



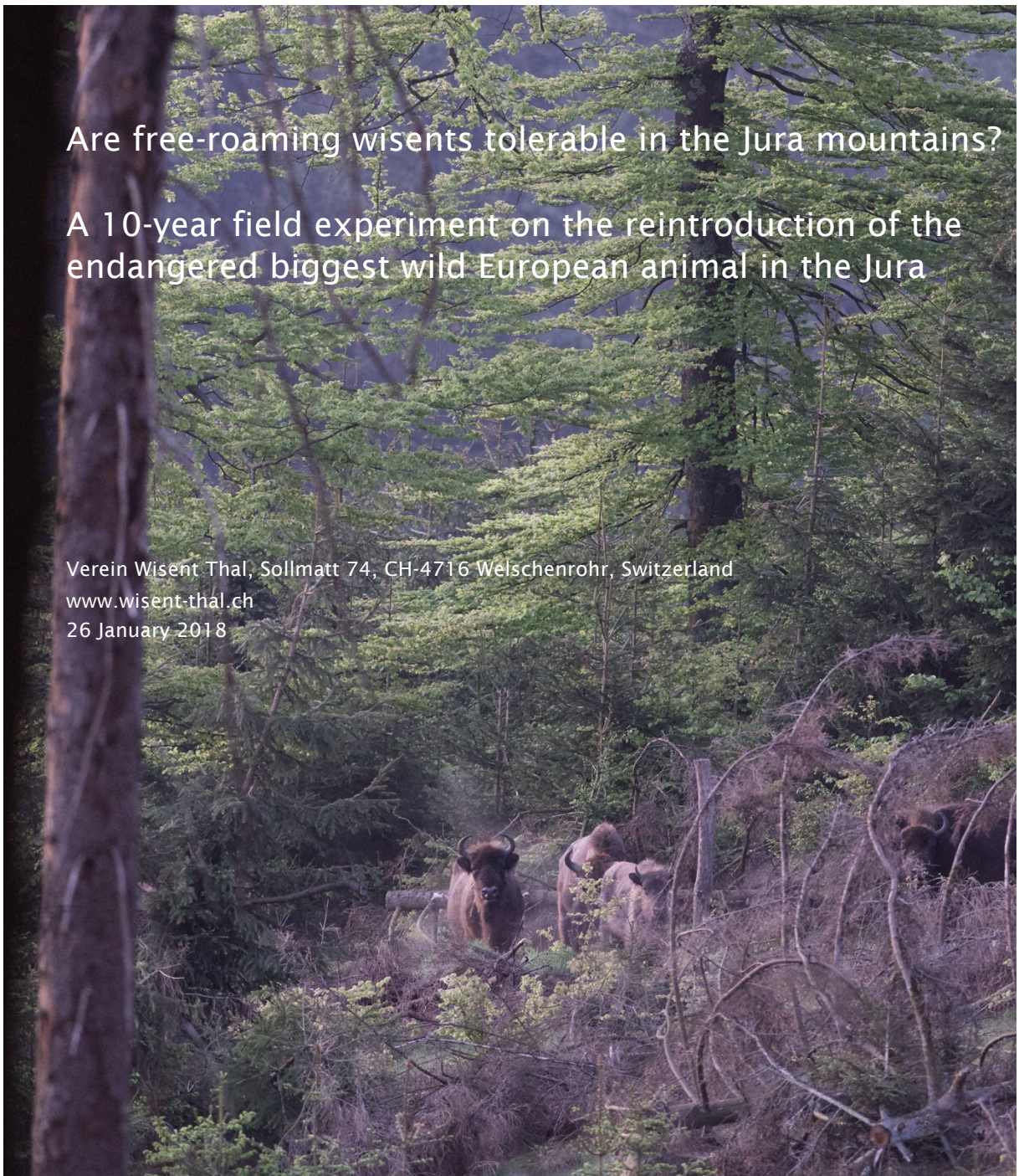
PROJEKT

WISENT THAL

Are free-roaming wisents tolerable in the Jura mountains?

