# WHERE THE BISON STILL ROAM: WILDLIFE PRESERVATION AND ANIMAL WELFARE ISSUES IN POLAND AND BEYOND

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I have had a long personal interest in animal welfare issues. During the winter of 1995, while spending a year in Poland researching an unrelated topic, I arranged to meet the president of the Society for the Care of Animals (Towarzystwo Opieki nad Zwierzętami) at a café in Warsaw. The president, a young woman in her twenties, showed up wearing a fur coat - something I found a bit disconcerting. As we talked, she happened to mention that her coat was a fake. This intrigued me since it made me reflect on my own expectations about what an animal rights supporter should or should not wear. For example, many animal rights activists in the US choose not to wear coats that even resemble fur, especially if the fake is such that it could be mistaken for the real thing, as this might suggest that one supports the wearing of fur. This incident was one of the first indications to me that approaches to animal rights in Poland were not necessarily the same as those in the United States.

Environmental and animal rights issues in Poland have received a good deal of attention within Poland itself, but also from Western Europe. These issues play an important role in the development of competing images of Poland. In this paper I will discuss these issues with regard to the on-going tension between Polish environmentalists and animal rights activists and more traditional segments of Polish society, as well as conflicts between potential West European investors in Poland and West European environmentalists.

#### Fur Coats and Kie≈basa: Brutality or Tradition?

In *Nations and Nationalism* Eric Hobsbawm suggests that one attribute of the concept of nation is its ambiguity (Hobsbawm, 1990). The images that the term conjures allow for considerable fluidity, making it possible for individuals to inscribe a variety of attributes to the category of nation according to their own worldview. My research addresses discrepancies in the image of the Polish nation between mainstream Polish society and a relatively small group of activists—although this movement is one that continues to grow.

The animal welfare movement in Poland is largely, but not entirely, a youth movement. The most vocal members of these groups—for example those that attend demonstrations—are in their teens and twenties. Many of the tenets behind the movement—humane treatment of animals including livestock, vegetarianism, anti-fur positions—are the results of influence from organizations in the West. Some of these positions challenge traditional Polish attitudes toward animals. The Polish diet is very meat-centered, and many people commonly wear fur coats and hats, especially those over fifty. Fur is not seen necessarily as a luxury or as a sign of decadence, but as a practical solution to cold weather. For most Poles—as for many people throughout the world—the use of animals as resources for human utility goes unquestioned.

In general, young Poles are very West-oriented, often rejecting cultural ties to their eastern neighbors, as well as distancing themselves from certain traditional Polish ideals. This western orientation is apparent in their efforts to learn English and German, travel to western countries, and widespread interest in American popular culture.[1] The

attraction of young Poles to western mass culture relates to a larger trend in Polish society, an attempt to reassert Poland's connections—economic, political, and cultural—to the West. However, while many older generations of Poles are eager to be politically associated with the West, they are often less enthusiastic about embracing western cultural conventions. Older Poles are especially hesitant to accept ideas that many westerners themselves continue to view as extreme, and find the burgeoning student interest in animal rights perplexing, irreverent, and the result of privilege.

In the early nineties, older and middle-aged Poles sometimes reacted with hostility when confronted with anti-fur demonstrations. Some onlookers even doubted that the demonstrators could be Polish. There were shouts to the young protestors to "Go back to studying!" and suggestions that they ought to try working for a change. Some older Poles were angered by what they saw as the squandering of resources on a frivolous cause (*Chicago Tribune,* January 29, 1992). This strong reaction was likely compounded by the fact that many Poles, especially in the early 1990s, were struggling to survive in the new market economy. Some critics do not see this concern for animals as a worthwhile cause when many humans are living substandard lives.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett asserts that behind discussions of identity and difference

lurk issues of authenticity related to primordial claims (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1994). This statement holds true when applied to the conflict between animal rights activists and those who consider their views offensive or misguided. As I mentioned above, such activists are attacking traditional conventions, and, in essence, are accusing society of immoral behavior. This assault is countered by others seeking to defend their "way of life." The conflict, therefore, hinges to some degree, on notions of what is "Polish" compared to that which some people view as derivative of values imported or imposed from the West.[2] Animal rights activists are attempting to reshape Polish culture. This issue becomes especially sensitive when accusations of "barbarity" and "backwardness" are invoked.

