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Rescue of the Buffaloes in Transcarpathia

(intermediate report end of 2009)

Buffaloes have been a part of the agricultural scenery in the Danubian basin and the southern Carpathians for thousands of years. They are the most northerly representatives of their species. Their hooves are hard, adapted to the stony ground of the mountains. Their coat is long, to protect them in the harsh winters. A compact and bulky body makes the Carpathian Buffalo a robust survival act. These features clearly differentiate it from its southern colleagues. The Carpathian Buffalo has enormous stamina as a draft animal and the milk and meat produced are delicious.



The break up of the Soviet Union led to the collapse of a coordinated breeding strategy for the animals in Transcarpathia (Carpatho-Ukraine), the stock numbers declined rapidly and they were in danger of extinction. The main problems faced were, as with other species, the old age of the farmers and the difficulty finding suitable breeding stock, in this case bulls, to ensure future generations of stock. Representatives of the SAVE Foundation have been keeping a careful eye on stock numbers in Transcarpathia since 1998. At that point in time there were still to be found at four locations with, between them, 65 animals. Ten years later there were only 38 animals in three places.

In 2009, together with very engaged and dedicated local partners from a new association "Conservation of Agro-Biodiversity in the Carpathians" (supporting association in Germany: www.karpaten-bueffel.eu) it was possible, inspired by the ELBARN project, to build up an Ark and Rescue Centre in Transcarpathia in a disused collective farm and, thus, create a conservation programme for Carpathian Buffaloes. That the project met an urgent need can be seen in the rapidity of its development:

- Phase 1: four breeding bulls were chosen and bought. These were put to use for interested farmers to service their female animals.
- Phase 2: female animals were bought that would have otherwise been sold away from the breeding area or even sold for slaughter.
- Phase 3: animals could be returned that were sold years ago to a zoo outside the area. These animals and their off-spring provide a valuable expansion to the genetic basis of the breeding group.

By the end of 2009, the Rescue Centre Saldobosh in Steblivka reached the substantial number of 19 animals – without endangering but enforcing the breeding activity in the surrounding area.

The Ark and Rescue Centre Saldobosh can be seen as a perfect example of how the rescue of endangered breeds can take place. The project was a success because a few, highly motivated people and organisations collaborated ideas and strengths and, also, found adequate funds in time to finance the purchase of animals that would have otherwise been lost. Foundation thanks for the support of STAB Foundation, Zurich, and many donators contributing to the buffalo fundraising in autumn 2009. SAVE wishes further success to the dedicated group at Saldobosh Rescue Station (see „Saldobosh“, Ukraine, in the European Ark-Network: www.arca-net.info).



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Livestock have shaped the Carpathian landscape



The Carpathians are rightly considered to be wild and ancient. However, they are not untouched. The natural landscapes have been influenced by humankind since primitive times. Hunting, planting and, especially, livestock keeping have changed the character of the landscape. The forest line of the mountains has moved to lower regions through herding. Mountain pastures show plants and insects that rely on the grazing of sheep. In partnership with ruminants, people have been able to make use of marginal land.

This partnership is often called into question. Shepherds swap their horses for cars. Oxen are replaced by tractors and sheep's wool with imported cotton. Affluence has found its way to the Carpathians and the younger generations can chose to spend their life in a European city.

What happens though, when a whole generation turns its back on the traditional, rural life? Experience shows that not only culture dies but, with it, diversity and landscape disappear forever. No one will be able to choose to take a different path through life to their parents anymore – after a few generations, ancient knowledge will only be found in textbooks. Without practical, living knowledge about the special livestock breeds and their accompanying landscapes, complete with nutrition chains and symbioses, life in the bleak mountains of the Carpathian region becomes unattractive. This is the motivation for us to conserve these unique animals in order to keep tradition alive, to learn from history and to respect it.