

Valea Zimbrilor Bison Reserve – a stimulus of local sustainable development

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Abstract: The Brasov county has the great advantage of including within its territory two national parks and other areas with great nature value. The Agency for Sustainable Development of Brasov established a bison reserve in Vama Buzaului called «Rezervația Valea Zimbrilor/Bison Valley Reserve». This reserve plays a important role in development of the county. In November 2008 five European bison were transported to reserve from Switzerland, Italy and Austria. As a proof of good condition within enclosure one female calved this Spring.

Brasov County Council and the Agency for Sustainable Development of Brasov County outlined the development strategy of Brasov county observing the principles of sustainable development, having in view to secure a balance between the social-economic systems and the elements of the natural heritage. The guiding principles are given by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) which sets out the sustainable development in the report “Our Common Future”, also known as Brundtland Report: *“sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”*.

According to these principles, we tried to find alternatives for economic growth by using the available resources in such a way that the sustainability of these resources should be maintained and, at the same time, the environment protection in this county which has an exceptional landscape should be secured.

In order to promote one of the main solutions for economic growth, Brasov County Council in partnership with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), launched in January 2006 the Strategic framework and the implementation plan for sustainable tourism in Brasov county. We should mention that Brasov county has the great advantage of including within its territory two national parks and a third one which is in the stage of obtaining the certification as a national park. This third park, Ciucas massif, is in the vicinity of Vama Buzaului, the place where our Bison Reserve is located. In accordance with the concept of tourism development in Brasov county, Vama Buzaului area is aimed at as a main zone for eco-tourism and rural tourism development in this county. The lack of pollution sources and the unspoiled nature in the proximity of Ciucas massif grants the area the advantages required for this approach.



Figure 1. Localization of Vama Buzaului area in Brasov county

According to this document, we wish the Vama Buzaului to become an area of excellence in eco-tourism and, at the same time, an area of excellence for increasing awareness of the citizens in terms of environment, biodiversity and, generally speaking, the importance of securing a coherent development which considers the principles of sustainable development.

Thus, speaking about eco-tourism, we invest at present so that Vama Buzaului should become a renowned centre for farm organic produces obtained through traditional methods and we use, for this purpose, the experience of the «SLOW-FOOD» international network. In order to make tourism in the area profitable, all the tourist attractions in the area have been identified so that tourist packages of 2 up to 5 days can be made in the area. These packages include access to the natural, historical and cultural heritage of the community, trying to make this destination a unique one.

That gave an origin to the idea of establishing a bison reserve in Vama Buzaului called «Rezervația Valea Zimbrilor/Bison Valley Reserve».

The bison was present for centuries in Romania's fauna. The province of Moldavia coat of arms has a bison head (Fig. 2).

In our country, this species disappeared, at the end of the 18th century or, maybe, the beginning of the 19th century; the areas inhabited by the bison were: Calimani Mountains, Bargaului Mountains and the Eastern part of Maramures.



Figure 2. The coat of arms of Moldavia.

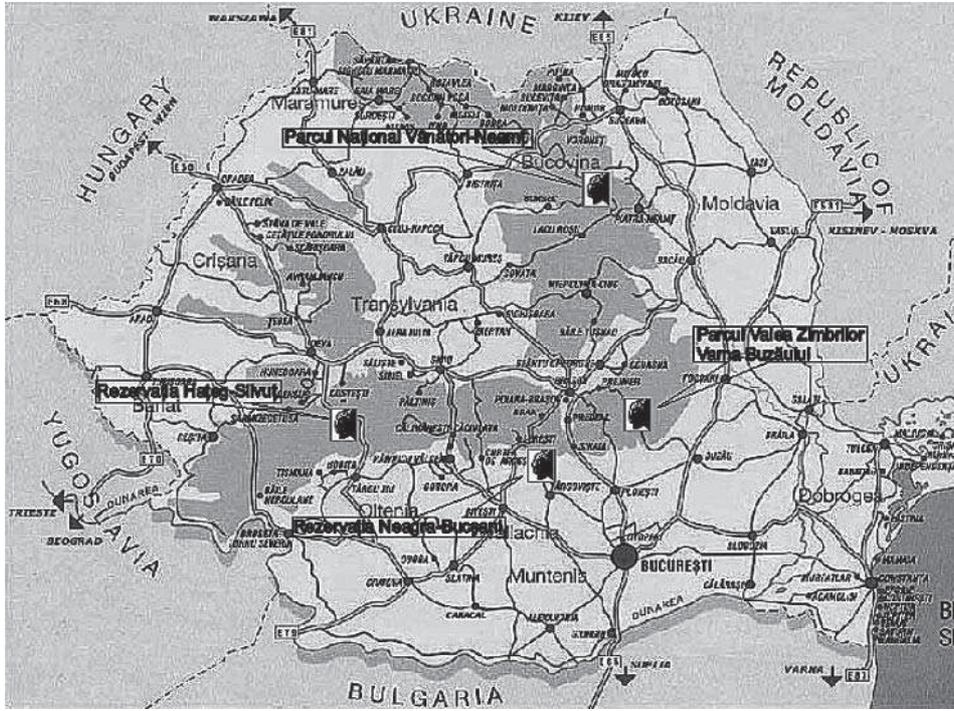


Figure 3. Bison reserves in Romania

The concept of reviving the bison population by using captive animals from zoos, initiated in 1923, aiming at species conservation through planned breeding and distribution, followed by introduction in big forest ecosystems, was also fostered by the Romanians.

