the important role of zoos today," says Zoo and Tierpark Director Dr Andreas Knieriem.

The WWF is responsible for the organisation, coordination and scientific supervision of the bison's release. "This reintroduction project sees the European bison return to its original habitat," explains Aurel Heidelberg, Caucasus Programme Officer at WWF Germany. "These large herbivores play an important role in ecological processes, ensuring, for example, that certain areas of forest are kept clear so that they can be colonised by other animal and plant species. That means the cooperation between Tierpark Berlin and the WWF is making an important contribution to preserving biodiversity in the Caucasus." The overall project is financed by KfW Development Bank as part of a cross-border nature conservation programme of the German government. It was initiated by the WWF, EAZA (European Association of Zoos and Aquariums), and national partners on site.

**Background:**

The European bison was hunted to extinction in the wild by humans, with the last surviving animals shot in the Caucasus in 1927. It was only thanks to some 70 animals kept in zoos that the species was saved from total extinction. In order to ensure the survival of the species, a group of European zoo directors and scientists founded the Society for the Protection of the European Bison in August 1923 at Zoo Berlin. This joint effort was the forerunner of many of today's conservation breeding programmes for endangered species. Zoo Berlin has been home to European bison since 1872. The Tierpark has also made a considerable contribution to the species' conservation ever since it opened in 1955. To date, more than 200 European bison have been born at Berlin's two zoos. European bison are currently classified as "Vulnerable" on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.