

Education and Awareness campaigns in Vanatori Neamt Nature Park: “Ana has apples ...for the bison!” & “The Bison’s Night”

Contact name

Elena Curea

Institution name

RNP- ROMSILVA Administratia Parcului Natural Vanatori Neamt

Region & country

Vanatori Neamt Nature Park Romania



Summary

The European bison reintroduction in Vanatori Neamt Nature Park started in 2012. Before releasing the animals into the wild, they were kept in semi-free conditions in a large accommodation fenced area situated near our Park’s Visitor Centre.

The presence of bison in our enclosures and the existing of appropriate facilities in the Visitor Centre, allowed us to develop specific activities in order to increase the public awareness on this species and to promote this natural asset, which is an emblematic characteristic of our territory.

Since 2012, we organise annually the campaign called “Ana has apples... for the bison!” (Ana are mere ...pentru zimbri!). In order to reward the children involved in this campaign, we also organise every year the campaign “The Bison’s Night” (Noaptea zimbrului), which is a series of games and competitions associated to Halloween.



The real winners of "Ana has apples.. for bison", 2015. Photo by Elena Curea.

Background of the project

The juicy food (apples, pears, potatoes, beet, etc.) have a very important role in bison diet, especially in the cold season (autumn). In the woods, wild apples and pears seem to be inconsistent with bison's needs, and almost all the food available for them (hay, cereals and corn) is dry. In addition, the Park's capacity to obtain juicy food to feed the bisons was limited.

In an attempt to solve this problem, we practically fathomed another: the education, awareness, responsibility and implication of children in actions regarding the protection of this kind.

In first place, juicy food is very important for bisons, especially in autumn. For this reason, it was necessary to find the adequate amount of this kind of aliment in order to cover bison's needs until their release into the wild.

On the other hand, we considered that an emotional and material implications in helping the bisons, especially from the schoolchildren, will generate a local proud and a feeling of belonging about the presence of European bison in our area. Also, we expected that children will transmit these feelings to their adults.

Solution and actions taken

Our solution was to promote a contest among the local schools: The school groups that wanted to participate should collect the biggest quantity of juicy food and provide it to the bison in our premises. To make the contest more attractive we used a well known sentence for schoolchildren – "Ana are mere" (Ana has apples). This is the first sentence that children learn to write in primary school.

When the children come with the collected food to the Visitor Centre, they have the opportunity to feed the animals and to participate in the educational activities that we programmed.

Initially, we developed a public awareness campaign involving schools, visits to the Visitor Centre, distribution of printed materials and publication of articles in mass media. This “classic” approach of awareness raising resulted in a low level of emotional and material implication from the public.

In the first year (2013) the contest was launched for the local schools and we managed to collect 1 ton of juicy food. Due to this success, in the next years the contest was promoted through an advertising campaign using the Park’s administration web page and Facebook accounts.

The increase in participants allowed us to organise a special event for rewarding not only the winning group but also all the participants. The event was called “The Bison’s Night”. In it, representatives from the participating schools were able to join a series of games and competitions associated with Halloween pumpkins, which will lately also be used to feed the bison.

Other institutions or parties involved

From the beginning we were supported by local schools and NGO’s. Later, ECO CLUB 20 OZANA Ecotouristic Association and the Neamt Scholar Inspectorate made the campaign public to every school in Neamt county and to some of the schools in the neighbouring counties. Furthermore, the national media allowed us to transform this local initiative in a regional and national one.

Results

As a result, we collected approximate 4 tons of food in 2014, 6 tons in 2015 and 4.5 tons in 2016. With an impressive media support, the launch of “Ana has apples.... for bison” and “ The Bison’s Night” campaigns increasingly gain relevance and became nation known events. They were covered by national TV channels and newspapers.

The bison became a true symbol and pride of our area. Nowadays, a football team, a folk dance ensemble and even the Local Action Group (involving 11 communities) are called “The Bison Land”.

Challenges

- The juicy food is perishable and the schools do not have proper space to store it. For this reason, in some cases they have to stop the food collection
- Due to the schools financial restraints, sometimes the juicy food was transported by us to the Park. This meant that the children did not have the satisfaction to see how the bison ate the food collected by them, which was against our wishes.
- We received too many requests for “The Bison’s Night”, so we were forced to invite only a team of representatives from each participant school.

Lessons learned

- A good idea, an iconic animal, a dedicated team and a lot of work are key for success. It was enough to dare, to believe in us and in our ideas, and make the idea happen.

- With the support of the children we succeed in transforming a material necessity (food collection) into sentimental values (offering the food, having the satisfaction of good deeds, senses of involvement and belonging, etc.).
- Through the bison and our through our initiative, the participants convinced themselves they are serviceable, responsible, kind and sympathetic to nature.

Other resources

- "Ana has apples... for bison" 2017, on a national TV channel

<http://a1.ro/news/inedit/mai-multe-scoli-din-neamt-se-intrec-in-competitia-ana-are-mere-pentru-zimbri-id695036.html>

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RNP- ROMSILVA Administratia Parcului Natural Vanatori Neamt

Website(s)

<http://www.vanatoripark.ro>