

Extinct in the Wild:

Finding a Place for the European Bison, 1919-1952

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On the 25th of August 1923, the Frankfurt zoo director Kurt Priemel gave an exalted speech. He did so in his capacity of first president of the newly founded International Society for the Preservation of the European Bison (ISPEB). In his speech, Priemel stressed the dire plight of the animal that his society had set out to preserve. To his knowledge only sixty individuals of the European bison, or wisent, survived. They were spread over European zoos and private menageries. This situation, Priemel insisted, called for action across borders. With distinct internationalist rhetoric, he stated:

‘It is particularly satisfying that this great task, which knows no boundaries, brings representatives of different countries around the table, to serve – free of political considerations and influences – a case that is equally important from an ideal and from a scientific viewpoint.’

In short, the wisent was to be saved by a Society that was apolitical, science-based and international. This Society, Priemel indicated, might focus on one particular animal, but served a wider goal. The goal he was referring to was the so-called *Weltnaturschutz*, or the global protection of nature.¹

The foundational meeting of Priemel’s Society had particularly attracted German scientists and breeders, but concern about the wisent was, indeed, not limited by national boundaries. Only three months earlier, the Polish zoologist Jan Sztolcman had equally devoted a talk to the situation of the wisent at the first International Congress for the Protection of Nature in Paris. His rhetoric had been very similar to Priemel’s: ‘We have to undertake this fight on an international level, and this because of the dispersal of the European bison itself’.²

¹ *Bericht über die Gründungstagung der Internationalen Gesellschaft zur Erhaltung des Wisents am 25. und 26. August, 1923, im Zoologischen Garten, Berlin* (Frankfurt am Main: R.T. Hauser & Co, s.d.) 4 and 10.

² Jean Sztolcman 'Le bison d'Europe', in : Raoul de Clermont et al. (ed.) *Premier congrès international pour la protection de la nature* (Paris: Société nationale d’acclimatation de France, 1923) 91.

By stressing the dispersion of the remaining wisents Sztolcman and Priemel highlighted the geographical aspects of the problem they faced. Also in the strategies the ISPEB developed in order to save the wisent, it is not hard to see that *spatial* concerns were of the utmost importance. Living and breeding spaces had to be designed; the geographical circulation of individuals had to be coordinated; and, in order to prepare reintroduction to the wild, it had to be decided where the wisent ultimately belonged. All this involved a lot of practical and conceptual work – and this work was in many ways pioneering. The ISPEB was only the second international conservation organization to be established (after the International Committee for Bird Protection that was founded a year before). Furthermore, the ISPEB was the first organization with the ambition to set up a large-scale breeding and reintroduction program for a wild animal. This chapter explores the spatial dynamics of the program that resulted from this ambition.

In any case, the complexity of international conservation was not lost on the audiences of both Priemel and Sztolcman. In Berlin, where the foundation meeting of the ISPEB was held, several foreign participants had made last minute cancelations ‘due to deterioration in political and economic relations’, while other invitees of ‘weak currency countries’ had not found the money to attend.³ At the International Nature Protection Conference in Paris, then, the tense postwar climate had convinced the organizers only to invite personalities from former Allied and neutral countries.⁴ In both Berlin and Paris, the internationalist rhetoric could hardly hide the place-bound restrictions the wisent preservationists had to deal with. These only increased the difficulty of their self-set task.

Wildness in Captivity

The speeches of Priemel and Sztolcman were held in an atmosphere of great urgency. By 1923 the catastrophic impact of the Great War on the wisent population had become clear. Before the war, there still had been more than 700 wisents roaming the forests of the tsarist hunting estate in Białowieża in then Russia. Between 1914 and 1918, the moving eastern front made that Białowieża witnessed a lot of heavy fighting and changed hands several times. While the area was under German control, the wisent received some protection under the military forestry administration. The overall success of this protection remains disputed however, and it is certain that it was of little avail in the light of the destructive warfare that immediately preceded and followed it. By 1919 the last Białowieża wisent had been killed.

³ *Bericht über die Gründungstagung*, 3.

⁴ *Premier congrès*, 31.

Depending on the source, German soldiers, Russian troops or local (Polish) poachers were held responsible for the implosion of the wisent population.⁵

While the wild Białowieża population was confirmed extinct, only rumors were heard about a possibly surviving herd in the Caucasian mountains. Preservationists in the west maintained little contacts with the Soviets, but the scant news that was forwarded by befriended Russian scientists was little reassuring. The ISPEB journal alluded, amongst others, to wisent hunting trips carried out with machine guns. By 1927 it had become clear that also the Caucasian population was entirely gone. This implied that the species as a whole could be declared extinct in the wild.⁶

According to the figures of the ISPEB the surviving animals in captivity in 1924 were limited to 54 individuals spread over 15 sites in 10 countries. Using the language of philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, we might describe this situation as one of deterritorialization.⁷ The remaining wisents were disembedded from what was considered their ‘natural’ or ‘true’ spatial context. They only survived thanks to ‘artificial’ sites that were – at least to an extent – mutually interchangeable. Extinct in the wild, the wisent was turned from a local wild animal to an international object of breeding.

This situation was a precarious one. Several European zoos – such as those of Schönbrunn, Stockholm and Berlin – held a few wisents, but seldom more than five. Moreover the financial situation of most zoological gardens in the early 1920s was worrying, and their experience in conservation limited.⁸ To complicate things, almost half of the remaining population in the 1920s was to be found in a rather different environment than that of the modern public zoo, namely that of the private aristocratic estate. Whereas the first is often seen as a nineteenth-century invention incarnating values of urbanity, sensationalism, liberalism and science, the second belongs to a much older tradition in which rural animal parks served as aristocratic symbols of power and hunting privilege.⁹ The continuing

⁵ See a.o. Rudolf Zimmermann, ‘Meine Begegnung mit dem Wisent in Bialowies und die Geschichte seines Unterganges’, *Zoologica Palaearctica*, 1 (1923), 58; *Bericht über die Gründungstagung*, 6.

⁶ *Bericht über die Gründungstagung*, 14; Goerd von Groeben, ‘Grundsätze der planmässigen Wisentzucht’, *Berichte der Internationalen Gesellschaft zur Erhaltung des Wisents*, 2: 1 (1927), 147.

⁷ Anthropologists have used Deleuze’s and Guattari’s term to describe how ‘locality’ erodes in the process of globalization. I use it in a similar way, but extend it to include the natural alongside the cultural. For the coinage of the term: Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (New York, 1977). For the wider use see amongst others: John Tomlinson, *Globalization and Culture* (Cambridge 1998).

⁸ Harro Strehlow, ‘Zoological Gardens in Western Europe’, in Vernon Kisling (ed.) *Zoo and Aquarium History: Ancient Animal Collections to Zoological Gardens* (Broca Raton, 2001), 104.