The animal activist movement in Poland, like most places, is diverse, including groups focusing on environmental issues and wildlife preservation and those seeking more humane treatment of livestock and domestic animals. The movement also includes individuals who many view as being more radical—those espousing vegetarianism and condemning animal testing and the wearing of fur. Although they do not fit the youthful profile, there are also significant numbers of elderly women (and perhaps some men) who feed stray cat colonies (Kapucinski and Kaemierczak).

These varied interests are reflected in the kinds of animal-related groups that exist; in Poland today there are at least thirty-eight organizations dedicated to animal welfare. They range from vegetarian clubs and other groups that promote Earth-friendly lifestyles, to organizations that support environmental and wildlife causes, to more traditional groups who assist shelters designed to ease the plight of unwanted cats and dogs, as well as local chapters of the Animal Liberation Front.

One organization—the Gaja Klub of Bielsko-Biała—has been especially vocal throughout the 1990s. The group first became visible in the early 1990s when it launched protests against the use of wild animals in circuses and staged anti-fur demonstrations. In October of 1995 the Gaja Klub launched a public relations and lobbying campaign entitled "Zwierzę nie jest rzecz" (an animal is not an object). This slogan was a direct

response to the existing Polish law passed in 1928 that described animals as "objects" and suggested that they were incapable of experiencing pain and emotions. According to this law they were to be treated as any other form of property (Kapucinski and Kaemierczak). Exactly two years after this campaign was begun, parliament passed a new animal welfare law (Gaja Klub). Previously, most animal cruelty cases ended in dismissal due to a lack of initiative and limited resources to investigate such cases (Kapucinski and Kaemierczak). The Gaja Klub and other groups with similar goals have continued to demonstrate publicly demanding better enforcement of the new laws. Unfortunately, it is likely that a lack of resources and the relatively low priority given to animals will continue to be obstacles to protecting animals in Poland from abuse.

**Poland: A Battleground for Western Interests**

Aside from conflict between parties within Poland, the status of Polish animals has also received attention from Westerners on both sides of the issue. Since the reshaping of Polish trade over the past decade, a great deal of Polish livestock is now being transported to Western Europe. Under the new market system, Polish transport companies have had an incentive to pack as many animals as possible into transport cars. In some cases livestock from Poland arrived at borders in such deplorable condition that it was refused entry (Ratajczyk). Horrid transport conditions were among one of the reasons that an animal rights tribunal in Geneva designated Poland as being among its worst offenders in 1993 (Kapucinski and Kaemierczak). Poland is scheduled to be among the first East European countries to join the European Union. In order to be admitted, its agricultural regulations must comply with Union standards. However, the Common Agricultural Policy that affects EU member states has itself been the object of criticism by animal welfare organizations who insist that animal transport standards and farm subsidies invite animal abuse and damage to the environment (*European Report*, September 19, 1998).

Many inhumane practices exist within the agricultural industry. In some cases, Western demands for certain luxury goods exacerbate the plight of Polish livestock. One especially lucrative commodity is the fattened livers of force-fed geese used in the production of *foie gras*. This industry is especially gruesome, with pipes often being forced down the throats of geese who live in such a state of misery that their claws are removed to prevent them from killing themselves (Ratajczyk).

A number of international and foreign animal rights and conservation organizations have made efforts to impact policy within Poland. Over the past five years The World Society for the Protection of Animals has increased its efforts to raise awareness about responsible pet ownership and improve conditions for companion animals in Poland and other East European countries. In particular this organization has taken efforts to make people aware of the necessity of spaying and neutering their dogs and cats. In many countries throughout the world—Poland included—spaying and neutering is often believed to be an unnecessary intervention into an animal's natural reproductive cycles. The unfortunate result of such attitudes is millions of unwanted puppies and kittens that are drowned or destroyed by other means. An excess of unwanted animals also invites opportunities for other forms of abuse and neglect.

In addition to attempts to improve the lives of domestic animals, some organizations also work to protect wildlife and their habitat. Partial funding has come from international organizations like the Worldwide Fund for Nature that, in 1993, helped

to found the Biebrza National Park—Poland's largest nature park (*AAP Newsfeed*, April 6, 1998). The Polish Board of National Parks in Poland signed a cooperation agreement with the US Department of the Interior last year. Similar agreements have been signed to establish sister parks in the Poland and the US. For example, Kampinoski National Park and the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore Park have established an agreement to carry out joint research and share information on ecological education (*PAP New Wire*, April 15, 1998). Conservation organizations in Germany and Japan have also made contributions to improve national parks in Poland. Both international and local environmentalists and animal activists have made considerable efforts to raise awareness and increase the resources devoted to animal welfare.

