

Nature, untouched by human civilization, has always fascinated people. Historically, as a place of awe and peril, a potential danger to health and life caused primarily by wild animals. In the present times, after humans had dominated the majority of landscapes for agriculture and other practices, wild places began to be rare and unique, consequently perceived as valuable and worth preserving. More and more of them are now protected under various laws, public programs and projects, among which ecological restoration and rewilding became an increasing popular approach. The goal of the project is to study if and how restoring free ranging bison – the largest wild mammal in Europe – influence reception of nature and place among local inhabitants of the restoration area. The project will contribute to a debate on rewilding by asking specific questions about importance of rewilding process to societies. The important questions to the rewilding debate raised by this project consider desired and acceptable levels of “wilderness” and “naturalness” and the meaning of natural environment to an identity of individuals and society – an ability to define what is nature to us and who do we become through the commune with nature.

The general research problem in this project considers therefore the influence of rewilding and ecological restoration on local society, on specific dimensions of human-nature relations: perceptions of nature and place attachment. Exploration of this problem, based on bison reintroduction in Poland, will consist of identification of values towards nature and bison, connectedness to nature and place attachment. The study will include various social science methods, such as qualitative and quantitative content analysis, in-depth and unstructured interviews, q-method, participant observation, as well as on-line questionnaire survey on representative sample of residents of local communities in the areas inhabited by free ranging bison. In order to improve quality of the social science research on the topic traditionally belonging to the natural sciences, the project will engage a knowledge broker in the research process – a co-investigation with a background in natural sciences who will facilitate communication between the principal investigator (social scientist) and experts in bison ecology and ensure a correct use and interpretation of information about bison ecology.

In comparison to the majority of previous studies, this project offers extended theoretical reflection that links the notion of place to environmental values and bond with nature. Within environmental sociology, the novelty of this project considers examining the new quality of human-nature relations in which society decides on restoring the environment and increasing its wild character, conversely to historical practices of dominating and domesticating land, wild plants and animals. This new formulation of human-nature relations reaches beyond constructivism-realism debate, emphasizing the role of human choice and values in shaping division between the “wild” or “natural” and the “social”. The project will contribute to engaging sociology in theoretical debates on the consequences on the Anthropocene – a well-recognized by natural sciences new era in Earth’s history in which human societies became the main driving force of global environmental change. The reality of the Anthropocene justifies a shift to “postnaturalism” in environmental philosophy, that ends the division between social and environmental problems, emphasizing that all environmental problems are inherently social and political problems, as “to be answered by us and not by nature”. Explanation of the social impacts of rewilding and ecological restoration will contribute to understanding and reflecting on the new condition, capacities and responsibilities of society in the new era.