⁹ David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford, 1984) 198-203; Patrick H. Wirtz, ‘Zoo City: Bourgeois Values and Scientific Culture and the Industrial Landscape’, *Journal of Urban Design*, 2 (1997), 61-82; Lynn Nyhart, *Modern Nature: The Rise of the Biological Perspective in Germany* (Chicago and London, 2009) 83-86.

influence of this second tradition is shown by the fact that largest wisent herd of the 1920s (comprising of ten individuals) was held at Woburn Abbey by Herbrand Russell, the 11th Duke of Bedford. Other aristocratic wisent hobbyists included Hans Heinrich XV Prince von Pless, and Count Dietlof von Arnim-Boitzenburg. Unlike urban zoo directors, this landed gentry did not hold its animals in small enclosures but in extensive parkland gardens. Its breeding practices took place in a different spatial setting and served different social purposes than those in, for instance, Priemel's zoo in the city center of Frankfurt. Yet, if his Society was to succeed, Priemel also had to include the aristocrats in his plans.

The limited numbers of geographically distributed wisents and a socially diverse membership confronted the ISPEB with important challenges. On the positive side, however, the Society could benefit from an increasing cultural fascination for the European bison. From the late nineteenth century onward, the wisent had slowly turned into an icon of European primeval nature (or: *Urnatur*), and was increasingly seen as an incarnation of manliness and strength. It became a symbol of a bygone age, in which Europe was still truly wild, and in which hunters could still encounter fearsome animals. This image, amongst others, came to expression in statues of heroic wisent bulls that were erected in several places in Central Europe, such as Zwierzynek (1862), Berlin (1904) and Königsberg (1912).¹⁰ Wisents, furthermore, became a subject of paintings and illustrations, in which they were either represented in a deserted wilderness (as in the animal paintings of Richard Friese and Wilhelm Kuhnert), or pictured in confrontations with prehistoric and medieval hunters (as in the work of Franz Jung-Ilsenheim and Mykola Samokysh).¹¹ A diorama in the Salzburg natural history museum testifies of the same fascination for the epic wisent hunts of the past, staging an example from ancient Austria.¹² The increasing fame of the prehistoric cave art discovered in Altamira in northern Spain further stimulated the idea that the histories of Europeans and wisents were closely intertwined.¹³ In the German lands, the longstanding

¹⁰ On the role of such statues in identity creation: Jawad Daheur, 'Les usages identitaires de l'élan et du bison en Allemagne, en Pologne et à Kaliningrad: Étude de six sculptures monumentales à la fin du XIXe siècle à nos jours', *Trajectoires*, 7 (2013) : <http://trajectoires.revues.org/1111>.

¹¹ On Friese and Kuhnert: Bernard Gissibl, 'A Bavarian Serengeti: Space, Race and Time in the Entangled History of Nature Conservation in East Africa and Germany', in: Bernard Gissibl, Sabine Höhler and Patrick Kupper (eds.) *Civilizing Nature: National Parks in Global Historical Perspective* (New York and Oxford, 2012); for reproductions of the work of Samokysh and Jung-Ilsenheim see respectively: Georgii Karcov, *Belovezhskaya Puscha* (Saint-Petersburg: 1903) ???; *Waidwerk der Welt: Erinnerungswerk an die Internationale Jagdausstellung Berlin 1937, 2.-28. November. Herausgegeben vom Reichsbund „Deutsche Jägerschaft“* (Berlin, 1938) 208.

¹² A picture of which can be found in: Kurt Floericke, *Wisent und Elch* (Stuttgart, 1930) 13.

¹³ See: Oscar Moro Abadía, 'Art Caves as Symbolic Spaces: The Case of Altamira', in: J. Maříková-Kubková, Nathan Schlanger and Sonia Lévin (eds.), *Sites of Memory. Between Scientific Research and Collective Representations. Proceedings of the AREA seminar at Prague Castle, February 2006*. (Prague, 2008), 69-77.

cultural prominence of the medieval *Nibelungenlied* played a similar role. One passage of the saga, after all, mentions the involvement of the heroic Siegfried in a wisent hunt.¹⁴

As historian Bernard Gissibl has indicated, this wisent romanticism was fed by wilderness ideals that were originally associated with far-off Continents rather than Europe itself.¹⁵ It was particularly in late nineteenth century America that a Romantic fascination for wilderness had developed, and it was also here that it materialized in the creation of the world's first national parks.¹⁶ In the same period, the young American conservation movement could boast an important success by turning around the population decrease of the American bison.¹⁷ Both the American wilderness concept and the measures taken to protect its most cherished icon were a point of reference for the founding members of the ISPEB.¹⁸ At the same time, also the nature in the European tropical colonies served them as an example. Particularly Africa with its charismatic megafauna played an important role in the European imagination of how unspoiled nature looked like. In the early 1900s, the later ISPEB-member Wilhelm Kuhnert, won particular renown for his paintings of big game depicted in magnificent African landscapes.¹⁹ While visiting Białowieża during the First World War, Kuhnert encountered a European equivalent for the African herds of elephants and buffaloes. In his paintings Kuhnert turned the wisent into a European counterpart of the African megafauna. Not without significance, Kuhnert was also asked to design the logo of the ISPEB.²⁰

Both the American West and the African savannah were places that Europeans envisioned as untouched remains of a deep past. Such places were considered lost in Europe, but saving the wisent could be a first step in recreating them. The European bison might have been extinct in the wild and deterritorialized, but even in captivity it could instill ambitions to restore sites of European wilderness.

¹⁴ For references to the *Nibelungenlied* among ISPEB members, see a.o. Theodor G. Ahrens, 'The Present Status of the European Bison or Wisent', *Journal of Mammalogy*, 2 (1921), 58; Floericke, *Wisent*, 7.

¹⁵ Gissibl, 'A Bavarian Serengeti', 109-113.

¹⁶ See notably Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven, 2001 [1967]).

¹⁷ See a.o. Mark V. Barrow, *Nature's Ghosts: Confronting Extinction from the Age of Jefferson to the Age of Ecology* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2009) 108-124.

¹⁸ See a.o. Kurt Priemel, 'Massnahmen zur Erhaltung des Wisents', *Zoologica Palaearctica*, 1 (1923), 3; *Bericht über die Gründungstagung*, 5.

¹⁹ Sabine Wilke, 'Romantic Images of Africa: Paradigms of German Colonial Painting', *German Studies Review*, 29 (2006), 292-294.

²⁰ *Bericht über die Gründungstagung*, 23; *Berichte der Internationalen Gesellschaft zur Erhaltung des Wisents*, 1: 2 (1925), 11.

Places of Regeneration

In the same years that prehistoric wisents grew into cultural symbols of strength, their twentieth century offspring was increasingly portrayed as weak and vulnerable. In the publications issued by the ISPEB one commonly spoke of ‘degeneration’, which seemingly expressed itself in limited reproductive success and susceptibility to disease. With regard to the reasons behind this ‘degeneration’ of the wisent opinions within the ISPEB were divided. Some stressed it was due to their competition with other animals and overpopulation in the forest, others believed the winter feeding the wisents had received in the Białowieża hunting estate had weakened them, while still others stressed the wisent was actually an animal from the steppe rather than the forest and that it was a forced retreat to the woods that had led to a deterioration of the stock.²¹

Whatever the cause of the wisent’s ‘degeneration’, the Society had to come up with a strategy to increase the numbers of a small and presumably weakened population. One approach that was quickly agreed upon was to keep the remaining individuals geographically separate. The underlying idea was that this could prevent the spread of epidemics such as foot-and-mouth-disease. A centralized herd might have benefits, but was considered too vulnerable. Furthermore, it was believed that keeping animals in different climatic circumstances would enhance diversity in the species and counter the effects of inbreeding.²² Yet, at the same time it was stressed that the geographically separated breeding centers were to be managed as a whole, in order to enable successful genetic exchange between them.

