

## *Overveen Workshop Summary*

On October 13<sup>th</sup>, 2009 Holland's Puur Water en Natuur (PWN) and the Large Herbivore Foundation (LHF) hosted the first workshop in a number of years to focus on the Human Dimensions of large herbivore restoration and management. The workshop was held in Overveen, the Netherlands at the edge of the Kraansvlak dunes and was attended by more than 30 people from several Western European countries as well as two Canadians. The workshop began with introductions and warm welcomes by Hans Kampf, who recently replaced Fred Baerselman as the new director of the LHF, and Piet Veel, sector manager for nature and recreation with the PWN. The workshop was divided into three sections: presentations by project leaders and experts in the area of large herbivore restoration and management, an excursion to the PWN's 200 ha European bison enclosure, and an afternoon working session to identify and learn about some of the most pressing human dimensions issues facing bison restoration in the Netherlands.

As part of his introduction to the workshop Mr. Veel provided a brief overview of the bison restoration project in the Kraansvlak dunes. Since 2007 the PWN Waterleidingbedrijf Noord-Holland, in association with Stichting Duinbehoud, ARK and Stichting Kritisch Bosbeheer has worked to successfully initiate, manage and promote the establishment of a European bison herd in the Kraansvlak dunes reserve. Though the animals are located within a 200ha fenced enclosure, the Kraansvlak pilot project has achieved important successes. These successes include the following: providing opportunities for research on bison impacts on dune areas and general bison ecology, offering guided excursions to allow members of the public to view bison, providing an opportunity to study bison-human interactions, and contributing to future efforts to restore free-ranging bison in the Netherlands. Given the important work of the PWN in this area, the Kraansvlak reserve was a very fitting location for this past October's human dimensions workshop.

The morning session of the workshop included interesting and informative presentations by researchers and project managers from Canada, Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium. For those unfamiliar with the field of Human Dimensions, Stephen Decker began the workshop presentations with an explanation of the field and its importance for large herbivore restoration and management. Stephen explained that Human Dimensions of Wildlife Management is a field of study which seeks to gather, understand and explain the attitudes, beliefs, concerns, and opinions of stakeholders and members of the public who are concerned about or affected by wildlife management efforts. Such information is essential for wildlife managers and nature conservationists because failing to understand and address the concerns of the public and interest groups can result in unsupported decisions, which may contribute to public opposition to nature and wildlife conservation efforts.

Presentations by project leaders (see presentation overviews and abstract links elsewhere on this webpage) highlighted human dimensions issues associated with bison restoration and management efforts in several European countries. The presentations by the guest speakers relayed experiences and issues that are of interest to all interest groups and individuals associated with bison restoration and management.

The experiences discussed in the presentations included the following:

- Efforts to address the concerns of farmers regarding crop damage and disease transfer
- Nature conservation opportunities provided by former military areas
- Positive bison-human interactions in an enclosed area
- Opportunities for further human dimensions-related research on public beliefs and attitudes regarding bison
- Learning from the LHF's extensive project experience to help to establish and maintain new bison restoration and management projects
- The role of bison in maintaining and restoring biodiversity and ecosystem functions
- The importance of gathering information on bison-related beliefs and attitudes that is representative of all stakeholder groups
- How bison react to public visits and tours
- Challenges and opportunities for other, more extensive, bison restoration projects

These presentations gave workshop participants a good base of information and allowed them to effectively participate in the afternoon session of the workshop. Before the afternoon session began, however, workshop participants were treated to an excursion into the nearby Kraanvslak reserve where they were able to see the features of the reserve area, view the bison herd and network with other workshop participants.

Following the excursion, Joep van de Vlasakker and Stephen Decker led a facilitated workshop session which involved workshop participants working together to identify, discuss and evaluate human dimensions challenges and opportunities facing European bison restoration and management in the Netherlands and elsewhere. Participants were divided into small groups and worked together to compile lists of the biggest challenges facing bison restoration and management efforts in the Netherlands. This exercise produced an extensive list of more than 30 challenges (Table 1). Each group then presented their list of challenges to the entire group of participants for discussion and evaluation.