In contrast, agro-business investors from the West have begun cashing in on the comparatively low cost of land in East European countries such as Poland and Hungary. Such investment trends anticipate the imminent expansion of the European Union; landholders in these nations will be eligible for juicy EU farm subsidies. Environmental groups in the West have been critical of their compatriots investments, suggesting that importing Western agricultural practices, deemed as Amore efficient," will destroy the incredible biodiversity that remains in Eastern Europe. For example, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has expressed concern that species that continue to thrive in East Central Europe will meet the same fate as their western counterparts whose populations have been decimated over the last century (Brown, 1998). Such conflicts indicate that Poland and other Central European countries may become an extended battleground between western environmentalists and investors.

In an earlier case in 1995, French actress Brigitte Bardot made a public appeal to President Lech Wałęsa to stop the planned culling of wolves in the Bieszczady region. Authorities believed that wolves were responsible for killing livestock, wild boars, and deer. In recent years hunting has been a very lucrative business in Poland—with wealthy amateurs from Austria and Germany paying high premiums for the opportunity to shoot wolves--something strictly forbidden in European Union countries (*Agence France Presse*, October 13, 1996). However, it is also true that in most European countries wolves have virtually disappeared. Poland's flourishing wolf population, though limited to two or three areas within the country, is quite unique.[3]

The circumstances surrounding the survival of wolves in the Bieszczady region is in itself quite interesting. This area is found in the very southeast corner of Poland wedged between Slovakia and Ukraine. In the years immediately following World War II Soviet forces fought the Ukrainian resistance in this region of the Carpathian Mountains. After the insurgents were defeated, the survivors were deported to Siberia and their villages were razed. The land in this remote region was allowed to revert to a more natural state—not through intent but by oversight. The fact that wolves were able to survive in this area, when they were considered a scourge and slaughtered throughout the rest of Europe, was a fortuitous accident and an indirect result of ethnic cleansing (Donkin).

Throughout the 1990s conservation scientists conducting research on the Bieszczady wolves, have endorsed limited hunting of the species. They reasoned that the best way to ensure the future of wolves in Poland was to maintain limits on uncurbed growth in order to prevent them from turning to livestock as a source of food. They believed that this phenomena would lead to a backlash among farmers and others who are

already apprehensive about the presence of wolves (*The Financial Times Limited,* December 9, 1995). Local inhabitants and game wardens were also strongly opposed to a ban on the killing of wolves since hunting comprised a key mainstay of their income in this remote area. However, due to considerable pressure from Polish and international environmentalists, in 1998 wolf hunting was banned in Bieszczad - the last region in Poland where it was allowed (*Agence France Presse*, February 8, 1999).

In 1979 UNESCO declared the national park in the Bielowie ʃa Forest a World Heritage site. This forest on the Polish-Belorussian border is home to one of the last remaining herds of European bison—a species once believed extinct. In the 1920's Polish scientists discovered a handful of surviving bison and undertook a plan to resurrect the species. The bison were reintroduced to the forest in the 1950s and now number in the hundreds. Estimates of their numbers range between 250 and 500 (*Times Newspapers Limited,* February 6, 1999). These rare creatures are fast becoming a tourist attraction.

In fact, one proposed solution to meet the needs of both wildlife and local residents in remote villages adjacent to the parks in Bieszczady and Bielowie ʃa is the further development of an eco-tourism industry. Presently there are several travel firms that offer tour packages to Poland's nature reserves. These tours are widely marketed to West Europeans offering them an opportunity to experience a continent that is now lost to them. Bielowie ʃa is often referred to as "Europe's last remaining primeval forest" and is described in fairytale-like terms (Woods). Certain travel articles include the local human inhabitants in their rustic portrayals. For example, British travel writer Lisa Sykes describes Poland's Bielowie ʃa and Bieczszady regions and a handful of other sites in the following manner, "Even in the crowded continent of Europe there are still havens where the landscape takes your breath away, the wildlife is out of this world and the people's lives are from another time. And the beauty is they are so close you can get there for a long weekend" (Sykes).

