

Perception of European bison and primeval forest in the 18th-19th century: shared cultural and natural heritage of Poland and Lithuania

The main aim of the project is to identify the impact of perception of European bison and primeval forest on science and culture of the 18th-19th centuries. By tracing those topics in the scientific, artistic and popular discourse of the era, we hope to identify roots of modern visions of bison and primeval forest, all based on common, Polish-Lithuanian heritage.

European bison, Białowieża Forest and in general „Lithuanian woods” were in the spotlight of European natural sciences of the 18th and 19th century. Centuries of protection of Białowieża Forest resulted in a very good state of preservation of this area until the 18th century. The stark contrast between Lithuanian forests and deforested and highly modified areas of Western Europe made the former a perfect place for scientific studies. Additional asset drawing naturalists from the entire continent was the last free-living population of lowland European bison, preserved in Białowieża Forest. We hypothesise, that the discussion about the bison, its natural habitat and the primeval character of the forests of former Commonwealth of Both Nations played an important role in the process of creation of modern forestry, phytosociology, and development of biogeography and nature protection. The discussion on the primeval forest and bison also helped to popularize knowledge on Polish and Lithuanian nature and culture among Western European societies. It was not restrained only to scientific works, but has spread into arts: literature, poetry, drama, paintings, later also photography.

To realize the project, we plan to: (1) conduct surveys in archives in Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, France, Russia and Ukraine in search for works of naturalists interested in „Lithuanian woods”; (2) analyse the 19th-century popular science magazines and literature referencing primeval forest and the symbol of European bison; (3) survey natural history museums in search of all kinds of specimens from Białowieża Forest; (4) conduct surveys in art galleries, museums, archives in search for artistic presentations of Białowieża Forest and European bison from 18th-19th century; (5) collect and analyse information from all sources: archival and literature surveys, popular writings, art galleries to identify the European perception of bison and primeval forest in science and culture of the 18th-19th centuries.

Results of the project will consist of an English-language scientific monograph (working title „Primeval beast, primeval forest: Perception of European bison and Białowieża Forest in the 18th-19th century”), at least three scientific papers and several presentations during conferences.