

# Rewilding Europe: The Complexities of Management in Projects with Conflicting Stakeholder Interests.

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## Contents

1	Introduction .....	1
2	Methods .....	3
2.1	Project structure overview.....	3
3	Analysis.....	3
3.1	Key aspects of the project .....	4
3.2	Structure of the organisation and project team.....	5
3.3	Stakeholder identification and engagement .....	6
3.4	Project management methods employed.....	7
3.5	Main unforeseen challenges .....	8
3.6	Other potential methods .....	8
4	Suggestions .....	9
5	Conclusion .....	9
6	References.....	9

## 1 Introduction

Between 2014 and 2024, Rewilding Europe enacted its long-term program to reintroduce several populations of European bison to various locations throughout Europe. One of the key projects within this program was the bison reintroduction as part of the Rewilding Southern Carpathians – Romania project. Following 10 years of implementation the project has reached its end stage as of 2024. Examining this long-term project from start to finish would allow us to better understand all aspects of the project and how they evolved throughout the lifespan of the project in reaction to unforeseen circumstances.

Rewilding Europe is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) established in 2011 with the mission of making Europe a wilder place. The organisation seeks to guide the restoration of natural processes, reintroduce keystone species, and create spaces where nature can flourish without intensive human management. It is both actively engaged in rewilding initiatives and acts as a host for a network of rewilding initiatives, led by other NGOs and private organisations, working closely with government agencies. By focusing on large-scale rewilding

efforts, it aims to transform the relationship between people and nature, demonstrating how wildlife-rich landscapes can provide both ecological and socio-economic benefits.

One of the key programs of the organization over the last 10 years has been the Bison Reintroduction Plan 2014 – 2024. The goal of the program was the wide-scale reintroduction of European bison to Europe, creating genetic, and population diversity within the European population of Bison, as well as reintroducing the ecosystem services offered by these species. These benefits include shaping the vegetation dynamics of the local area, guarding the local biodiversity, preventing the spread of potential invasive species, and nutrient dispersal, to name a few.

One of the key projects within this program is the reintroduction of European bison in the Southern Carpathians of Romania. Three sites in particular were earmarked for rewilding efforts in 2014. These were the Tarcu Mountains Natura 2000 site, Retezat National Park, and the Rusca Montana-Turcu-Retezat corridor Natura 2000 site, with a total area of roughly 121421 ha. The main wildlife attractions in the areas are red deer, chamois, bear, wolf, lynx, wild boar, eagles, griffon vultures, owls, capercaillie, and the planned free-roaming populations of European Bison. One of the overarching goals is for the wild resources of this area to promote tourism and thereby contribute to increased income and new employment opportunities within the region.

Though much preparation was made for the arrival of bison to the area, one of the first big landmarks in the project was the release of 17 European bison on the 17<sup>th</sup> of May 2014. The population was planned to grow from the 17 released bison, to a population of 300 by the end of the project. However, by the end of 2023, a total of 99 bison had been relocated to the area, with the total population estimated to only consist of 180 individuals, 120 individuals short of the stated goal of 300 individuals in 2014.

This report examines the success and shortcomings of the project by focusing on the organisation of the project team, the roles of its members, the project's position within the program, the identification of key stakeholders and their interests, the project management approach used by the team, and opportunities for implementing additional project management strategies. The project, selected because it has just reached its planned end date, provides an opportunity to analyse a long-term initiative with the benefit of hindsight. Discussions with key organisational members will help identify the strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement in the project management approaches utilised. Furthermore, reviewing the project retrospectively allows for an exploration of unforeseen challenges that arose during implementation but were not identified during the defining and planning stages.

### **1.1 Key research questions:**

1. What was the structure of the project team, and of the project within the organisation?
2. How were all relevant stakeholder priorities identified and engaged?
3. What project management methods were employed?
4. What were the main unforeseen challenges?
5. Which other methods could have been employed to further the successful implementation of the project?

## **2 Methods**

To answer the research questions, I conduct two semi-structured interviews with core members at Rewilding Europe. The interviewees were sent a list of the main research questions ahead of the meeting. During the meeting, we discussed the questions and any other relevant talking points which stemmed from the interview, as required. Two of the key sources of information on which I based the questions and interviews were Project Management: The Managerial Process by Larson (2020), and the Half Double Compendium developed by the Half Double Institute (2024). Based on the interviews, the key research questions could be answered, with additional insight provided by the interviewees. The information garnered from the interviews was subsequently analyzed and integrated into this report.