A 10-year field experiment on the reintroduction of the endangered biggest wild European animal in the Jura

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A brief portrait of the Wisent:

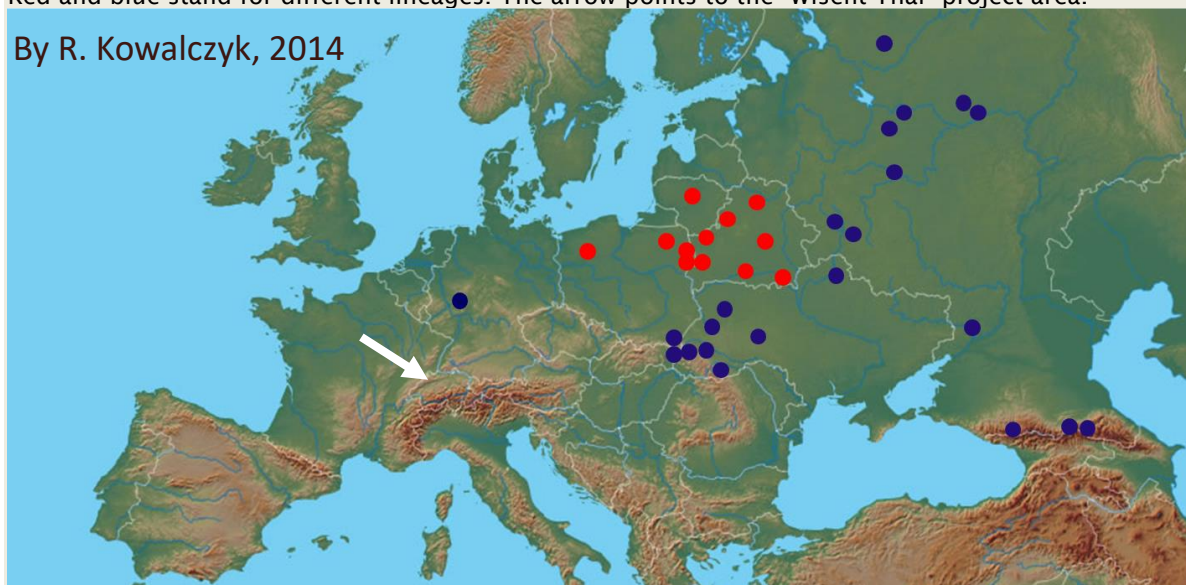
Wisents (European bison) are big wild bovids native to Europe. The bulls weigh between 500 kilograms and a ton, and cows between 300 and 500 kilograms. The wisent is a ruminant that eats only plants. Its diet consists of grass, herbs, leaves, young shoots, roots and tree bark. Adult animals need around 30 to 60 kilograms of food per day. Wisents are known as placid and peaceful grazers that live in herds of eight to 20 cows, juveniles and calves. Bulls usually linger at the fringes of such groups. They live alone or in groups of up to seven.



Herds of free-roaming wisents (as of 2014):

Red and blue stand for different lineages. The arrow points to the “Wisent Thal” project area.

By R. Kowalczyk, 2014



Contents

Summary	3
Vision, goals of the project	4
Concept, work packages	5
Project carrier, project team, partners	9
Timetable	10
Budget, financing, compensation	10

Summary

Some 1,000 years after the eradication of the largest remaining wild animal in Europe, it may be possible today to reintroduce the wisent in the Jura Mountains and thus make an important contribution to the preservation of this endangered species. It is not known, however, whether the positive experiences with free-roaming wisents in other countries can be transferred to the Swiss Jura region. The purpose of the project “Wisent Thal” is thus to determine over a period of around 10 years based on a well-monitored and managed wisent test herd of 10 to 25 animals, at first fenced in and later allowed to roam free, whether wisents can live in the wild in the Jura Mountains and whether they are a viable addition to the landscape. In parallel, the people living in the region are to be familiarised with wisents.

Thanks to GPS collars, it will be possible to track the herd in the wild. Researchers will study the herd’s feeding habits and behaviour toward people, livestock and facilities of all kinds. Any damage the animals cause will be systematically documented and those affected compensated. This also applies to extra costs incurred as a result of the wisent presence. A large viewing enclosure with five to 10 wisents will be used to generate positive interest in the animals, allowing people to experience them in the Jura landscape. This will help to dispel any fears of the animals and can also be used for practice-oriented studies. At the centre of all communication with the public will be the “Wisent Ranger”. He will be reachable at all times to provide information, advice and assistance to people who come into contact or conflict with the wisents, arriving quickly on the scene whenever needed.