For organizing this exchange, animal husbandry was explicitly taken as a source of inspiration, and a wisent studbook was set up.²³ It was the first ever for a wild animal. The studbook turned the wisent into a breeding object – and, thus, in many ways equaled it to domestic livestock. This also showed in the standardized photographic images used in the breed registry, which could hardly have differed more from the artistic representations of the wisent as an icon of wilderness. The studbook largely ‘de-naturalized’ the wisents and cut

²¹ These different standpoints were voiced respectively by Rudolf Zimmerman, Hermann Pohle and Max Hilzheimer. See: Zimmermann, ‘Meine Begegnung’, 62; ‘Protokoll, Konferenz Ausschusses und Züchters 1932’, 21, Archief van de Nederlandse Commissie voor Internationale Natuurbescherming, City Archive Amsterdam [ANCIN] 1283-192; Max Hilzheimer, ‘Römische Wisentreste von deutschen Boden’, *Berichte der Internationalen Gesellschaft zur Erhaltung des Wisents*, 1:3 (1926), 69-71.

²² *Bericht über die Gründungstagung*, 8-9; Priemel, ‘Massnahmen’, 6; *Berichte der Internationalen Gesellschaft zur Erhaltung des Wisents*, 1: 1 (1923),9; ‘Bericht über die vierte Hauptversammlung vom 1. Bis 3. September in Posen’, *Berichte der Internationalen Gesellschaft zur Erhaltung des Wisents*, 3:2 (1930), 77-78. See also: ‘Protokoll, Konferenz’, 3; Dietlof von Arnim-Boitzenburg to Pieter-Gerbrand van Tienhoven, 18 August 1932, ANCIN 1283-192.

²³ Quite some time in the making, the first wisent studbook would only be presented to the ISPEB-members in 1932. ‘Protokoll, Konferenz’, 2, ANCIN 1283-192.

them loose from local associations. As objects of breeding European bison were cosmopolitan. They were carriers of hereditary material that had to be carefully combined, without taking borders into account. The prime objective – again as in domestic cattle breeding – was to deliver healthy and numerous offspring. The studbook-keeper of the ISPEB, Goerd von Groeben, was very straightforward in this regard: “We have to produce”.²⁴

Despite some broadly shared ideas, the practical organization of the breeding program was not uncontested. To begin with the Society witnessed discussions about the concrete setting in which the wisents were to be held. Were urban zoos suitable at all? Or were bigger enclosures and wildlife parks more appropriate? Leading voices in the ISPEB such as Priemel and Groeben belonged to the faction who defended the modern zoo. Its infrastructure was believed to provide the wisent with all necessary forms of protection against poachers and disease. Furthermore it offered a good context to perform veterinary research and to perfectly control the wisent’s environment – such as its food and water as well as the shelter and the soil of the enclosure. The fact that the wisent would become ‘tame’ in such a setting was only seen as an advantage. It would avoid stress and make the veterinarian’s life easier.²⁵ That small zoo cages provided ‘unnatural’ conditions was considered off-topic for several leading men within the ISPEB. Or as Groeben phrased it: ‘The question of today is not “what is natural?”, but rather: “how do I get this cow pregnant again as quickly as possible?”’²⁶

Yet, within the ISPEB the artificial settings of the urban zoo were not uncontroversial as places of wisent breeding. Several breeders stressed that wisents were forest animals and that they needed conditions in which they could run and retain muscular strength. Such conditions were better secured at aristocratic estates than in urban zoos, but it was not only aristocrats who pushed for more natural circumstances of wisent keeping. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s a growing group of breeders defended the cause of so-called wildlife parks, and they did so with success. Wisent parks with large ‘natural’ enclosures would subsequently be opened in Sweden (Långsjön, 1924), Germany (Springe, 1928; Schorfheide, 1934; Hellabrünn, 1937) and Poland (Białowieża, 1931; Spala, 1934).²⁷ Unlike the older private menageries, these new parks were often created with state support, and partially served as showcases of national or regional nature. In order to fulfill the latter function some of these parks (such as Białowieża, Schorfheide and Hellabrünn) would also be open for a general

²⁴ Goerd von Groeben, ‘Zuchtbericht’, *Berichte der Internationalen Gesellschaft zur Erhaltung des Wisents*, 1:1 (1923), 19.

²⁵ *Berichte der Internationalen Gesellschaft zur Erhaltung des Wisents* 1:1 (1923) 7; Goerd von Groeben, ‘Über Wisenthaltung’, *Berichte der Internationalen Gesellschaft zur Erhaltung des Wisents* 1:3 (1926) 28-42.

²⁶ Groeben, ‘Über Wisenthaltung’, 28.

²⁷ Erna Mohr, *Der Wisent*. (Wittenberg Lutherstadt, 1952) 55-57 and 64-69.

audience.²⁸ This implied that not only the wisents' spatial preferences were to be taken into account, but also those of the prospected visitors. The 'wildness' evoked in the enclosures catered to humans as much as it did to animals. Again, American wilderness ideals proved influential – particularly after American money started to flow to the ISPEB in the early 1930s with which wisent parks could be sponsored. One prominent Society member, the Berlin zoo director Lutz Heck, was straightforward about this influence, when he defended the case of wisent parks at an ISPEB meeting in 1932: 'The Americans are kind of romantic [...] and they want to see the wisents roam freely in the woods. If we do not take this into account, they might not send their money, or, at least, not so much of it.'²⁹

At the same time, it is clear that the 'natural' conditions of wisent parks largely boiled down to a *mise-en-scène*. Most parks strongly integrated the ideals of safety and control that the ISPEB had so strongly put forward, and these necessitated strong human management. In Springe, for instance, natural water reservoirs were drained (as to counter infection), trees were felled to provide air and space, shelters and fences were erected and feed concentrates were brought in.³⁰ Similar provisions were taken in the so-called breeding reserve in Białowieża.³¹ Furthermore, also visitors looking for wilderness needed modern infrastructure. When eventually discussing possible places for wisent parks, Priemel stressed that the presence of highways and the closeness of major cities were main requirements.³² Also here, the United States – where car travel and nature tourism had developed in close interrelation – had shown the way.³³ By bringing in (urban, car-driving) visitors and by carefully managing the animals' environment, wisent parks, of course, integrated elements of the zoo. By the 1930s, therefore, the strife between proponents of 'artificial' zoo breeding and those defending keeping wisents in natural conditions had largely disappeared.