### **2.1 Project structure overview**

Program: Bison Rewilding Plan 2014-2024.

Project: Rewilding Southern Carpathians – Romania.

Objective: Successful reintroduction and stable establishment of a European Bison population in the Southern Carpathians.

Lifespan: 10 years

Key organisation: Rewilding Europe; Rewilding Romania; WWF Romania; Armenis and Teregova municipalities; RomSilva; European Commission – LIFE Bison Project; European Bison Conservation Centre; WeWilder.

## **3 Analysis**

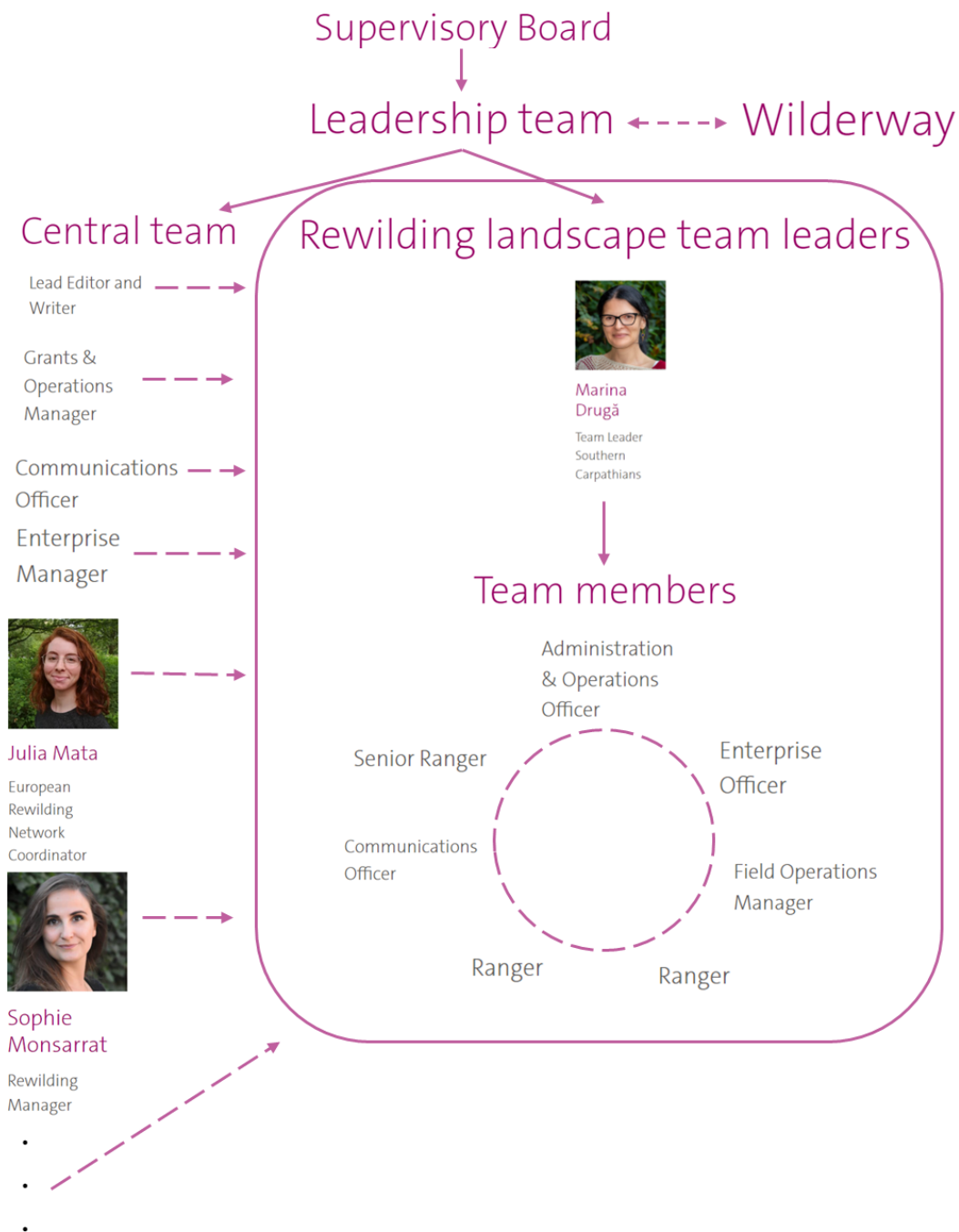
Through the interviews, I gained insight into the structure of the project and its key characteristics, its placement within the parent organisation, the process used for the identification of key stakeholders and strategies for stakeholder engagement, the key project management strategies employed by Rewilding Europe on this project, and the shortcomings

of some of the strategies, as well as unforeseen issues which arose during the lifespan of the project.