The project Wisent Thal wants to achieve the following goals over the 10-year period:

- 1 To determine based on a well-monitored and managed free-roaming wisent test herd whether wisents can live in the wild in the Jura Mountains and whether they are a tolerable addition to this cultural landscape.
- 2 To familiarise people living in the region with this almost unknown species.
- 3 If the wisents are able to be incorporated well into the developed landscape, the project will form the starting point for reintroducing wisents in the Jura Mountains, a significant step for the conservation of this endangered species.

The project is carried by an association with a limited number of members who have close connections with related projects in Europe and with the local stakeholders. The total budget for 10 years is approximately CHF 3.3 million, of which around 1.3 million can be generated by the operation of the viewing enclosure along with guided excursions to see the wisent test herd.



Vision, goals of the project

Wisents (European bison) formerly roamed most parts of Europe. But the wisent was already extinct in Switzerland and almost everywhere else as early as the Middle Ages. About one hundred years ago, Europe's largest remaining free-roaming mammal then nearly vanished completely. Like the Alpine ibex, the wisent has managed to survive on protected aristocratic hunting grounds and in captivity. For the past several decades, wisents have been living in the wild in Eastern Europe, and three years ago they even found a home in the German Rothaar Mountains, including in operational commercial forests. Positive experiences with wisents elsewhere have encouraged us to hope that the wisent could also once again find a habitat in the Jura Mountains. A population of free-living wisents would be an important contribution to the survival of this still endangered species.



It remains to be seen whether the experiences in other countries can be transferred to the Swiss Jura Mountains. The wild wisents that have been living for the past few decades in Eastern Europe mainly inhabit landscapes whose use is more extensive and different than that of the Jura, at least as regards agriculture. Before the wisent can be reintroduced here, it is therefore necessary to study the animals' behavioural patterns, their impact on the landscape, and how their behaviour and distribution can be influenced if necessary. This is the purpose of the project "Wisent Thal".

Project goal 1: To determine over a period of approx. 10 years based on a well-monitored and managed free-roaming wisent test herd of 10 to 25 animals whether wisents can live in the wild in the Jura Mountains and whether they are a tolerable addition to this cultural landscape.

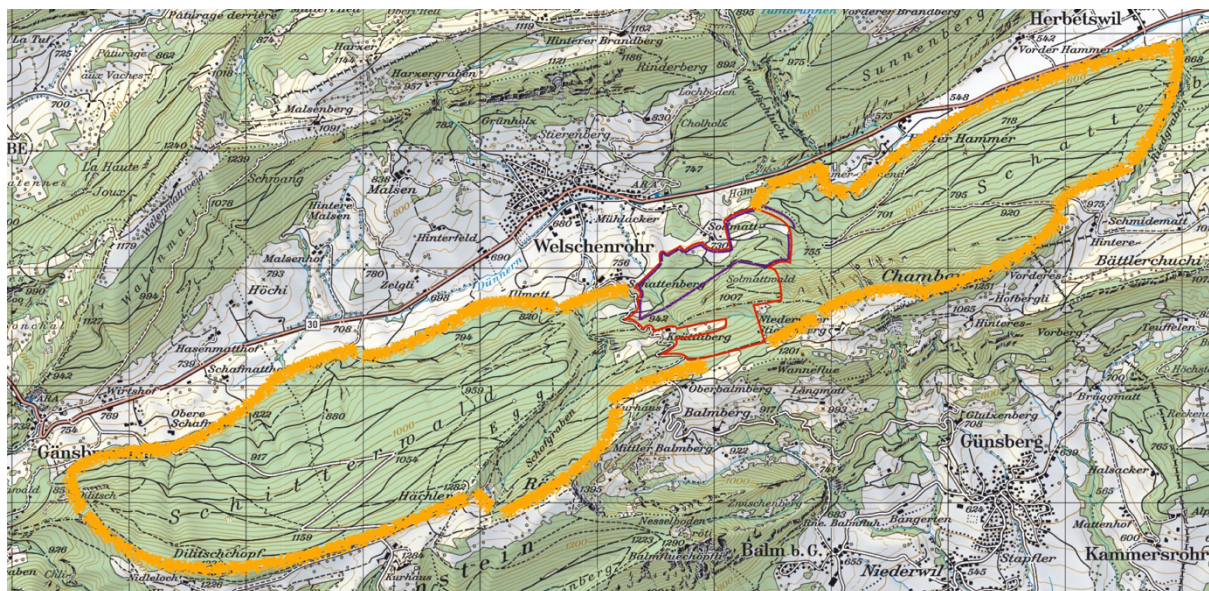
Project goal 2: To familiarise people living in the region with this almost unknown species.

