

Animal Health Law and the European *Bison*

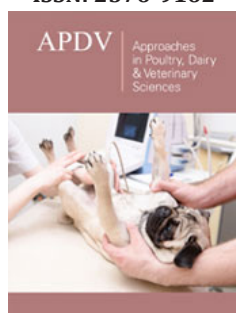
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Opinion





Present population of the European *Bison* (wisent) *Bison bonasus* L. is already about 200 times larger, comparing to its numbers in 1923 when the attempts for restitution of the species were initiated. Over 25% of the world population is maintained in various enclosures, zoos or breeding centers. However, many of those enclosures have an area of several tens of even several hundreds of hectares and animals living there have very limited contact with people. The European *bison* is included in the Animal Health Law (AHL) (EU 2016/429) in the group “*Bovines*”. This class refers to both domestic and wild taxa of all large *bovidae*. This includes genera: *Bison*, *bos* (with subgenera *bos*, *bibos*, *novibos*, *poephagus*) and *Bubalus* (with subgenera *anoa*) and progeny resulting from crossbreeding among those species. According to AHL rules animals are assigned only to two categories: wild and kept. However, the European *bison* within the EU are in fact divided into three: captive (usually few animals living within small restricted area), semi-free and free ranging (fulfilling the criteria for the wild). This intermediate category (semi-free) refers to animals dwelling in large groups within large enclosures (sometimes several hundreds of hectares) with only limited human interference. In such conditions animals have a possibility to form natural social groups and maintain close to natural interactions with environment. Therefore, semi-free herds are invaluable reservoirs of animals well adapted to natural lifecycle. Hence, individuals originating from such herds more easily adapt to circumstances typical for life in the nature and are more suitable for reintroduction programs, than animals available from typical captive conditions like breeding farms or zoos.

Additionally in some countries, due to limited space for free ranging large mammals or the lack of public acceptance, maintaining the European *bison* in considerable groups within large enclosures is the only way to sustain a breeding population of this species. Unfortunately, the European *bison* (wisent) as well as American *bison* belonging to the same genus *bison*, become assigned in European Union to the group “cattle” which means that legally both are treated equally with domestic livestock. However, the status of these species in Europe is quite different (Table 1). AHL rules for managing animals in captivity require a number of procedures regarding routine health tests (like for tuberculosis or other infectious diseases) when an animal should be mechanically restricted or immobilized for blood sampling, visible identification means (i.e. ear tags, young individuals should be marked during first 7 days of their life), as well as long quarantine periods obligatory for animals prior to a transport or translocation. Most of those actions include also a need for tranquilisation which is not indifferent for animals’ health. For untamed animals like European *bison*, frequent handling poses a great stress, often is connected with a direct risk of injuries not to mention quite substantial extra costs, which have to be taken into consideration by breeders and herd owners. Additionally last but not least, treatment of wild, strictly protected species just

like the cattle, destroys its image and perception by the public, which may negatively influence social acceptance towards future efforts aimed at restoring the species into natural habitats. Living conditions for European *bison* in large enclosures, except of a possibility for migrations, are not significantly different from those in natural environment. Moreover, in some cases, such enclosures are situated within home ranges of free ranging populations of this species (Białowieża, Bieszczady Poland, Vanatori Neamt,

Tarcu Mtns Romania) and include a part of their natural habitat. Animals in such enclosures do not have any contact with domestic livestock, like it is possible in the case of free ranging populations, so they cannot be a transmitter of any pathogens or infectious diseases. Nevertheless, the rules for their management are much more restrictive than towards the animals living in the same type of habitat but outside the fence.

Table 1: A comparison of European and American bison status in Europe.

<i>Bison Bonasus</i> (European Bison)	<i>Bison Bison</i> (American Bison)
	
	
native European species	alien species
Purpose for Keeping	
conservation, possible reintroduction	meat production
Management Methods	
wild, not tamed	tamed, like beef cattle
Behavior	
shy, aggressive, cannot be treated like cattle	less aggressive, can be treated like cattle
Population Size in EU Countries	
ca 1,800 in enclosures	ca 10,000
Protection in Europe	
Bern convention, habitat directive	None
Health Monitoring	
passive (transport, selection)	like cattle

Requirements for translocation within EU of animals with “wild” status are not very severe, none health tests are obligatory, only a certificate of their home range being free of certain diseases is necessary. Therefore, why animals living in large enclosures should be treated differently than free ranging representatives of the same species? An optimal solution would be an assumption that European *bison* living in large enclosures are animals protected in situ within delineated fragment of their habitat. Considering such enclosures

as habitat patches would be in accordance with a definition of a habitat and the opinion of European Commission expressed in a document SANTE.G.2/JD/sc (2022)2609194 from 01.04.2022. That would allow for treating European *bison* living in large enclosures as wild animals and applying to them health requirements like for wild species. That would exclude necessity for routine, costly and risky for animals’ pharmacological immobilisation, required for monitoring of tuberculosis, brucellosis etc. Therefore, it would

be advisable to make an exception in AHL rules and include an exclusive additional category for the European *bison* like: "semi-free" or "semi-wild in enclosures". Such enclosures could be regarded as habitat patches and health monitoring there could be performed in a passive way, including veterinary examination *in vivo* of every animal which has to be tranquilised from any other reason (e.g. preparation for a transport or fixing a radiocollar) and obligatorily of every dead animal post mortem. Such approach,

i.e. the treatment of wisents in enclosures as animals living in the wild, is now proposed by Polish government under the framework of implementation of the AHL rules. This could allow for those animals to live in conditions as close as possible to those of their natural environment, as well as limit necessary health checks and identification procedures only to cases when animals are supposed to be translocated, immobilized or culled for any reason.