



*Report from the*  
**Roundtable discussion on autochthonous buffalo  
and other Romanian livestock breeds and  
cultivated plant varieties**

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In collaboration with:



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## Background

### ***“Buffalo are not cattle!”***

Buffalo in Romania are rapidly decreasing in number. Although there are still an estimated 20-30'000 animals still existing, the lack of conservation strategy means that stock numbers are in free-fall. Unless urgent action is taken, the buffalo in Romania – which have been a traditional part of the agricultural landscape and the lives of the people for many centuries – will be lost forever. Romania was once an important exporter of buffalo stock, now the situation is so



critical that it has been suggested to import new commercial blood lines from Italy, even though Romanian stock should have the capacity to be commercially viable without any crossbreeding. Nevertheless, this downward trend in stock numbers needs to be reversed in order to give buffalo a chance of survival in Romania.

Traditionally, buffalo have had their place within subsistence and semi-subsistence farming. For many generations, the profits of buffalo-keeping have been kept within the informal economy of the country. Products have been sold or bartered locally amongst neighbours or further afield to family members. The use of the buffalo as traction has also not been economically formalised. In order for the contribution of the buffalo to the local, subsistence and semi-subsistence level economy to be recognised it needs to gain a monetary value. As such, the buffalo needs to move from the informal economy into the “alternative”-formal economy whereby its products have a price (even if they are still bartered) and their other contributions to the farm and household are given a monetary value. For example, a buffalo used for traction needs to be compared to the price of running a tractor. Even when compared to horses, buffalo have an economic advantage due to the fact that they provide their muscle power on much less and lower quality fodder than a horse. The buffalo in Romania are often an essential part of the livelihood of small-scale farmers. Any conservation strategy developed needs to take this into account and to respect the needs and wishes of the small-scale farmers.

The Romanian buffalo has much potential as a dairy animal. A buffalo dairy cow can produce up to 13 litres per day, which matches the amounts recorded in Italy. Therefore, it is possible to use selection to create a commercially viable Romanian breed without the necessity of cross-breeding. For this to be successful, sire-lines from good dairy cows must be created and wisely used. On no account should Murrah crossbreeding occur as these animals are not adapted to the European conditions and only serve to weaken the whole European gene pool. There is a good market for products of buffalo, such as mozzarella and traditional cheeses, but there are many problems for cheese-makers to buy enough good-quality milk to satisfy demand. Consumers are prepared to pay a premium price, especially if products are organic.

Just as buffalo are not cattle, the owner of a buffalo is not a cowboy. Owning a buffalo requires much commitment – they often only give up their milk or work for one person in the family. Cattle are much easier to handle and fit in better with modern expectations of time off the farm and a high out-put of milk. The difficulties in keeping buffalo are a barrier to the younger generation. However, if it is seen that one can earn more money from keeping buffalo than from keeping a cow, buffalo become much more attractive. At present, cow's milk is expensive in Romania as demand is higher than supply, therefore buffalo are at a real disadvantage unless farmers can find innovative ways to make buffalo pay. It may take some time, or prove impossible, to move buffalo from their old-fashioned or alternative niche into the mainstream of agriculture in Romania. However, it is essential that action is taken to conserve the gene pool that exists and to establish a conservation strategy that will ensure that there is a future for the species in Romania.

### **Next Steps:**

- Closer cooperation between SAVE Foundation and Romanian organisations and stakeholders with the aim of the future establishment of a national-level organisation to promote and organise conservation of agrobiodiversity within the context of sustainable rural development.
- Projects with various partners: a model Ark farm based on traditional Transylvanian farming practices; securing local fruit varieties through identification, registration of synonyms, planting arboretum; continued search and monitoring of breeds and varieties with rescue actions when necessary; improving the market value of products and services related to traditional agrobiodiversity; implementing the recommendations regarding buffalo and agrobiodiversity in general.
- Raising awareness, politically and publically, for the need for action.
- Fund-raising for project work.



*The roundtable took place on the 7<sup>th</sup> May 2011 at the World Vision Farm in the village of Crit, Romania. It was co-organised by SAVE Foundation and Fundatia ADEPT. For more information about participants as well as presentations, please see <http://www.save-foundation.net/Conferences/Sighisoara.htm>*

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## **Recommendations:**

The participants at the Roundtable discussion make the following recommendations for ensuring the conservation of **buffalo** in Romania:

- Registration of all buffalo and their keepers should take place
- Small-scale farmers should be encouraged to continue keeping buffalo
- Help and coordination is needed to provide suitable bulls
- Geographical nuclei/farmers' cooperatives need to be established for both bull-keeping and milk collection for e.g. cheese production
- A comprehensive list needs to be made of buffalo keepers and people interested in supporting conservation activities
- Information material about the benefits of keeping buffalo and of using their products needs to be disseminated
- Buffalo and cattle should be kept separated within data collection and subsidy structures in order to improve information available about stock numbers
- Knowledge about buffalo keeping should be collected from older generations before it is lost
- Training and information should be provided for people wishing to start keeping buffalo
- The triple-use of the buffalo should be maintained within the conservation programme
- Use of labelling to add value to products of autochthonous buffalo
- A pilot project to test the viability of a system where one family farm keeps c. 50 buffalo plus breeding bulls to support breeding activities in smaller, satellite farms in the locality
- It is essential that conservation activities are used to support the low-input systems suitable for small-scale farming and for nature conservation

For **autochthonous livestock breeds and cultivated plants in general** the following recommendations are made:

- There should be a national inventory made of autochthonous livestock breeds and cultivated plants keepers and growers
- Active coordination between organisations within Romania to encourage conservation of autochthonous livestock breeds and cultivated plants should take place with the aim of the future establishment of a national-level organisation to promote and organise conservation.
- Expert-level exchange visits to other countries for both practitioners and policy makers should be arranged to see how various aspects of conservation are handled and/or can be improved e.g. visit to the buffalo conservation programme in Albania.

All these recommendations need to be based upon a broad and inclusive framework that takes into account the needs and viewpoints of subsistence and semi-subsistence as well as commercial farmers, ecological and developmental agencies, policy-makers and the specifications of EU regulations. In this way a cohesive and successful conservation strategy for all autochthonous livestock breeds and cultivated plants can be established.