Project goal 3: If it turns out that the wisents can be integrated well into the developed landscape, the project will form the starting point for reintroducing the wisent in the Jura Mountains, a significant step for the conservation of this endangered species.

Concept, work packages

Summary:

The project “Wisent Thal” borrows heavily from the concept for a similar project in the Rothaar Mountains (<http://www.wisent-welt.de>) that has been running for several years. It consists of three key complementary components: reintroduction herd under control, viewing enclosure, wisent ranger.



Map 1: Location of the reintroduction enclosure in Phase I (magenta) and Phase II (red) and presumed grazing area of the test herd after removal of the fence in Phase III (planned perimeter in yellow). In Phase III, the eastern part of the first enclosure will serve as a viewing enclosure for a second wisent herd (magenta).

Controlled reintroduction of the wisent test herd in three phases:

The controlled reintroduction of the test herd will be done in three phases in increasingly large areas, with the animals fenced in during the first two phases and allowed to roam freely in the third phase. Due to existing pasture fences, the wisents will be able to leave the forest in only a few places even during the third phase.

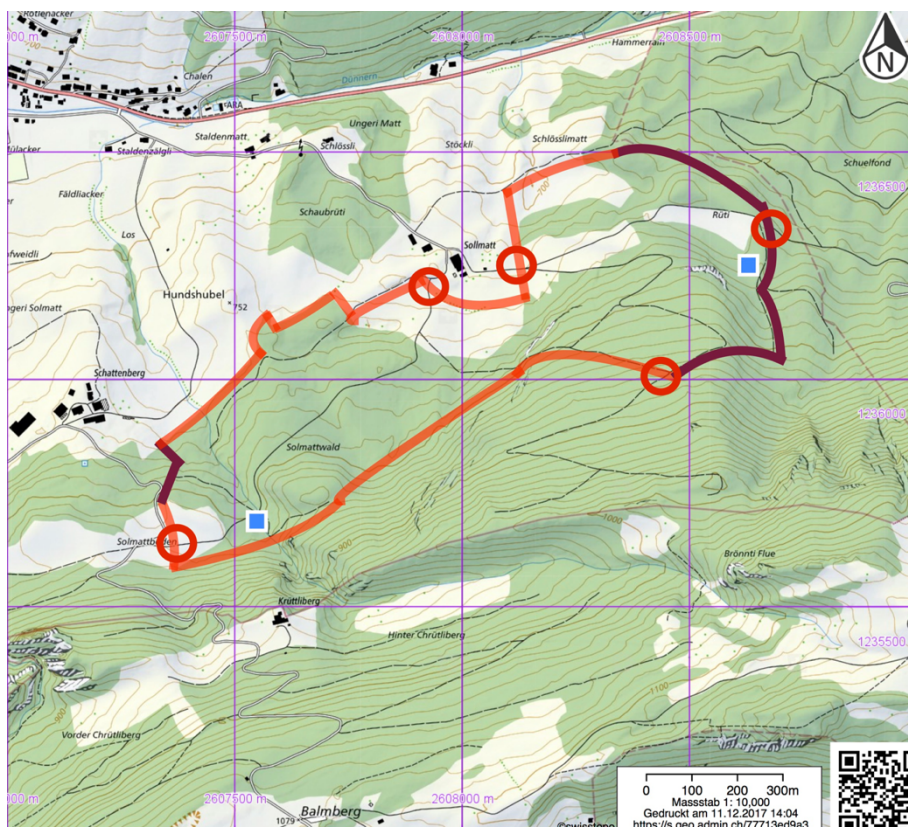
Thanks to GPS collars, the herd will still be trackable after reintroduction into the wild. The welfare of the animals and the social structure of the group will be monitored in the field, as a rule daily. Researchers will study the herd’s feeding habits and behaviour toward people, livestock and facilities of all kinds. The research questions will be supplemented and refined based on the needs and concerns of local stakeholders and those affected on the ground, so that the project can supply the answers that are really relevant to the open questions regarding the tolerability of free-roaming wisents.

Any damage caused will be systematically documented and those affected compensated. This also applies to extra expenses incurred as a result of the wisents. We will also examine how the behaviour of the free-roaming wisents can be influenced selectively. In particular, it must be clarified whether and how the wisents can be kept or driven away from areas where they could cause significant damage.

