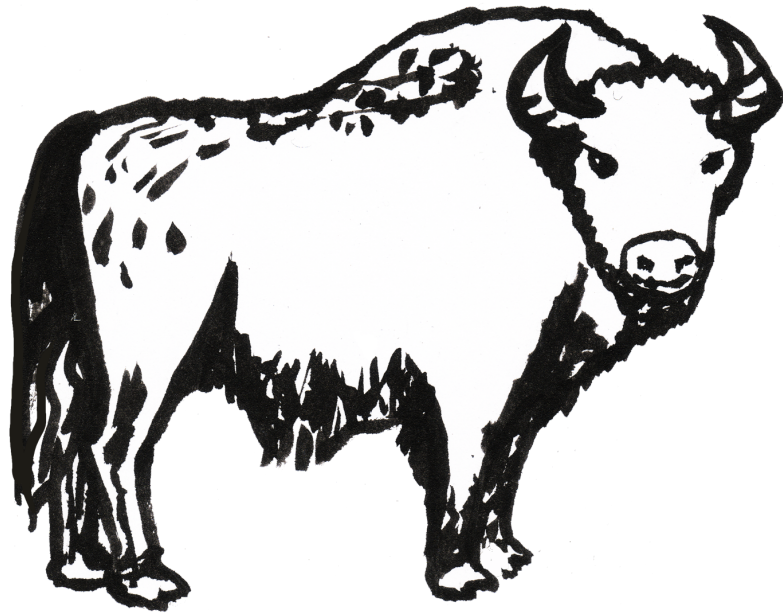


TEAM ROMANIA
FOR "PHILOSOPHY IN THE WILD: FINDING HOPE IN MIXED COMMUNITIES"

Reflections about our trip to the European Bison Nature Reserve Slivut Hateg
(April 10, 2025)



Note: the reflections were collected after the trip (April 12-April 16)



Picture of the entrance to the European Bison Nature Reserve Slivut Hateg.

Alina:
We set off for the European bison natural reserve on a cold, rainy April day. It was cold outside, but so warm in our hearts, knowing that we would see and feel these majestic animals. We (Alina, Eugen, Alex and our invited guest from Rewilding Europe, Dr. Vet. Ciprian Hodor) were prepared to provide our students with scientific information about the "zimbrii", but seeing them coming towards us and staying in our proximity was so much more than just words. Were they exploring us as we were exploring them? We happily collected elements of their environment, from little spring flowers to dried leaves, hay, and strands of their beautiful fur, with the colour of fresh earth. The smell of the air was earthy and rainy.



Picture of the three members of the "Philosophy in the Wild", team Romania, USAMV Cluj-Napoca (Alina, Eugen, Alex)



Picture of our group together with Med. Vet. Dr. Ciprian Hodor (Rewilding Europe).



Picture of Adina at the European Bison Nature Reserve (April 10, 2025)

Adina:
I went again to see the European bison. After 13 years, it is true, I was seeing them now with different eyes. 13 years ago it was another April day, but one full of sunshine. It wasn't about the bison, it was just a field trip with my nephew, but in my memory the bison looked a lot bigger and healthier. Now, on another April day, but a cold and rainy one, the bison looked sad and small, but I am unsure if my memory was failing or I am just seeing them with different eyes.



Picture of Ada at the European Bison Nature Reserve (April 10, 2025).

Ada:
The European Bisons Nature Reserve from Hațeg was a memorable first encounter for me. Despite the cold and humid weather, my curiosity to see the bison was stronger. The bison seemed less interested in us visitors than I was in them. Though I gained new insights, I left primarily with a heavy mind because of the European bison's history of vulnerability, reflecting once again on the harmful influence of humans on other life forms.

Adoriana:
Visiting the European Bison Nature Reserve was a very nice and memorable experience. It was amazing to see such powerful and rare animals up close in a natural setting. I learned a lot about the European bison and the efforts being made to protect them, which made me appreciate the importance of wildlife conservation even more.

The peaceful environment and the beautiful nature around us made the visit even more special. It was a unique opportunity to connect with nature and share the experience with classmates. I will definitely remember this trip for a long time.



Picture of Pavla at the European Bison Nature Reserve (April 10, 2025).

Pavla:
Changing Romanian landscape is empowered by rain and mist. Creating the right opportunity to see the majestic creature, European Bison. The location was the exact spot that I would imagine the Zimbru to live and thrive. But, unluckily, not sure I can state this, for these individuals the situation was not so bright. It seems that the people around them tried their best to preserve the wilderness in them but they do not have that much power as they should. Conservation and rewilding of these creatures is a noble task, now with a not so bright future, it seems. I believe and hope, as many others, that this mission will be successful. And we will have bison again in our forests.

Adriana:
The forest was embracing the road as I was approaching the reservation. Emotions are coming up, last time I visited it was forty years ago, too long ago to have any memories. It Rains. Rain is a life giver and empowerer, the colours are more vivid, the nature smell is much stronger...and through the rain curtain, here they are.... Eight furry creatures near the fence. One of them is curious and approaches us.... Sad eyes. Sadness among them and sadness among us for their situation...but birds are singing in the trees, life still goes on and HOPE is the key word. Tomorrow will be better....

Anda:
Visiting the European Bison Nature Reserve in Hațeg was a special experience for me, especially since I am from the same region, as I built over the past years a strong image of them, and back then, the bison seemed large and majestic. Seeing them again now, with my class, felt different. This time, I learned much more about the reality behind the scenes. I was glad to be there and to find out about the challenges people working there are facing, which are crazy and amazingly interesting to hear. I understood how limited genetic diversity over time has affected the bison population there. That helped me understand why my memory didn't quite match.