### 3.1 Key aspects of the project

As per Larson (2020) section 1.1, the key characteristics of a project are:

1. An Established objective
2. A defined lifespan
3. The involvement of several departments and professionals
4. A novel product
5. Specified time, cost, and performance requirements



In the same order, the key characteristics of this project were:

1. The reintroduction of European bison, and establishment of a free-roaming population in the Southern Carpathians.
2. This phase of the project had a lifespan of 10 years (2014-2024).
3. The project involved various members and departments from both Rewilding Europe and from external keyholders and collaborators.
4. The reintroduction of European bison in the Southern Carpathians represents the first European bison population in the region for more than 250 years.
5. Key milestones were established for the project, the budget was closely regulated, and though the success of the rewilding initiative was hard to quantify in its entirety, key metrics were observed.

### **3.2 Structure of the organisation and project team**

The project was structured within the parent organisation with a hierarchical approach, allowing key members to focus on the project and make key decisions, while still allowing for oversight, feedback, and assistance from axillary structures within the parent organisation (Figure 1). Further, this project formed part of the larger program of the Bison Rewilding Plan 2014-2024, consisting of multiple unique projects throughout Europe within the program lifespan.

Within the functional organisation, oversight, general direction, and assistance is provided by the Rewilding Europe core team. The main components of the parent organisation are:

1. The supervisory board, which provides the general direction and vision of the organisation, as well as scientific consultation.
2. The leadership team, which takes the direct leadership of the organisation, and the various projects.
3. Wilderway, which acts as a separate commercial entity differentiated from the Rewilding Europea NGO but which is part of the enterprise team for local business.
4. The Central team, which includes various roles, such as:
  - a. The lead editor and writer which can assist projects with information dissemination and awareness.
  - b. The grants and operations manager which is responsible for assisting with funding to the project.
  - c. The communications officer which can assist the project with communications with stakeholders and the general public.
  - d. The enterprise manager which can assist the project with commercial activities related to the economic development of the region.
  - e. The network coordinator (interviewee #1), who is responsible for coordinating various projects within the organisation.
  - f. The rewilding manager (interviewee #2), who is in charge of overseeing the general rewilding activities withing the projects, and the scientific methods employed.
5. The project team

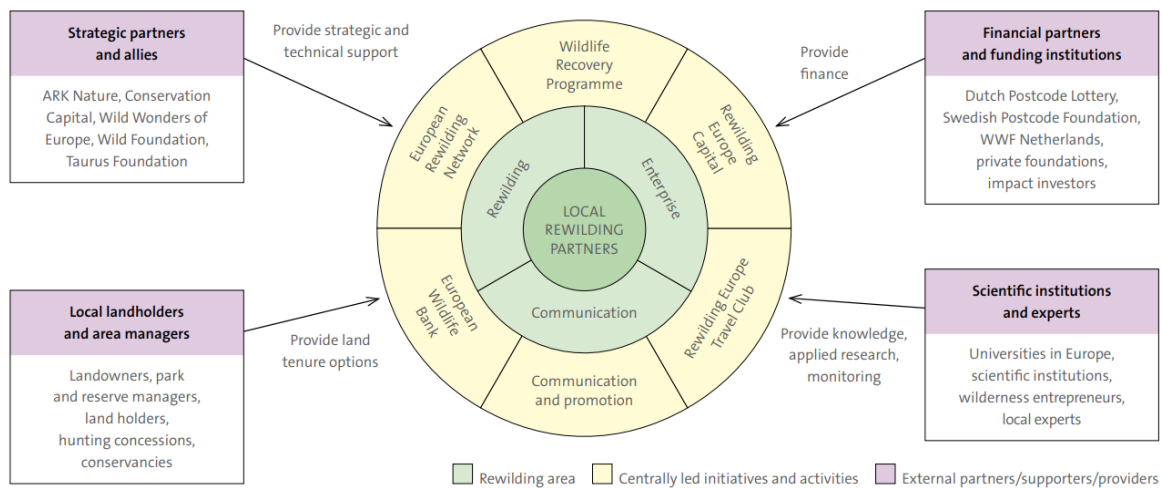
Through this structure with a dedicated project team, assisted and supervised by various departments within the parent organisation, the team can ensure efficient and focused completion of the project goals. The team has various specialists, such as the communications officer and enterprise officer which are focused on the project, but who can also be assisted by the members of the parent organisation with the same role. However, the project team also contains specialists with roles not present in the parent organisation, such as site rangers,