The wisent test herd will have the legal status of a “free-range herd in the possession of the Wisent Thal association” and not that of wild animals set free. This ensures easy access to the animals by the association and regulates issues of liability. Releasing wild animals would require a federal permit. If the test shows positive results after 10 years, the canton of Solothurn can apply to the confederation

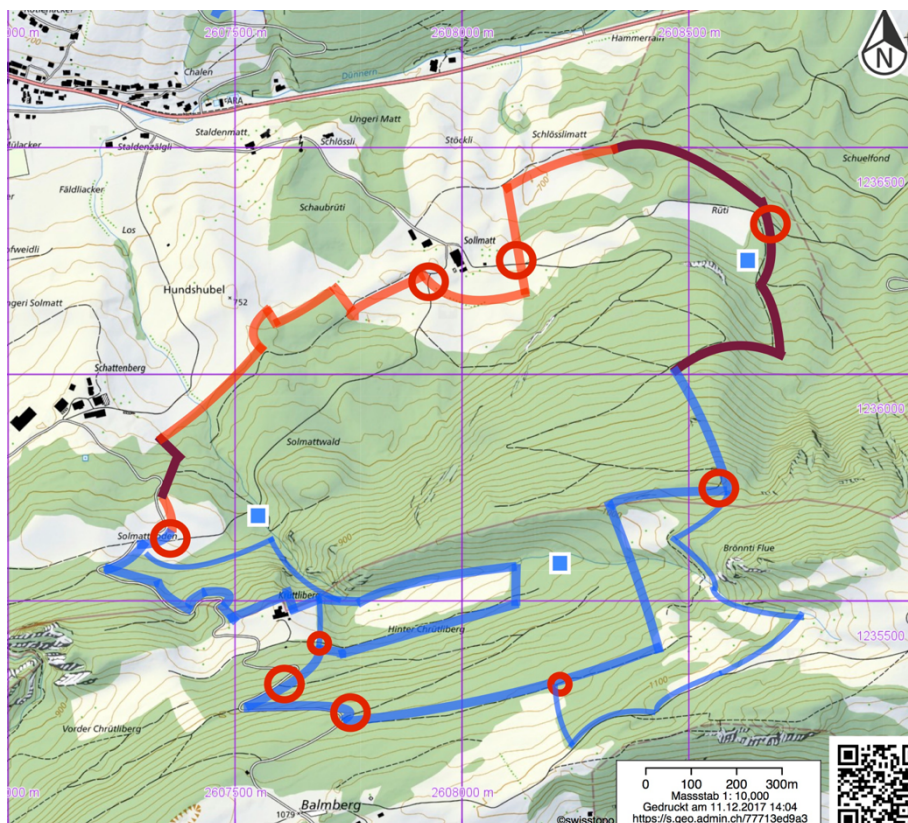
for the animals' release into the wild. The Wisent Thal association does not have the legal jurisdiction to do so.

In Phase I, which is scheduled for about two years, the wisent test herd will remain within the later viewing enclosure. Parts of the enclosure will be surrounded by an electric fence and other parts by a semi-permeable fence made of wire cables through which wild animals ranging in size from deer to wild boar can pass through without a problem while wisent will be unable to escape. A similar fence has proven serviceable at Wildpark Langenberg near Zurich for several years. The enclosure covers a total area of about 51 hectares. Of this area, around 10 hectares consist of meadows and pastures and the rest is made up of forests of varying structure.



Map 2: The reintroduction enclosure in Phase I. The electric fence is lighter-coloured and the semi-permeable wire cable fence darker. Gates are marked with red circles and watering stations with blue squares.

After the wisents have acclimated themselves and are familiar with their new surroundings, the area surrounded by the electric fence will be expanded to about 106 hectares for Phase II. For the next three years, the research will focus on determining whether the behaviour of the test herd and any associated conflicts would make allowing the herd to roam free in the subsequent Phase III appear to be a viable option. During Phase II, the areas within the enclosure will be used as normal for agriculture and forestry, and also for hunting. The area fenced in for Phase II belongs for the most part to the municipality of Solothurn. Crossings and passageways will ensure that the area is still accessible for normal use by pedestrians and forestry vehicles.



Map 3: The reintroduction enclosure in Phase II. The semi-permeable wire cable fence from Phase I is darker-coloured. Electric fences are shown in orange (taken over from Phase I) and blue (newly installed for Phase II, with thin lines as variants). Gates are marked with red circles and watering stations with blue squares.