The discussions within the ISPEB, however, were not limited to the concrete places in which the wisents should be kept. Also the ways in which the genetic exchange between those places should happen were the object of debate. Was the species to be kept 'pure', and, if so, what did that mean in practice? This issue was considered crucial, because it concerned the

²⁸ Particularly Schorfheide proved a popular success with 100.000 visitors in the first year and a half after 1936. The number is quoted in: Frank Uekötter, *The Green and the Brown: A History of Conservation in Nazi Germany* (Cambridge, 2006), 107.

²⁹ 'Protokoll, Konferenz', 5, ANCIN 1283-192.

³⁰ Lutz Heck, 'Bericht über den Wisent-Schutzpark in Springe', *Berichte der Internationalen Gesellschaft zur Erhaltung des Wisents*, 3: 3 (1932), 97-120

³¹ Małgorzata Krasińska and Zbigniew A Krasiński, *European Bison: The Nature Monograph* (Berlin and Heidelberg, 2013) 71-72.

³² Priemel to W. Reid Blair, 22 August 1932, ANCIN 1283-192.

³³ See: Peter Peters, *Time, Innovation and Mobilities: Travel in Technological Cultures* (London, 2006) 87-89.

‘naturalness’ of the wisent itself. Furthermore, as we will indicate, it also involved its biological connection to particular places.

One point of continuous discussion within the ISPEB concerned the cross-breeding of the wisent with the American bison. The two were (and are) considered as separate species because of outspoken morphological differences and different geographical ranges. They can, however, easily interbreed. According to some ISPEB members this possibility should be used to create a mixed population that could serve as a safety ‘reservoir’ of wisent blood. Lutz Heck, most notably, was convinced that the American bison could bring vitality into the degenerate wisent stock. He also believed he could, in a later stage, breed the morphological characteristics of the American bison out of the population thanks to a principle he called *Verdrängungszucht* (or: ‘expulsion breeding’).

The idea of cross-breeding wisents and American bison, however was highly controversial. The scientific underpinnings of the project were questioned, and there was also an aversion of creating an unnatural hybrid that did not have a clear place of belonging.³⁴ Heck tried to counter both objections. Firstly, he connected his project of *Verdrängungszucht* with a particular chromosome theory. According to Heck, chromosomes were built up in a mosaic-like way, which would enable breeders to replace individual components. The vitality of the American bison could, thus, be entered in the wisent stock, while its morphological characters were to be crossed out again.³⁵ Secondly, Heck also tried to counter the image that the American bison was an element that was completely foreign to European nature. North American fauna, he stressed, originally came from Europe via the Bering Strait. Furthermore, because human influence had been less intense in North America, original European nature had been better preserved there. Canada, for instance, presented the ‘primeval state of our *Heimat* [or: Homeland]’. The vital American bison, then, offered more original wildness than the degenerate wisent.³⁶

While Heck developed some theoretical reasons to take up cross-breeding, it seem to have been mostly practical causes that stimulated the enterprise. In the remaining wisent population of the interwar years, bulls were overrepresented. Those that were not used for the wisent breeding program, could thus easily be integrated in some sort of *Verdrängungszucht*

³⁴ Erna Priemel, ‘Niederschrift über die erste Hauptversammlung’, *Berichte der Internationalen Gesellschaft zur Erhaltung des Wisents*, 1:3 (1926), 21-22; Hans Rümmler ‘Niederschrift der 5. Hauptversammlung’, *Berichte der Internationalen Gesellschaft zur Erhaltung des Wisents*, 4:2 (1931), 157.

³⁵ See e.g. Heck, ‘Bericht’, 105-107.

³⁶ Lutz Heck, *Auf Urwild in Kanada: Berichte, Beobachtungen und Gedanken einer glücklichen Fahrt* (Berlin, 1937) 5.

with bison cows.³⁷ Several ISPEB members believed this practice to be acceptable as long as it was completely separated from ‘pure’ wisent breeding. This separation would eventually be anchored in geography. In the 1930s, Polish and German wisent parks started to specialize in either cross-breeds or pure breeds – so that the different lineages became spatially divided by tens of kilometers.³⁸

Yet, not only the interbreeding between wisents and American bison was the object of continuous discussion within the ISPEB. A similar debate existed about how to deal with different wisent subspecies. According to the theories of the time two such subspecies could be discerned: a Caucasian one associated with the western Caucasus, and a Lithuanian one associated with Białowieża. Virtually everyone agreed that the Caucasian subspecies did no longer exist in a pure form, but some believed a pure Lithuanian type still subsisted and should be kept apart from ‘mixed’ individuals. Some argued that further mixing would increase degeneration and decrease fertility.³⁹ Others, however, were convinced the overall population was too small for such ‘racial’ hairsplitting, and that time had come ‘to put an end to such jokes’.⁴⁰ They added that because of transfers of Caucasian individuals to Białowieża in the 19th C, it had become very difficult to disentangle the two races anyway.⁴¹ In this way they also suggested that a place of origin (in this case Białowieża) could never be a guarantee for any kind of purity.

The studbook keeper of the Wisent Society, Groeben, however, took purity to be the key objective of the ISPEB’s breeding strategy. And in this, he took more into account than the existence of two subspecies. Groeben discerned four so-called ‘bloodlines’, which he linked with important breeding centers and which he indicated with different colors in the studbook. He believed these lines should be kept apart as much as possible in order to maintain diversity in the species. Only when clear signs of inbreeding arose Von Groeben believed it was legitimate to bring in genetic material of another bloodline.⁴² Again, spatial strategies in which certain animals were kept apart or brought together, were co-constructed with genetic theories. The opposition to Groeben’s approach was very outspoken however. A group that identified as ‘practical breeders’ cast it aside as a program designed by

³⁷ Hermann Pohle, ‘Bericht über die dritte Hauptversammlung 31. August bis 3. September 1927 in Budapest’, *Berichte der Internationalen Gesellschaft zur Erhaltung des Wisents*, 3:1 (1929), 29-30.

³⁸ Schorfheide and Spala for instance would have cross-breeds, whereas Springe and Białowieża would gradually specialize in the breeding of ‘pure’ wisents.

³⁹ Notably the zoologist Hermann Pohle was of that opinion. *Berichte*, 1: 2 (1925), 22.

⁴⁰ Arnim to Tienhoven, 23 May 1932, ANCIN 1283-192.

⁴¹ *Bericht über die Gründungstagung*, 15.

⁴² Groeben, ‘Grundsätze’, 140-151.

theoretically-oriented zoologists with little actual breeding experience.⁴³ Alternative guidelines were never agreed upon – undermining the coordinating function the Society had set out for itself.

Next to discussions of a theoretical kind, also practical problems occurred. Within the small wisent population, cows were underrepresented and hardly ever on the market – which hampered whatever exchange strategy you might devise.⁴⁴ Artificial insemination with wisent sperm flown over by air was considered, but never actually performed.⁴⁵ Bulls were occasionally transported between breeding centers, but also this proved a logistic and political challenge. Transport was costly and animals could get wounded (and even die). National institutions that engaged in the breeding program were, furthermore, anxious not to decrease the total wisent population within their national borders.⁴⁶ Crossing boundaries was more complex than the internationalist rhetoric of the ISPEB suggested.

