

Path of the forest giant

Road Map for Auroch Union State programme aims to find new habitat for Belovezhskaya Pushcha giants

By Vera Samoiloova

The well-known forest giant is not only the most recognised animal in the domestic Red Book — bison bonasus — but symbolises Belarus. It is being used as the mascot of the forthcoming World Ice Hockey Championship, being hosted by Minsk.

Of course, in the early 20th century, these majestic beasts were on the edge of extinction but, with human help, they've raised their shaggy heads, gaining in population from 50 encaged animals worldwide to over 4,500. Belarus occupies second place in terms of numbers, with around a dozen micro-populations registered and the total number of auroch exceeding a thou-

sand. The question is how we proceed to ensure their place in our eco-system.

Pastures new

Belarus should feel proud of its achievements, having begun with just five male and seven female animals in the Belovezhskaya Pushcha. Unlike rabbits, they do not breed quickly. Nevertheless, our auroch population has almost tripled within 15 years, fulfilling the first stage of the *Auroch* national programme, which aimed to reach 600 animals.

As our territory is limited, our forests can support no more than 1,500 aurochs; animals are already tending to stray onto agricultural fields, damaging crops, so their habitat is being extended. The new *Road Map*



New programme will help Belarusian aurochs to receive 'residence permit' in Russia

for *Auroch* (a Union State programme) gives Belarus and Russia a unified approach. Professor Mikhail Nikiforov, who heads the National Academy of Sciences' Scientific-Practical Centre for Bio-Resources, tells us, "Russia boasts vast territories suitable for occupation by large herds, which need less human care. Belarus has many aurochs who could be resettled, so we've planned our Union State programme: the *Road Map for Auroch*." The programme

is to launch this year, running for five years, with our natural resource ministries co-ordinating expenditure. Of the 600m Russian Roubles being spent, Belarus is covering 30 percent.

Keep healthy

New habitats for Belarusian aurochs are yet to be defined but remote, vast territories are to be chosen, to avoid poaching. Aurochs have a natural desire to migrate over large areas, so the chosen lands are to stretch

to the Belarusian border, so that animals can interbreed. Of course, scientists will continue to study the animals, with each Belarusian auroch receiving a 'passport' including its genetic identity. "We've applied this to our domestic animals but it's more complicated for wild animals, since they need to be immobilised in order to take blood samples," Mr. Nikiforov tells us. "Moreover, trauma can occur in large animals."

He believes that aurochs

are unlikely to edge out other animals in their introduced habitats. Moreover, scientists are hugely hopeful that these new populations will prove successful. Up to 250 aurochs are to be resettled and it's quite possible that Belarusian aurochs may become hunted one day, like American bison. Poland's auroch preservation is quite advanced, so our scientists plan to liaise with their colleagues in this field — including organising animal exchange.

House-warming for unusual foreteller

During the Sochi Winter Olympics, Petrovich, the Giant Crab, will learn to predict results, in preparation for the Ice Hockey World Championship, held in Minsk this May



Crab-foreteller Petrovich

Numerous guests have attended the centre to congratulate the decapod on the house-warming and to assess its foretelling and tourist potential. According to the Oceanography Centre's Director, Alexey Azarov, Petrovich first needs time to adapt to his new surroundings and then will undergo a specially developed programme, which will be tested during the Sochi Olympics. However, the technology of determining the results of the hockey matches in May is yet to be announced, while the Minsk 'oracle' currently keeps mum.

"It's not important whether it's a sea crab, or some other

animal that takes on the role of Nostradamus," notes Cheshlav Shulga, Belarus' Deputy Minister for Sports and Tourism. "We believe that such a promotion of the forthcoming world forum through such active forms will only bring benefits. Petrovich will quite probably become an alternative mascot of the hockey event, and visitors to the Belarusian capital would like to see it. We only welcome this."

The Oceanography Centre also plans to set up an 'oyster bar' for the beginning of the Ice Hockey World Championship, offering Sakhalin and Vladivostok oysters to its visitors.

Visitors to feel real comfort

By Andrey Fiodorov

Victoria Olymp Hotel to welcome Minsk guests in April 2014

The hotel is housed in the office and hotel complex close to the Belarusian National Olympic Committee headquarters. The office part of the building will be completed soon, while the hotel itself will

throw open its doors for visitors in April. The Victoria Olymp Hotel boasts around 250 rooms of various levels of comfort and is capable of accommodating about 500 guests.

"The heating has been already switched on at the site and decoration work in the rooms is currently underway. The furniture, supplied by Pinskdrv, has already been fully prepared,"

noted Hotel Director, Boris Kritsky. The Chairman of the Minsk City Executive Committee, Nikolai Ladutko, ordered completion of the construction, and the commissioning of it to the customer, by early March, and that the latter should completely recruit the personnel and start welcoming guests in time for the forthcoming International Hockey event.

Visiting Father Frost in the countryside

By Andrey Fiodorov

Over 60,000 people visited the Belovezhskaya Pushcha National Park during the New Year holidays

One of the major events, attracting numerous tourists, was the celebration of the 10th anniversary of Father Frost's Residence. New fairy-tale characters appeared during the festive days. The tourists also enjoyed the new Christmas tree decorative lights, and attended the opening ceremonies of Mother Winter's Workshop and Baba Kargota's House. Additionally, the guests of the National Park were offered excursions

to the Museum of Nature and acquaintance with the animal world of the Belovezhskaya Pushcha.

The Belovezhskaya Pushcha National Park is one of the oldest forest reserves in the world, becoming a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1992. In the following year, the National Park was granted the status of a UNESCO biosphere reserve. In 1997, the Belovezhskaya Pushcha was awarded the Council of Europe diploma for outstanding achievements in the conservation of wildlife.

The residence of Father Frost is the most visited tourist attraction in the Belovezhskaya Pushcha. It receives



around 70 percent of the total tourists coming to the National Park. The Residence welcomed its first guests in December 2003, and since then, has received over 1 million tourists from 120 countries.