In Phase III, the fences will be taken down, with the exception of the eastern part of the enclosure from Phase I, which will serve as a viewing enclosure for a second, smaller wisent herd. The test herd will now be able to roam freely through the forest for five years, but it can be expected that it will scarcely leave the area marked in yellow on Map 1 for topographical reasons and due to the existing pasture fences. Phase III will show whether it is really true that free-range wisents do not do any major damage in agricultural areas, as the Wisent Thal association assumes, or whether damage can be prevented through simple measures. Any open questions regarding conflicts with forestry will also be answered in this phase, because the wisents will now also have access to various types of forest.

Wisent Viewing Enclosure, observations of the test herd:

Encounters with the wisent test herd in Phases I and II as well as with a second, smaller herd in the viewing enclosure during Phase III will be used to generate positive interest in wild wisents, allowing people to experience the animals in the Jura landscape and to learn more about them, while also serving to allay any fears.

After a settling-in period of a few months, the enclosure from Phase III will be open to the paying public five to six days per week. The wisents will not necessarily be easy to find in the over 50-hectare area, but will have to be sought out. Visitors will not be permitted to leave the marked trails and will be instructed on rules of conduct before entering the enclosure. People will be able to visit the viewing enclosure alone or in the company of the Wisent Ranger or other persons specially trained by the project for this purpose. At the visitors' centre, the visitors will learn where in the enclosure they can most likely find the herd.

A visitors' centre will be set up to collect admission fees and make information available (leaflets about wisents, the wisent project, the viewing enclosure and the reintroduction of the herd, along with a video playing in an endless loop). There will also be a kiosk with a small selection of souvenirs, merchandise and books. The enclosure is easily reached by public transport (the next bus stop is 900 metres away, the travel time is 24 minutes from Balsthal station and 8 minutes from the train station in Gänsbrunnen). Visitors arriving by car will be picked up by the Wisent Bus from designated public car parks either according to a fixed, posted schedule or after calling the visitors' centre.

During Phase II, the herd will roam around in an over 100-hectare area and will be more difficult to find than in Phase I. The fenced area will be freely accessible during this phase for anyone walking along trails leading into it. An entrance fee can therefore only be requested on a voluntary basis during this phase. In return, general information and tips on the current location of the herd will be available at the visitors' centre. It is assumed that most visitors will take advantage of the offerings at the visitors' centre and will be prepared to pay an entrance fee (in the form of a donation to the project). In addition, guided tours to the test herd will be offered to groups for a fee in Phase II (and also in Phase III, depending on developments), during which visitors will be shown many kinds of traces left by the animals as they learn about wisents and the forest. Thanks to radio telemetry, the tour guide will almost always be able to find the wisent herd and can also make sure that the group of visitors does not get too close to the herd and disturb the animals.



In Phase III, when the test herd can be expected to be roaming over an area of several square kilometres and will therefore be difficult to observe, a part of the enclosure from Phase I will be set up as a viewing enclosure and an additional wisent herd with five to 10 animals will be shown there. Excess animals from the test herd or those with problematic behaviour could become part of this show herd. It will be open for visitors to view for an entrance fee, either on their own or accompanied by a guide. Visitors will not be permitted to leave the trails within the enclosure. This show herd can be used to conduct real-world studies on dealing with the presence of wisents. If the experiences with guided visits to the free-roaming test herd are positive, this offering can be maintained in Phase III, whereby visitors will now have to walk much farther to see the herd, sometimes for several hours.

Wisent Ranger:

Thanks to professional communication, all those involved in the project as well as other interested parties can be kept up to date at all times on the status of the project and current events. This will be done using a website, social media, an e-newsletter and targeted printed matter. The main communication hub, however, will be the **“Wisent Ranger”**. He will be reachable at all times to provide information, advice and assistance to people who come into contact or conflict with the wisents, arriving on the scene quickly whenever needed. The Wisent Ranger will also assess any damage or

additional expenses for which farmers, forestry operations or other affected parties must be compensated, or he will arrange for experts to assess such damage. Finally, the Wisent Ranger will also offer excursions to see the wisent herd, during which he will inform visitors about wisents and the project.

Scientific project management, research:

In addition to the operational project management, the project manager will also be in charge of scientific research for the project and will maintain contacts with all of the major research and reintroduction projects abroad. For the scientific research accompanying the project, Wisent Thal is collaborating with academic research institutions and covering the cost of materials for master and bachelor theses. The project is also funding half a PhD position.