The Nation Incarnate

The practical work of breeding and transporting wisents was closely intertwined with the cultural work through which these animals received significance. As indicated, the ISPEB sought this significance on an international level. Wisents were framed as part of a global heritage or as icons of European nature. Yet, several players also threatened the wisent as a carrier of national meaning, and even within the ISPEB itself, national sensibilities were never absent. The result was that the deterritorialized space in which wisents could freely circulate was always a fragile one.

At official occasions the ISPEB would, of course, hold on to its internationalist rhetoric. This was, for instance, clearly demonstrated at the General Assembly of the Society held in the Polish city of Poznan in 1929. The opening speeches framed the protection of the wisent as an enterprise of high culture and world peace. In his oration the local host, Władysław Janta-Połczynski, stressed that the importance of the ISPEB went beyond the particular animal under consideration. By triggering love of nature, the Society's activities would 'work people-friendly (*völkerfreundlich*) and generate a pacifist impulse in the

⁴³ 'Protokoll, Konferenz', 10-16, ANCIN 1283-192.

⁴⁴ In a letter to his Amsterdam colleague Armand Sunier, Priemel indicated that between the First World War and 1930 only one wisent cow had been on the market. He estimated that, if one would become available, a prize between 20.000 to 25.000 Deutschmark (which would translate into 70.000 to 85.000 dollar in 2014) would be reasonable. Priemel to Sunier, 9 April 1930, Artis Archives, City Archive Amsterdam.

⁴⁵ G. Rütter, 'Über Sterilitätsbekämpfung beim Wisent', *Berichte*, 1:3 (1926), 46-58.

⁴⁶ All these complications were mentioned in a letter of Priemel to Blair, 7 December 1930, ANCIN 1283-192.

world'.⁴⁷ The wisent, so it was assumed, would connect people across borders in a shared project.

In practice, however, things were more complicated. The reason the 1929 Assembly was held in Poznan, after all, was that a Polish national subgroup (*Landesgruppe*) of the ISPEB had been created. In origin, the Society had been mostly a German initiative and the national subgroups were seen as an exercise in internationalization. At the same time, however, the subgroup structure reinstated national categories.⁴⁸ Because the leadership of the central board remained firmly in German hands, and because some subgroups (such as the Polish one) acted rather independently, tensions were quick to arise. This became particularly clear in the early 1930s, when American money became available for wisent breeding via the New York Zoological Society.⁴⁹

With substantial resources in sight, the tensions between the Polish country subgroup and the German leadership of the ISPEB started to increase. Priemel tried to convince the director of the New York Zoological Society, W. Reid Blair that the American money would be best used for a German wisent park – rather than a Polish one. 'Given the complexity of the European situation', he argued, 'it is by no means unimportant *where* the most significant breeding actions will take place.' He stressed that the Poles propagated the wisent as 'a national animal' and that they were not prepared to export a single individual for the international breeding program. Furthermore, he indicated the wisents would hardly be safe in Poland, since it had to defend its borders against no less than six countries with territorial claims. And finally he emphasized the American money would be the only possible resource for German wisent breeding given the fact its national economy heavily suffered from the war reparations it needed to pay.⁵⁰ Reid Blair showed a growing irritation. 'Our desire', he wrote in October 1931, 'is to reestablish the wisent and it seems to be immaterial whether this be brought about in Germany or elsewhere.'⁵¹ Two months later he repeated the same message with extra emphasis:

⁴⁷ 'Bericht über die vierte Hauptversammlung vom 1. Bis 3. September in Posen', *Berichte*, 4:2 (1931), 64-80.

⁴⁸ Hermann Pohle, 'Bericht über die dritte Hauptversammlung 31. August bis 3. September 1927 in Budapest', *Berichte*, 3:1 (1929) 27.

⁴⁹ After a *Grand Tour* in which he visited virtually all wisent breeding centers in Europe, W. Reid Blair (the director of the New York Zoological Society) decided to inject a substantial yearly contribution into the functioning of the ISPEB. Kurt Priemel 'Siebener und achter Geschäftsbericht für die Jahre 1930 und 1931', *Berichte*, 4:2 (1931) 118-125.

⁵⁰ Priemel to Reid Blair, 6 October and 3 December 1931, ANCIN 1283-192.

⁵¹ Reid Blair to Priemel, 15 October 1931, ANCIN 1283-192.

‘We are interested in the wisent alone and I have no desire to discuss the disarmament of Germany, possible wars, or the political and economic aspects of the European situation. Permit me in all kindness to suggest that if our correspondence is confined to the welfare of the wisent there will be less confusion and danger of misunderstandings.’⁵²

Priemel understood that he had to tone down his nationalist language in order to secure continued American support for his plans. The money eventually went to Germany.

The skirmishes between Priemel and the Poles were indicative of a larger context in which the wisent increasingly served as a symbol of national history. In Sweden, for instance, the wisents were showcased in Skansen, an open-air museum that had to evoke the national past.⁵³ In Poland, similarly, the surroundings of the wisent’s breeding center in Białowieża were declared a national park in 1932. As historian Simon Schama has indicated the regional forest and its iconic (former) inhabitants served Polish patriots as an endless reservoir for ‘mystical allusions to a sacred past and a sylvan destiny’.⁵⁴ Such nationalistic imagery, however, would reach its peak not in Poland, but in Germany – and it was leading figures of the ISPEB who were among its main promoters.

Not long after the Nazi takeover in 1933 the world of wisent breeding witnessed the foundation of a new organization: the German Association of Wisent-breeders and -keepers. Among its fellows were several members of the ISPEB, but unlike the latter society, the new organization was closely associated with the national authorities. Significantly, Hermann Göring acted as its director; Lutz Heck – an SS member since 1933 and a close friend of Göring’s – was his deputy.⁵⁵ The goal of the association was to save the ‘noblest of German game’ by creating good breeding places ‘within the borders of the *Reich*’.⁵⁶ In the past, so Heck claimed, several breeding animals had left the country, but from now on they had to be maintained for Germany.⁵⁷ At the same time Heck continued to stress the good relations of the new association with the ISPEB – of which he remained an influential member. He used his international contacts to rally American funding for the breeding plans of his brother Heinz, and to create a good image of Nazi Germany abroad. To his Dutch conservationist

⁵² Reid Blair to Priemel, 19 December 1931, ANCIN 1283-192.

⁵³ Erna Mohr ‘Wisente in Schweden’, *Berichte*, 5:3 (1937), 81.

⁵⁴ Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York, 1995) 66-67.

⁵⁵ On Heck’s links with National Socialism: Kai Artinger, ‘Lutz Heck: „Der Vater der Rominter Ure“: Einige Bemerkungen zum wissenschaftlichen Leiter des Berliner Zoos im Nationalsozialismus’, *Der Bär von Berlin*, 43, (1994), 125-138.

⁵⁶ ‘Deutsche Fachschaft der Wisent-Züchter und -Halter’, typescript, 21 October 1934, ANCIN 1283-192.