who specialise in the fauna and flora of the region, fulfilling roles which the parent organisation can not adequately fulfil based on their core staff.

Though members from the parent organisation do assist in various aspects of the project, the structure is still best described as a dedicated project team structure, as opposed to a purely functional organisation, projectized organisation structure, or matrix organisation structure. Through the interview, it became clear that the dedicated project team structure was identified as the best approach for projects of this type. This was based on the extensive experience of the team with projects of this nature. One of the key reasons for the need for this project structure within the parent organization identified in the interviews was the highly specialized nature of the work being conducted in each of the regions, which would be beyond the scope of abilities of members of the core parent organization team. Additionally, the interviewees also identified that due to the long-term nature of the project and the relative geographic isolation of the project, it makes sense to have a dedicated project team, rather than a matrix or similar approach.

### **3.3 Stakeholder identification and engagement**

Per the interviewees, a key stage in the development of each project is the identification of the stakeholders relevant to the project. In the case of the Southern Carpathians bison reintroduction project, stakeholders included members from government agencies, local administration, local interest groups, and various funders (Figure 2). The financial partners for the project were WWF-Romania, the Dutch Postcode Lottery, the Swedish Postcode Lottery, and Liberty Wildlife Fund. Additionally, WWF-Romania acted as a project sponsor and strategic partners, championing the project. Rather unique to this project, and acting as suppliers in the project structure, are the Avestra Visentpark and Kolmardens Djurpark in Sweden, Springe, Hardehausen, and Hirshfeld Zoos in Germany, Parco Natura in Italy, and Han-sur in Belgium and Hateg in Romania, which acted as the sources for the translocated bison. The key government agencies involved in the success of the project were identified as the Armenis Municipality of Romania. The project also had the addition of scientific institutions and experts, who advised the project. These were identified as The West University of Timișoara, the Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University. Lastly, the success of the project also depended on interactions with local interest groups. The key among these were the DEMSUS landowner Association in Densus. Based on the interviews, it seems that all relevant stakeholders were successfully identified and engaged during the course of the project. According to the interviewees, it is believed that early identification of the stakeholders, and engagement with members of the Rewilding Europe team and the local project team, allowed for good coordination and interaction with the project stakeholders, especially the local stakeholders.



### 3.4 Project management methods employed

From the interviews, it would seem that some of the key strategies employed by the organisation, and which seem to play a big part in the success of their projects, is stakeholder mapping and structured, planned engagement. In the organisation, it seems to be centred closely on some of the key questions required in stakeholder mapping, and especially in social network building, as outlined by Larson (2020). According to one interviewee, in charge of the large rewilding network, which is especially engaged in the start of any new project, these key questions are very similar to those outlined by (Larson, 2020): whose cooperation will be required for the project, whose agreement and approval will be needed, and whose opposition would keep is from accomplishing the project. In the case of the Southern Carpathians rewilding project, the agreement and approval of the local state agencies, government conservation agencies, and reserve management were key. Close cooperation with the suppliers (mentioned above) was critical for reintroducing the bison. Lastly, the largest threat to potential opposition to the project was local landowners, who might feel threatened by human-wildlife conflict that would arise from the bison reintroduction. According to the interviewee, this thorough mapping of stakeholders prevented many issues that may have halted or completely stopped the project.

Additionally, the other interviewee, in charge of the practical rewilding aspects of the project, highlighted the need for contingency plans and their great use in the project. One example provided by the interviewee was that the transportation and release of the bison relied on a complex transportation system, due to the wide range of sources from which the bison were acquired. This meant that backup transportation options were planned during all stages of the bison transportation, especially as any drastic delays could adversely affect the health of the bison being transported. According to the interview, having such contingency plans worked out allows for the safe transportation, and successful release of the bison, in both this and other projects.