Project carrier, project team, partners

The association "Wisent Thal", based in Welschenrohr, is the carrier responsible for the project. It currently has four members: Benjamin Brunner (Welschenrohr), Stefan Müller-Altermatt (Herbetswil), Christian Stauffer (Gondiswil) and Darius Weber (Rodersdorf). Delegates of sponsoring organisations or local stakeholders may join the association, but it will remain a small unit not exceeding about 10 members. The association is responsible for strategic project management and for hiring staff to run the Wisent Project. It will be the holder of the wisents and liable for any damage by the animals.

For the 10-year project, the Wisent Thal association will hire a project team to cover the following functions:

- Scientific and administrative project management (25% position),
- Wisent Ranger (50% position),
- Project secretary, administration (25% position),
- PhD candidate (100% position, 50% of which covered by Wisent Thal),
- Temporary assistants (50% position),
- People doing community service (100% position).

An "advisory group" of local stakeholders will advise the project management. It will be made up of representatives from forestry, agriculture, hunting, nature conservation and tourism. The advisory group will ensure that:

- The project provides answers that are as complete as possible to the critical questions that seem important to those affected.
- The interests of the land users are taken into account in the planning and practical implementation of the project.

The test herd will be provided by the Wildnispark Zürich Langenberg (<https://wildnispark.ch/tierpark/>). The Wildnispark will put the wisent herd at the disposal of the project in consultation with the European Endangered Species Programme (EEP), procuring in accordance with the EEP individual genetically matching animals from different wisent herds in Europe. The animals will thus be an important part of the EEP, which ensures the survival of this endangered species.

Mutual assistance of all kinds has been agreed with the wisent reintroduction project in Germany's Rothaar Mountains (<http://www.wisent-welt.de/>). Wisent Thal was already able to rely during project development on the experiences from that project and the practical assistance offered by the project team there.

Close cooperation with the "European Bison Conservation Center" (<http://www.bison-ebcc.eu/>) is planned, and the association will join the organisation "European Bison Friends Society"

(<http://www.smz.waw.pl/>) immediately after the start of the project. This collaboration will ensure that the Wisent Thal project is optimally embedded in the range of European projects geared toward preserving the wisent.

Timetable

- June 2017: Start, association “Wisent Thal” founded
- June to March 2018: Planning, discussions with public authorities, stakeholders, critics, start advisory group, fundraising
- March 2018: Asking for permissions
- Summer 2018: Decision to start the project, as soon as permissions are given (hiring of project team)
- 2018: Construction of Phase I enclosure, provision of the animals, start of scientific monitoring
- 2019: Opening of Phase I enclosure to the public
- 2020: Enlargement of the enclosure for Phase II
- 2022: Preparing the viewing enclosure for Phase III
- 2023: Removal of the fence, “release” of the reintroduction test herd
- 2023: Bringing small wisent herd into the viewing enclosure, routine operation of viewing enclosure
- 2019 to 2027: Intensive observation and monitoring of the test herd, routine operation of the viewing enclosure
- 2027: Evaluation of experiences with the test herd, decision on the viability of wild wisents reached in cooperation with the competent authorities of the canton of Solothurn
- 2027: Asking for permission to formally introduce the animals to the wild or elimination of the test herd by capture or culling

Budget, financing, compensation

The total budget for the project is CHF 3.4 million, of which approximately 1.3 million can be generated by the operation of the viewing enclosure. The remainder of the financing will be secured or organised by the project group. Third-party funds will ensure financing.

The owner of the main forest most affected by the project will be compensated for sharing the forest with the test herd during the duration of the project with an amount analogous to that paid by the canton for a forest reserve.

The owners of the forest areas where the wisent herd will roam during Phase III will also be financially compensated. The exact arrangements must be still negotiated and agreed upon.

Normal forest use in keeping with regular planning is foreseen for the area of the reintroduction enclosure and environs for the duration of the project. The project carrier pledges to financially compensate farmers and forestry operators in full for any forest or agricultural damage caused by the wisent test herd. The modalities for a fair estimate of any damage will be contractually agreed between the sponsor association and a representative of those potentially affected. Affected hunting societies will be compensated for interference with hunting according to the cantonal calculation model and as if hunting were not possible at all in these areas.