⁵⁷ Lutz Heck, ‘Deutsche Fachschaft der Wisent-Züchter und -Halter’, *Deutsche Jagd*, 1 (1934), 425-427.

friend and ISPEB grandee Pieter Gerbrand van Tienhoven, Heck wrote that he should not miss the opening of Göring's wisent estate in Schorfheide. Only there, Heck insisted, Tienhoven would be able to witness 'the idealism with which everything is approached here.'⁵⁸

In Heck's and Göring's imagery the wisent was given significance as a representative of a far-off Germanic past. Both Heck and Göring referenced ideas in which the 'eternal nation' was closely associated with the 'eternal forest'.⁵⁹ The wisent, then, could serve as the marker of the forest's eternity – the symbol of true *Urnatur*. To stress this transtemporal connection, Heck hardly wrote anything about the wisent without referring to the *Nibelungenlied*. Both he and Göring were avid hunters and they openly dreamed of the return to primitive hunting scenes on German soil.⁶⁰ Heck's lyric description of cross-breeds at Schorfheide is illustrative in this regard:

'There a few herds have been created, and for everyone who can observe them it will be an unforgettable event to see those huge wild bovines like they lived in German prehistory in our woods. One believes to be transported back to the time of the youth of our *Volk*, in which Siegfried and his men went hunting and confronted this dangerous primeval game [*Urwild*] with swords and spears in a manly fight.'⁶¹

The wisent (or, in this case the bison-wisent hybrid) thus served as a trigger for mental time travel.

Lutz Heck knew how to play to different audiences, presenting his national-socialist breeding programs also as successes at the international level. The Poles, in turn, felt the need to do the same. In reaction to an article in *The Times* that discussed German wisent breeding, the Warsaw zoo director and ISPEB member Jan Żabiński sent in a 'supplement' that stressed that actually Poland was the leading country when it came to wisent preservation. He added that it was the only place where one still encountered animals of 'the pure Białowieża strain'.⁶² In mutual competition, Polish and German breeders reterritorialized the wisent. For a while, however, their respective forms of nationalist nostalgia could co-exist. This was illustrated, for instance, at the International Hunting Exhibition that was held at the instigation

⁵⁸ Heck to Tienhoven, 3 August 1934, ANCIN 1283-192.

⁵⁹ See e.g. Michael Imort, "'Eternal Forest, Eternal Volk': The Rhetoric and Reality of National Socialist Policy", Franz-Josef Bruggemeier, Marc Cioc and Thomas Zeller (eds.) *How Green were the Nazis? Nature, Environment and Nation in the Third Reich* (Athens, 2005) 43-72.

⁶⁰ Lutz Heck, 'Urwildgehe Schorfheide', *Wild und Hund*, 41 (1934) 593-597.

⁶¹ Heck, *Auf Urwild*, 89.

⁶² Jan Żabiński, 'European Bison – Saving the Species from Extinction', *The Times*, April 15 1936.

of Göring in Berlin in 1937. The Poles built their national section around a mounted wisent. The Germans, for their part, had set up a special exhibition on *Urwild* (primeval game) of which one room was entirely devoted to the prehistoric presence of wisents in the Reich. The Poles happily received the first prize for their display from the hands of Göring himself, who could not hide his enthusiasm about the Polish primeval landscape.⁶³ Only a few years before, the German *Reichsjägermeister* had been hunting in Białowieża at invitation of the Polish ambassador.⁶⁴ At the Berlin exhibition, Göring stressed that the hunt brought nations together in ‘comradely attachment’ – ‘far from false internationalism’.⁶⁵

The national-socialist involvement could not but affect the functioning of the ISPEB. In 1938, a complete Nazi take-over was organized with Heck replacing Priemel as president of the organization. From then onward the international council would no longer meet. Yet, even then, Heck maintained contacts with his foreign colleagues. When the German army entered Poland in 1939 he immediately wrote Tienhoven to reassure him the Polish wisents were doing fine.⁶⁶ Later, he did not inform him, however, about the ethnical cleansings ordered by Göring to make Białowieża into a ‘primitive’ wilderness. Neither did he tell him about his own initiative to transport the only wisent of the Warschau zoo to Berlin.⁶⁷

The war did not detract Heck from his wisent breeding plans, but offered new possibilities in terms of both his career prospects and the geographical scope of his projects. In 1940 he was appointed Director of the Higher Authority of Nature Protection, which gave him the power to literally redraw the map of German nature.⁶⁸ In 1942 he was involved in the release of wisents in the Elchwald in East-Prussia – a place considered symbolically important because the last ‘German’ specimen had been shot there in the eighteenth century. But also Białowieża, which was to be turned into a national park six times its original size, was to be ‘Germanized’ in Heck’s rhetoric. He saw it as a place where, ‘under German protection’, a ‘wisent forest’ could be created.⁶⁹ Elsewhere he indicated that the ‘Annexed East Areas’ constituted an ‘ethnic political combat zone’ that called for a complete ‘reorganization of nature protection’. The East had to be made into a German landscape, which implied that it

⁶³ Waidwerk, 86-92 and 208-211.

⁶⁴ See extensively in Schama, *Landscape*, 67-69.

⁶⁵ Waidwerk, 13-14.

⁶⁶ Heck to Tienhoven, 30 October 1939, ANCIN 1283-192.

⁶⁷ Schama, *Landscape*, 70-72; Kitty Millet, ‘Caesura, Continuity, and Myth: the Stakes of Tethering the Holocaust to German Colonial Theory’, in Volker Langbehn and Mohamad Salama (eds.), *German Colonialism: Race, the Holocaust, and Postwar Germany* (New York, 2011) 93-120.

⁶⁸ Artinger, ‘Lutz Heck’, 126.

⁶⁹ Lutz Heck, ‘Hermann Göring der Schützer des deutschen Urwildes’, *Wild und Hund*, 48 (1942-1943), 154-155.

‘was to be conquered for a second time’.⁷⁰ This violent conquering was to create both *Lebensraum* for the German *Volk* as well as a ‘homestead’ for ‘the biggest German primeval bovine’.⁷¹ German geopolitics, it might be clear, left clear traces in the spatial strategies of wisent breeding.

In 1944 the national-socialist phantasies of a Germanized landscape inhabited by prehistoric animals came to an end when the Red Army retook Białowieża. Göring committed suicide in jail. Lutz Heck fled the Soviet-occupied zone and largely escaped persecution, but he lost his directorship of the Berlin zoo and was banned from international organizations.⁷² The ISPEB resurfaced and was put under the leadership of Jan Żabiński. Apart from him, hardly any of the old leading figures returned. Wisent breeding was denazified and put under Polish leadership. Global politics had (again) redrawn the map of wisent preservation.⁷³

The new start of the ISPEB did not mean the keeping, breeding and circulation of wisents had been de-ideologized. Almost immediately after Żabiński took office, the Iron Curtain would create obstacles for international collaboration once again. On the western side several conservationists were worried about the fact that the majority of the remaining herd was now in the communist East. In this context, Żabiński was contacted by Georg Wilhelm Harmsen – a Dutch microbiologist who in 1947 had taken up a position at the Canadian National Research Council.⁷⁴ Harmsen’s request was to purchase a few wisents to transport them to the New World. The underlying plan was to start a new breeding line in Canada and the United States, for which Harmsen mobilized the Canadian National Parks administration, the New York Zoological Society and befriended Dutch conservationists. What remained hidden for Żabiński was the rationale of Harmsen’s plan.⁷⁵ As Priemel before him, Harmsen believed Poland to be a highly unsafe place for the wisent. In his personal letters he revealed that his fear for a Third World War had been his true motivation for setting up the evacuation of the wisent away from the European continent. In his personal letters he testified of extreme pessimism. In his view overpopulation had caused an era of hunger, confusion and atomic bombs. Nature would eventually heal herself, Harmsen believed, but he hoped the ‘next war’

⁷⁰ Lutz Heck, ‘Behördliche Landschaftsgestaltung im Osten’, *Neues Bauerntum mit Landbaumeister*, 34, (1942), 213-215.