Lastly, one of the key strategies employed by the organisation, according to the interviewees, is opportunity mapping. Though the primary goal of the project was the reintroduction of free-roaming bison populations in the region, it was acknowledged from the start of the project, and indeed an additional aim, to encourage economic growth and independence in the area, with the rewilding efforts serving as an opportunity for growth. Though more structured, based on the interviews, it seems as though the economic development employed during this project was highly structured, but also took advantage of opportunity management. For example, when the enterprise officer for the project team ran into challenges that they could not overcome on their own, they shared some of the opportunities to the external Wilderway organisation, which allowed for full economic development of many opportunities, rather than the opportunity slip away due to the inability of the enterprise officer of the project to capture every opportunity. Similarly, events such as releases and births were exploited as opportunities to engage the public, and further drive tourism in the area beyond the initial enterprise scope of the project.

Three methods that the interviewees identified that aided the project and similar projects, that fit very well within the Hald Double method, were a co-location design, a collaborative leadership approach, and pulse checks. For example, the choice to have the project team based entirely within the area, and co-located allowed for much stronger collaboration and much better completion of the project. However, regular meetings with the organisation's leadership ensured a unified vision for the area and ensured adequate resource provisions were made for the project by the parent organisation. Additionally, the team leader was able to rely on the experience and leadership of key local team members, such as the senior ranger, when questions arose that were best addressed by their experience. Similarly, the team leadership also saw frequent collaboration with the organisation, rather than a simple top-down leadership style. Lastly, regular 'pulse checks' with the project stakeholders allowed for efficient communication and improved relations. For example an annual meeting with the local interest groups allowed for clear communication and improved relations. Similarly, short monthly check-ins with the parent organisation allowed the project to maintain a steady pace throughout the project life cycle.

### **3.5 Main unforeseen challenges**

The interviewees, based on their own experience with the project, as well as conversations with their colleagues, identified multiple unforeseen challenges that arose during the project lifespan. For example, though the original project scope intended to have a bison population of 300 individuals by 2024, only roughly 180 were achieved. This was largely due to illnesses such as the unforeseen blue tongue, and infant mortality within the population. However, though the original main goal of the project was not met, the project was still considered a success, with the number of bison within the area considered suitable. However, due to developments during the course of the project, it was realized that one of the key aspects not initially given as much importance in the original scope of the project was the spatial distribution of the bison within the range. The home range of the bison exceeded their initial expectations, with the impacts of the bison spread over a much larger area. This serves as the perfect example of scope adjustment and key project aims still resulting in a quality product at the end of the project life cycle.

### **3.6 Other potential methods**

One of the key questions for the interviewees was which other methods could have been employed to further the successful implementation of the project. After a discussion on some of the other challenges encountered in the course of the project, it would seem that methods

which could allow for a greater engagement with the local community, and earlier development of the enterprises associated with the project could have been valuable.

#### **4 Suggestions**

The team seems to be highly efficient and aware of project management methods, due to extensive experience in project execution. Based on the interviews, it would seem that key strategies employed by the organization such as stakeholder identification and mapping, contingency planning and opportunity management, and the use of smart strategies such as co-location design, collaborative leadership and pulse checks have served the organisation well and will continue to be integrated in future projects.

However, the team did express a desire to have the enterprise activities implemented at an earlier date to allow for a fuller development of enterprise activities by the time the project reaches its end cycle. This is where I believe one of the key aspects of the Half Double methodology could greatly benefit the organisation. Focusing on allowing for a greater impact at earlier stages of the employment of the project life cycle which are then developed throughout the lifecycle of the project would allow for a stronger basis for the enterprise activities associated with the project which could in turn support the primary focus of the reintroduction of herbivore species during the project.

#### **5 Conclusion**

Rewilding Europe serves as a great real-world example of how the smart use of many project management strategies can allow for efficient implementation and completion of projects. However, based on feedback from the interviewees, there is still room for improvement and the implementation of additional strategies allowing for earlier impacts, especially in the enterprise aim of the project. One of the key approaches I would recommend here would be the Half Double methodology.

#### **6 References**

Half Double Institute. (2024). *Half Double Compendium Draft*.  
Larson, E. (2020). *Project Management : The Managerial Process*. NY, UNITED STATES: McGraw-Hill US Higher Ed ISE.