This image of Polish nature reserves as one of the last vestiges of "unspoiled" European forest coincides with the rhetoric used by Western environmentalists who see a need to protect Eastern Europe from the same mistakes that were made with regard to development in the West (Brown). Sykes' reference to the close proximity of Poland to Western Europe also underscores the vast potential that such places offer as sites of "eco-tourism." This trend includes traditional types of nature excursions, as well as more experimental and participatory models. For example, one nonprofit organization—Earthwatch—supports scientific studies and takes efforts to make projects accessible to volunteer researchers. Such volunteers also make a financial contribution to projects, thereby funding research and the costs of travel and accommodations (Donkin). Other private organizations devoted to the protection of birds offer tours the price of which includes a contribution to local conservation efforts (Marsch).

However, while such possibilities for developing nature-related tourism may appear to be more ecologically sound than other kinds of tourism, this is not necessarily the case. Deborah McLaren, the author of *Rethinking Tourism and Ecotravel: The Paving of Paradise and What You Can Do to Stop It,* warns against the "Greenwashing" of tourism. She writes, "What is the difference between conventional travel and ecotravel? The overwhelming answer seems to be not much. Ecotravel may involve more of a focus on getting out to see nature, but that doesn't necessarily mean protecting the earth" (McLaren, 113).

After reflecting on the situation of Polish wildlife and their habitat, it becomes clear that hordes of tourists—even those with good intentions—could have a detrimental effect on species that thrive best in remote areas with minimal disturbance from humans. There are no simple solutions, and as is often the case with issues of animal welfare, there is also no clear agreement as to what is best for the animals in question.

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Like children, animals can illicit strong feelings because they are seen by many as innocent beings. The destruction of innocence can lead people to react strongly, even rabidly. Such sentiment can be especially damaging when directed at members of another ethnic or cultural group. Even seemingly benign organizations dedicated to improving the lives of animals in poorer countries run the risk of treating local inhabitants as misguided barbarians. Such attitudes are possible even when the indicators of cultural difference are less obvious, for example between East and West European nations. Animal activists within Poland as well as in the West must be aware of the degree to which the status of animals is culturally defined. They must possess an understanding of the high levels of emotional intensity invested in the distinctions that people make between animals and humans. In calling into question such categories, one is essentially asking that people reconsider their own place and worth in the world. Traditional attitudes toward animals are often validated by religion, and many individuals who have lived in accordance with this dichotomy may perceive challenges to it as a threat to their own identity. The sensitivity of this issue must be kept in mind along with other root causes of exploitation and insensitivity to animals including poverty, a lack of educational opportunities, and generally miserable living conditions. These issues will be the focus of my future research on the animal welfare and environmental movements in Poland.

In the meantime, the Polish government appears serious in its efforts to amend legislation to comply with Western standards. After a round of accession talks devoted to environmental regulations in January of this year, Vice-minister of Environmental Protection Jan Radziejowski announced that Poland should have no major problems adopting Community legislation regarding wildlife protection as the relevant Polish regulations are now stricter than the EU requires (*Polish News Bulletin*, January 19, 1999). However, legislation itself does not ensure that laws will be respected. In fact during recent decades many East European countries had very strict environmental laws. Such laws, unfortunately, did not protect Eastern Europe from widespread environmental degradation as authorities made few, if any, provisions for enforcement.

In other areas of animal welfare, efforts continue, with organizations pressing for more explicit legal provisions and improvement in regulatory agencies. In recent months animal rights activists in several countries have generated a good deal of attention, Polish activists not least among them. Animal advocates in Poland have launched attacks on butcher shops, fur stores and fur farms causing extensive property damage. If earlier generations have overlooked the plight of animals, a small, but passionate segment of Polish youth is now pursuing it with a vengeance.

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**Notes**

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[1] I should note that this motivation to learn English and German is at least partly driven by socio-economic concerns as it often improves one's employment opportunities.

[2] Similarly, Julie Hemment argues that negative perceptions of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Eastern Europe have to do with their being seen as agents of imperial power that

reinforce a kind of inequality in value between things labeled "Eastern" vis-à-vis those that are considered "Western." From this perspective it is understandable why some East Europeans perceive NGOs as imposing alien values on them. Hemment also suggests that people who are most suspicious and critical of NGOs are those individuals who have been less successful at adapting to the new "code system" in post-socialist societies (Hemment). The elderly are especially prevalent among this group.

[3] However, in recent years wolves have begun to make a comeback in a handful of areas in Western Europe including the Swiss Alps. Wolf populations have been in existence in northern Italy, Spain and Portugal for a number of years. In Germany there have also been occasional sightings of wolves believed to have passed over from Poland (Klaffke).