⁷¹ Heck, ‘Hermann Göring’, 154.

⁷² ‘Urmacher unerwünscht’, *Der Spiegel*, 26 (1954) 12-14.

⁷³ Jan Żabiński, *Pedigree Book of the European Bison* (Warszawa: International Society for the Protection of the European Bison, 1947).

⁷⁴ E. G. Mulder, ‘G.W. Harmsen, 1903-1981’, *Plant and Soil*, 66 (1982), 6-11.

⁷⁵ Harmsen contacted Żabiński via Jan Westermann (then director of the International office for the Protection of Nature). Westermann to Żabiński, 23 August 1947; John Tee-Van to Stefan Jarosz, 3 Jan. 1948; Harmsen to Westermann, 21 March, 3 May and 1 Oct. 1948, ANCIN 1283-192.

would first ‘do away with many millions of people’. To re-establish nature after this apocalyptic warfare, he hoped to provide a temporary safe haven for the wisent.⁷⁶

Harmsen’s plan was not carried out – apparently for practical reasons.⁷⁷ Yet, the fact that it could mobilize so many people indicates it captured the imagination of at least part of the wisent breeding community. After Polish nation-building and national-socialist territorial expansionism, it was now Cold War imagery that affected the spatial dimension of breeding wisents.

Conclusion: Travels in Time and Space

In the late 1940s, the ISPEB under Żabiński’s leadership witnessed a rapid increase in wisent numbers. The USSR joined the Society (and took over some wisents from Poland), new forest reserves were founded and an increasing number of calves were born. This led Żabiński to reassess a few of the old topoi of the Society. The degeneration of the wisent had been a myth, he claimed. When held in the right conditions the animal would reproduce energetically. For this reason he also believed it no longer necessary to maintain cross-breeds with American bison as a safety reservoir of wisent blood. And he did away with Groeben’s guiding principle of bloodlines – of which two had gone extinct anyway. Natural enclosures, Żabiński added, were to be preferred over zoo-like conditions.⁷⁸ In 1952, finally, he started releasing wisents back into the wild in Białowieża forest. ‘Wild’ – as always – was a relative concept. In the Białowieża of the 1950s, after all, the forests were managed, and the wisents were closely monitored and received winter feeding.⁷⁹ It is clear, however, that by reintroducing a few individuals in the open forest, Żabiński had altered the spatial discussions of the Society.

In the years between 1923 and 1952 the discussions within ISPEB had to a large extent focused on what was the ‘right’ place for the wisent to be bred and kept. In these discussions one might see clashes of particular interests. There were aristocrats who tried to revive old estates, zoo-keepers seeking an aura of genetic expertise, and politicians wanting to gain a reputation as nature protector. One might also see a German *Sonderweg* story, in which wisent breeding became connected with the racial mysticism of the Nazis. Or, if one chooses to put the focus elsewhere, you could see how wisent preservation became linked to Polish

⁷⁶ Harmsen to Westermann, 1 Oct. 1948, ANCIN 1283-192.

⁷⁷ The New York Zoological Society did not give up on the wisent, however, and finally bought two individuals from the Amsterdam zoo in the late 1950s. ‘Market in European Bison’, *New Scientist* (1959), 981.

⁷⁸ Jan Żabiński, *Pedigree Book*, 5-6; Idem, ‘The Progress of the European Bison’, *Oryx*, 4 (1957), 184-188.

⁷⁹ Krasieńska and Krasieński, *European Bison*, 220.

nation-building, or to apocalyptic thinking in the Cold War west. Of course, these concrete histories are of importance, but there are also broader cultural patterns to be found that go beyond these particular accounts. The ISPEB offered a transnational and interdisciplinary network in which people with different national and professional backgrounds found a *common* project. In fact, many of the core ideas behind the wisent preservation project were shared within this network. Much of the discussion over spatial strategies within the ISPEB has to be explained, I believe, by the ambiguities that were inherent to this shared project.

On the one hand, the ISPEB presented the wisent as an object of breeding. This was an international, *cosmopolitan* enterprise, in which the species was dealt with as a domestic breed that could only survive thanks to artificial circumstances and human management through a controlled program of genetic exchange. It was a project of deterritorialization. On the other hand the same endeavor relied on an imagination in which the wisent was associated with particular nations or regions and was presented as a symbol of wilderness, naturalness and strength. This was a project of reterritorialization. Basically all ISPEB-members – from Priemel to Żabiński, from Groeben to Heck – referenced both (apparently antithetical) aspects of the program. Depending on the context they would stress one aspect over the other.

We can only understand the logic behind the ISPEB's project, I believe, by adding a temporal dimension to the spatial one. The artificial genetic management of the wisent *in the present* was always presented as a temporary measure that was necessary to restore a wild *past* in the *future*. In order to recreate romantic encounters with true nature, one believed a transitory stage was needed in which one had to rely on cold manmade interventionism. The restoration of the wild and unruly places of the mythic past needed temporary places of human management and control.

It is not difficult to find present-day echoes of the spatial strategies the ISPEB devised for saving the wisent. Breeding and reintroducing the wisent was a high profile and pioneering undertaking in the conservation community. In the decades after World War II similar projects would be set up ranging from the reintroduction of the Arabian oryx to that of the Californian condor.⁸⁰ Next to that, the studbook as devised for the wisent would also prove highly inspirational. Today the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums describes it as the 'most important tool in scientifically managing ex situ populations of wild animals',

⁸⁰ See: Mark Stanley Price, *Animal Reintroductions: The Arabian Oryx* (Cambridge, 1989); Peter S. Alagona, 'Biography of a "Feathered Pig": The California Condor Conservation Controversy', *Journal of the History of Biology*, 37 (2004), 557-583.