**Table 1: Challenges as Identified by Participants**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Fear of the animal</li> <li>○ Fear of bison-caused damage</li> <li>○ Public Fear of losing access because of reserves</li> <li>○ Scientific Debates</li> <li>○ Government attitude (Minister does not want fuss)</li> <li>○ Legal liability (regarding damage/injuries)</li> <li>○ Assumptions by managers about thoughts and attitudes of the public</li> <li>○ Lack of funding</li> <li>○ Single interest groups (hunters, farmers)</li> <li>○ Debate about fencing</li> <li>○ Need media support for bison (“Knut effect”)</li> <li>○ Irresponsible conduct by visitors to reserves</li> <li>○ Lack of knowledge about behaviour of wild animals</li> <li>○ To create areas of sufficient scale</li> <li>○ Need to analyse feelings on different levels</li> <li>○ Extinction - responsibility</li> <li>○ Need to encourage local pride in local nature reserves and natural areas</li> <li>○ Emphasize unique nature experience in areas with large herbivores</li> <li>○ Need to assess / increase public knowledge levels regarding bison and bison ecology</li> <li>○ Bottom up approach (first gain support of the general public then the politicians)</li> <li>○ Need organizations with areas willing to reintroduce bison</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Need to use facts to challenge mistaken beliefs that bison and cows hybridize and that bison are dangerous</li> <li>○ Need more examples (pilot projects) with bison in nature</li> <li>○ Need to establish cooperation between nature conservation organizations (stronger network)</li> <li>○ Need bigger wilderness areas (nature is divided too much between different areas)</li> <li>○ Identify why we want to reintroduce bison (need a guiding plan for bison restoration and management in the country)</li> <li>○ Need to communicate why we want to do this (reintroduce bison) to create sufficient acceptance</li> <li>○ “Recognize our own paradigm” especially with respect to densities. What should determine densities cultural carrying capacity (public acceptance) or ecological carrying capacity?</li> <li>○ Need a sound research base from pilot projects</li> <li>○ Convincing Government <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- laws regarding agriculture are challenging</li> <li>- highlight that bison are original species</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ How to deal with professional compliance</li> <li>○ Support / acceptance by farmers. Need money for compensation.</li> <li>○ Need support of local inhabitants and those using the area for recreation</li> <li>○ Conflicts with roads and demands of fauna underpasses and overpasses</li> <li>○ Fences for bison that allow red deer, wild boar, etc. to pass through</li> </ul>
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Following an extensive discussion about the nature of the challenges identified and whether some could be grouped as more general issues, workshop participants cast votes to indicate which of these challenges presented the largest roadblocks or barriers for bison restoration and management in the Netherlands. Despite having initially identified both a large diversity and a large number of challenges, participants very clearly identified just three challenges out of 35 as being the most important issues to address.

The three most important challenges identified by workshop participants are as follows:

1. ***Need to develop more pilot projects*** (like the Kraanvslak) to expose the public to bison, educate people about bison behaviour and ecology and conduct scientific research on bison behaviour and ecology.
2. ***Need bigger wilderness areas/reserves*** to support ecosystem functions, allow for species migrations, buffer against the effects of global climate changes and support/enhance species diversity.
3. ***Need to reduce fear of bison***. Public safety fears were identified by several workshop participants as important issues in their project areas. Farmers' concerns regarding disease transfer and crop damage were also identified as significant issues that need to be addressed.

It is important to note that two additional issues emerged from discussions during the workshop. These issues relate to (1) important challenges regarding the transportation (domestically and internationally) of bison and (2) the need for more effective networking opportunities among individuals and interest groups interested in promoting European bison restoration and management efforts. After some discussion and debate regarding these three central challenges workshop participants were again divided into groups and asked to identify possible solutions for each challenge. This exercise produced a rich list of almost 30 possible solutions (Table 2) to these most important challenges. While some of the solutions identified relate specifically to a particular challenge identified, others are more general in nature and thus may apply to a larger variety of challenges.

**Table 2: Solutions as Identified by Participants**

		<b>Main Challenges</b>				
		Need to develop more pilot projects	Need bigger wilderness areas/reserves	Need to reduce fear of bison		
<b>Suggested Solutions</b>	○	Begin by identifying potential suitable areas (i.e. areas with few problems / controversies and big, natural areas)	○	Lobby to link to existing areas using relevant nature conservation policies	○	Gather data regarding fear
	○	Employ experience (e.g. successes / lessons learned) from other pilots (e.g. Kraansvlak)	○	Identify pilot areas with the right conditions (size) to address these objectives	○	Formulate solutions to address concerns
	○	Formulate clear goals (e.g. more species / open to the public)	○	Apply lessons learned in smaller project areas to establishing larger reserve areas	○	Educate the public
	○	Develop pilots with clear objectives / research questions	○	Explore the possibility of converting former military areas to reserves	○	Host / offer excursions to the public to allow people to experience bison behaviour (visitors will become ambassadors / promoters)
	○	Develop relationships with decision-makers supportive of bison restoration efforts	○	Enlarge existing pilot project areas and consider the value of a broader spectrum of herbivores (possibly even carnivores)	○	Develop education materials for all age levels
	○	Groups interested in bison restoration and management should work as a team – take a systematic approach (may help resolve difficulties with regulations)	○	Connect existing areas	○	Develop positive image in the media to create the “Knut effect“
	○	Find someone with guts to begin a new pilot and work through the growing pains – learn from the ‘growing pains’ of other projects.	○	Support and learn from networks and corridors in the Veluwe area	○	Encourage experience exchanges where local people can learn from their counterparts in areas where bison currently exist. (Similar to the exchange organized by Uwe Lindner (Rothaarbegirge project, Germany) where local interest group representatives made an excursion to Bialowieski National Park in Poland to learn from their counterparts about issues related to bison)
	○	Use Kraansvlak as a model to follow for future pilots - or to extend from (increase size of Kraansvlak or link Kraansvlak with other areas)			○	Develop a communication plan to address fear

The challenges and associated solutions identified by the Overveen workshop participants have been well documented and are currently being compiled to form the basis of LHF efforts relating to bison restoration and management in the coming months. The LHF has committed to organizing a follow-up human dimensions workshop during the Fall of 2010 to discuss progress on addressing the main challenges and associated solutions identified in Overveen this past October.

The LHF and PWN sincerely appreciate the cooperation and hard work of workshop participants and look forward to continued cooperation with and assistance from network participants in the coming months as we move forward with efforts to address the challenges identified.

By all accounts the Overveen workshop was both very enjoyable and productive. My dad and I wish to express our sincere gratitude to all participants and organizers for their hospitality and kindness during our visit.

I very much look forward to further discussions with you all in the near future and to our continued work in the area of Human Dimensions of large herbivore restoration and management.

Sincerely,  
Stephen Decker

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