The objective of the present conservation strategy promoted internationally by Bison Specialist Group SSC IUCN, to set up favourable conditions for long term survival of bison populations was fostered by us too through our new project. The bison can be saved from disappearance only as an component of the wild fauna in the natural environment of forest and open grassland ecosystems in the central and eastern part of Europe. More than half of the area of the Carpathians is in Romania; they are considered as the last big reservoir of biodiversity in Europe. More than that, in Romania, as a result of the quality of habitats which are close to natural or only slightly altered, one can find the largest populations of big carnivores (bear, wolf, lynx) in Europe, and the evidence of fully structured trophic pyramids existing there.

In Romania, there are three bison reserves in Vanatori – Neamt, Bucsani – Dimbovita and Hateg – Hunedoara (Fig. 3). Out of these, two are situated in the Carpathians, others unfortunately at the extreme limits of the Romanian Carpathians. The presence of Bucsani reserve which has, at present the

greatest number of bison, in a plain forest, isolated from the Carpathian forest eco-systems, is due to a political decision made by the communist regime.

Based on the IUCN strategy for European bison (Status Survey and Conservation Action Plan) it is necessary to set up new reserves, where the surplus bison from the Zoos or other reserves should be acclimatized, becoming available for developing re-introduction programs. The location of bison reserve in Vama Buzaului is ideal to fully exploit the high potential represented by the Romanian Carpathians. In a result we will obtain

a harmonious distribution of the bison reserves along the Carpathian Arc, showing the value of the natural potential of the Cubature Carpathians, known as a refuge for many protected species and habitats.

The location of this new reserve, situated near Brasov city, at the border with Buzau, Covasna and Prahova counties, in the proximity of DN11 road which crosses the Carpathians towards Buzau, is also of major advantage. The area is linked to the great Carpathian forest ecosystems and, due to its natural beauties, its sightseeing sites (Ciucas Massif, Siriu Lake etc), due to the fact that local inhabitants either continue to develop traditional activities (forestry and animal breeding) or are involved in agro-or eco tourism, became very important from a tourist point of view. Thus, an increasing number of tourists either pass through the area or choose to spend their holidays in this zone, far from the renowned busy tourist destinations. Establishment of a bison reserve will also contribute to raising the public awareness towards this species, in this part of the country.

The reserve of Vama Buzaului offers the visitors the opportunity to see and, through the raising awareness programs, to find out more about this species and about the location of the reserve. Establishment of this reserve will increase also the support for the European bison at national level contributing therefore to international efforts to save this species.

From the experience of the countries where the European bison was given a constant attention, especially in Poland, but also from the experience of the reserves in Vanatori and Hateg, we can say that, due to the impact of this animal on the public, an animal considered to be the largest mammal of Europe, the bison reserves are important tourist attraction spots and, for this reason, they are stimuli for sustainable development in the areas where they



Figure 4. New born female in Vama Buzaului reserve.

are located. So, it is proved that the efforts made for conserving this species are rewarded not only through favorable effects regarding the stability of forest ecosystems (by introduction of free ranging bison), but also by creating economic benefits.

Brasov County Council, through the Agency for Sustainable Development of Brasov County (ADDJB), in partnership with Vama Buzaului and Prejmer initiated this project, the objective of which was the setting up of a bison reserve in the area of Vama Buzaului and the developing the project for reintroducing the bison to the forests of that area.

In conclusion, at present we have a reserve in compliance with the standards, managed by "Valea Zimbrilor" (Bison Valley) Association, including as members ADDJB, Vama Buzaului Commune and Prejmer Commune. At the moment we have 6 bison. Five of them come from Switzerland, Italy and Austria, which we received with the support of **Prof. Wanda Olech**, European Bison Specialist Group Chair and EEP Coordinator. I take this opportunity to thank those who donate these animals, **Landscape animal Park Goldau – Switzerland, Parco Natura Viva from Busolengo – Italy and Schlosshof – Austria**. The animals were brought to Vama Buzaului in November 2008 and they get rapidly acclimatized, so that in the spring of 2009 a female was born, increasing the number of bison in our reserve to 6.

We are now in the stage where we apply for structural funds through the Sectorial Operational Program for Environment with the view to develop the reserve in Vama Buzaului. In case this project will be approved for financing, we will increase the area of the reserve with 80 hectares of forest and will build a visitors' centre which will have as main objective to educate and raise awareness of the public regarding our project for reintroducing the bison to their natural environment.

We would like to bring more animals to Vama Buzaului; for that reason, we are open to partnerships with European counterparts. We are happy to learn from the experience of our counterparts, and would like to have our contribution to biodiversity conservation in Europe and to the reintroduction of European bison to the Carpathians.