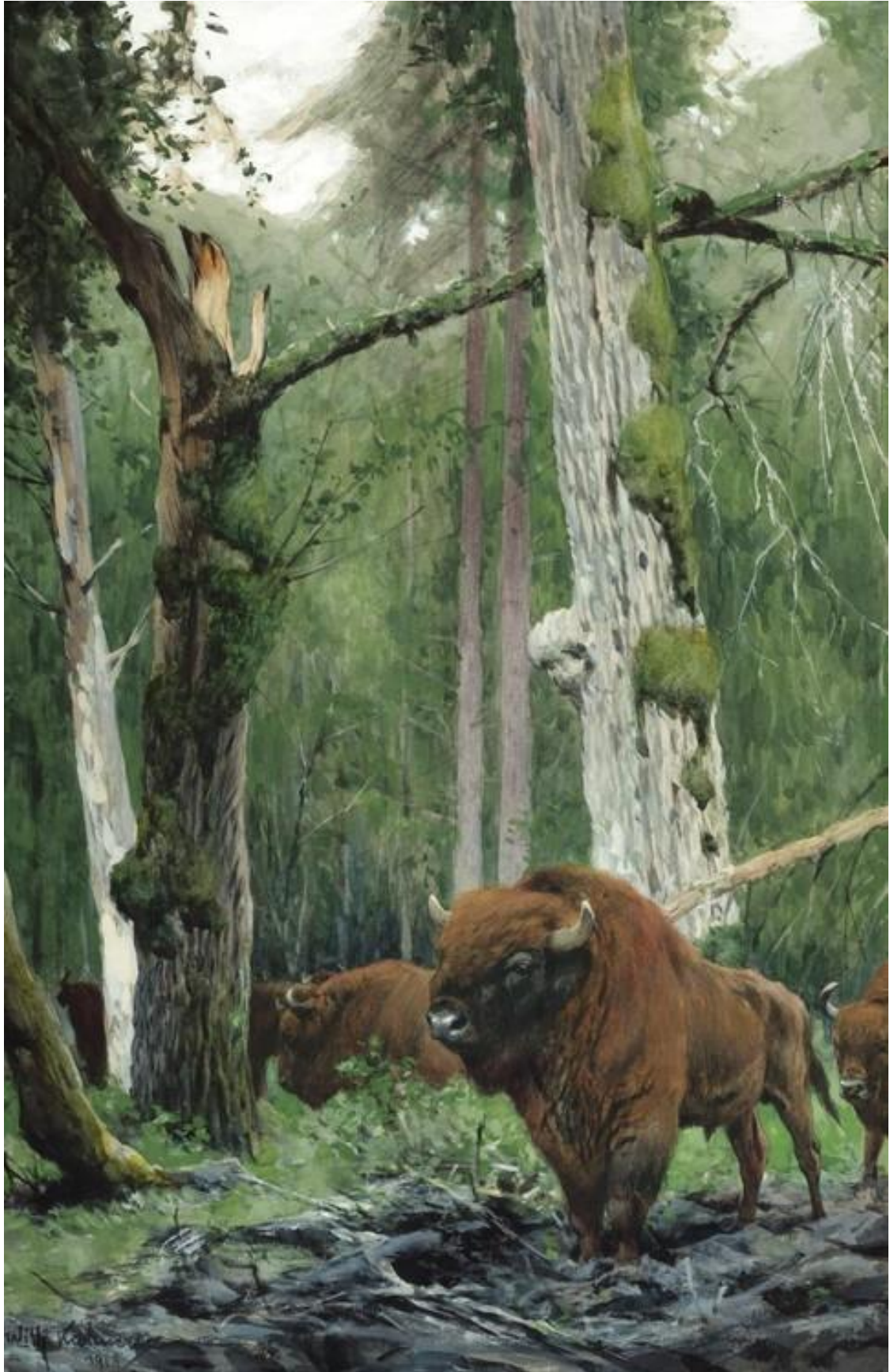
and studbooks are now kept for no less than 132 wild species.⁸¹ Yet, I believe the most important aspect of the history of the ISPEB lies elsewhere. Discussions on where the wisent should be bred and kept reflect broader ambiguities that concern the conservation community as a whole. Until today conservationists often combine technocratic rhetoric about the management of nature with a strong longing for places without human interference. In this way, they are not very different from the wisent-breeders of the 1920s and 1930s, who set up restoration ecology *avant la lettre*.

⁸¹ <http://www.waza.org/en/site/conservation/international-studbooks>

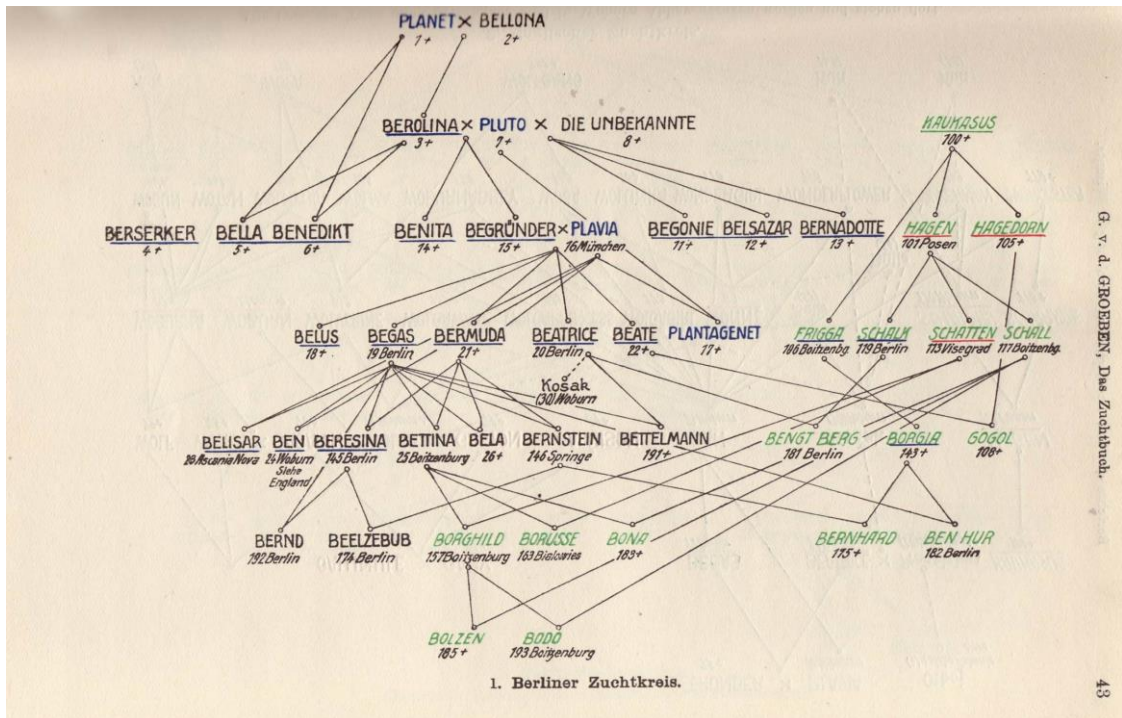
Illustrations



Remaining sites of wisent conservation in 1924 (according to ISPEB data).



Icon of the Wild: Wilhelm Kuhnert, *Im Urwaldinnern (Wisente)*(1918).



The Berlin ‘breeding circle’ as represented in the studbook (Groeben ‘Das Zuchtbuch’, 43).



Lutz Heck (left) and Hermann Göring (right) overlooking a map of Bialowieza at the Polish section of the International hunting exhibition of 1937. In the background one can see a mounted wisent (Waidwerk, 9).