In my opinion when it comes to Hațeg reservation, there are some poor resources for animals that organizations must work with, they offers a balance between species conservation and the possibility of public observation, it is more educational structured then 'Nature reserve', in that way they must invest in extending the space animals are using more in that forest or even try to monitorize them free in that wild area, in my believe they keep them like this so no one could miss the opportunity to lie a look on them if visiting and not encouraging the natural behavior.

I believe that more efforts could be made to conserve the European bison and to invest in preservation programs that support relationships between reservations in a way that help biodiversity and directly the health of the species. These animals can live in the wild and play an important role in maintaining the balance of nature. Protecting them means protecting the environment and our natural heritage and it is sad we don't use them as we should.

Miruna:

Visiting the European bison in Hateg again after so many years brought back a mix of familiar feelings. The place is still peaceful, surrounded by hills and forests, and the bison are just as impressive in size and presence. But compared to my visit in 2012, something felt off. They looked healthy enough, but they seemed tired and less active. They moved slowly, stayed close together, and didn't show much interest in their surroundings. Back in 2012, the bison were more playful and curious. I remember them coming closer, interacting more with each other, and just seeming full of life. This time, the energy was missing. It felt like their spirits were low. It was a bit sad to see, and I left hoping that they'll get back that spark over time.



Looking forward to a better tomorrow (April 10, 2025, with our dear EHLA students first year).



Picture of one of the male European Bisons (April 10, 2025).

Olivia:

The reflections today are about the difference between expectations and reality. And also about the difference between how a normal human being sees an animal in a situation and how a person that knows a little about animal behavior and welfare sees the same thing.

My expectations came in a form of the child's expectations, imagining that we're going to see the bison in the woods and go on trail that was built and see the bison in the wild behaving naturally. But it was very different from what had really happened.

Since I started this master program I've learned something about the behavior of ruminants and the fact that most of their time is spent feeding and ruminating. But the child in me still hoped to see them at least moving freely in a forest. Second, I was expecting much bigger animals. I've seen the equivalent of some small cows with a lot of hair like, you know, rock cows.

I was a little bit disappointed, I have to admit, it's not an experience I would like to try again. I really hope that next time I'm gonna see animals in the wild or I'm not gonna see them at all. I have a trauma since I was a child, I hated Zoos and seeing animals in an unnatural environment for them. From the Zoos I've seen, I've visited only one zoo, in Bari, that seemed friendly with the animals and where the animals looked quite happy. Actually, I don't know if the bison at the location we've been were happy or not. But, you know, we have a way of interpreting happiness in animals in a human way. Seeing them wandering around and playing and interact, this is how us as humans perceive happiness. Now, I also know something about ruminance so I don't perceive it like this but still my untrained child part has the first opinion because it's older than the ethologist part. Again, it's the difference between how a normal person versus an ethologist sees a situation, the normal person was happy to see the bison that came to see us and that was very curious and almost interacted with us, on the other hand the ethologist would say it's not okay for a wild being to be that friendly to humans, it might cancel his abilities to survive in the wild. So yes, there are two different opinions in the same person, two different points of views really fighting each other.

The best part of the visit was actually the interaction with the veterinary doctor about the bison and everything that happens in the reservation. First because he seemed like a very well-trained professional and the information he gave us was very valuable. Second, because he seemed like a wise man, which nowadays is quite rare with everybody going insane around. He seemed like a very well balanced person, a "rara avis" nowadays, it was really reassuring to see there are still people like this around because for the moment we are living in a crazy environment. But from his speech, I also was left with disappointment, it was just a confirmation that the bureaucracy is killing life. In Romania, bureaucracy, meaning people that are not in the mood to do their job, is a reality and I'm afraid it can't be changed, because too many people are like this.

So, overall, for me, it wasn't such a good experience. And I'm really looking forward to go and see some wild animals in the wild. I've never been to the Refuge for the Bears in Rasnov, maybe it's different there. I would really like to see wild animals in the wild behaving normally (not meaning by this that those there that we've seen were not behaving normally, but having the freedom to move and behave in a natural way). I would prefer to take the risk to go to a place and not see the animals because they are not around. For example, I was in the Letea reservation and I didn't see the horses, only two of them that were close to the water, but that was a better experience for me, because I didn't see them because they are not kept in an enclosure, so those are happy wild animals. And for me it was enough to see the area they are living in.

Anyway, I also enjoyed A LOT the meal we had together at the restaurant afterwards, that experience I would love to repeat as often as possible.



Picture of Olivia at the European Bison Nature Reserve (April 10, 2025).



Picture of our group at the restaurant "Zimbru" (April 10, 2025).

Sigrid:

The visit to Hateg was significant, but not quite what I imagined. Despite the anticipation leading up to the trip, the bison appeared smaller and less energetic than I had expected. Maybe it was the cold weather, the rain, but they seemed subdued, standing far off in the enclosure without much movement or interaction. I had imagined a more dynamic scene, something closer to the vitality shown in documentaries. It was like a gentle reminder that wildlife does not perform on command.

Still, there was something quietly powerful about being there. When the one bison approached the fence, it felt like a small, but meaningful moment. I wondered what it saw in us. Even though their energy was low, just being near them brought a sense of connection to something resilient. It made me reflect on how human expectations can sometimes overshadow the actual experience. It also deepened my respect for these creatures and for everyone who is making efforts for their conservation.

All in all, the trip left me with more questions than answers, which I think is what a good field experience should do and reminded me why I chose this field: to better understand and protect the ways in which humans and animals share space, limits, resources, history, emotion.



Picture of two of the European Bisons at Nature Reserve Slinut Hateg (April 10, 2025).



Picture of Alex collecting the piece of soil with a natural size European bison footprint.



Picture of the piece of soil with a natural size European bison footprint.



Picture of the nature elements collected in the tin by all the members of our group.