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Peter Pekins, Professor, Department of Natural Resources & the Environment, travels to Poland

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Peter Pekins

Peter Pekins, Professor - Department of Natural Resources & the Environment

Professor Peter Pekins travelled to the 7th International Moose Conference in Poland to discuss research and management issues concerning moose that range west from Eastern Europe through North America.

The Bialowieza National Park and Forest in western Poland was the site of the 7th International Moose Conference where 150 biologists gathered to discuss research and management issues concerning moose that range west from Eastern Europe through North America. My travel to Poland was focused on:

- 1) moose research/management and serving as Chief Editor of *ALCES* a scientific journal dedicated to moose research and management,
- 2) learning about the special history of the wisent, or European bison, that was saved from extinction in the Bialowieza National Park and Forest in the early 1900s, and
- 3) reconnecting with close Norwegian colleagues who have supported a previous sabbatical as well as a number of IROP students from the Hamel Center.



Professor Pekins (second from right) stands next to a 350+ year old oak with Professor Per Wegee from Norway, Professor Gerald Redmond from New Brunswick, and moose researcher Roy Rea from British Columbia

The Bialowieza National Park and Forest is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and is one of the largest remaining primeval forests in Europe. We were extremely fortunate to view sections of the Forest closed to tourists. Our walk was shorter than expected given the great pride and exuberance of our guides in answering our questions —to view a forest of such magnificent oaks, ashes, spruce, and lime (linden) trees with international colleagues was indeed special. However, beyond this immensity all was not perfect: Rooting by wild boar and heavy browsing by bison, red deer, and roe deer were taking their toll on forest regeneration; a similar story with elk and deer plays out in many of our National Parks. Preserved wooden crosses appearing sporadically in the forest were somber reminders of the horrific persecution of Polish Jews in WWII, when 20% of the Polish population was lost. I asked a young guide how this could be forgiven; looking away, he replied that one must not and could not forget, but it is a new generation and it is important that all Europeans pull together to ensure that such atrocities are never repeated. Having married into a Jewish family originally from Eastern Europe, I knew it wasn't as easy as it sounded.

Appreciating the history of countries is critical to understanding the cultural significance of special resources. Bison and the primeval Bialowieza National Forest were clearly incredible sources of national pride in Poland, and the local community was rapidly developing into a destination of ecotourism under the recent democracy. Bison were the calling card of all types of local businesses and the symbol of foods and beverages; it was not unlike the ecotourism role of moose in northern New England. As with moose, certain management issues are inevitable and Poland is seeking balance between habitat damage in the Park, the number of bison, and winter feeding in the context of ecosystem integrity and biodiversity. Our hosts graciously provided me a wonderful documentary of this story - "Land of the Bison"- and I will provide a lecture about European bison in my general education class (NR 433 - Wildlife Ecology) this fall. The significance of bison and moose in this unique area of Poland in the midst of rapid development and economic growth was thought-provoking: Will their cultural importance help balance economic growth and conservation?



European bison in a zoo inside Bialowieza National Park

After the conference, many of us stayed for a day trip through the Biebrza National Park that is one of the largest intact wetlands in Europe and home to most of Poland's moose; again we were entertained by a great (and hilarious) guide who was a hydrologist in the Park. Communication is clearly an art form because in 3 hours he connected with my close colleague from Voyageurs National Park in Minnesota who agreed to host him next summer for a collaborative study on beaver! We toured a forested area in this wetland and viewed incredible winter browsing damage by moose on Scotch pine and willow stands. For many in North America this was stark evidence of why forest damage by moose was a major theme at the Conference.

Although damage to this degree is not common in New England, a past graduate student of mine assessed the influence of moose on forest regeneration in northern New Hampshire in 2009, and a current student repeated this work in northeastern Vermont this summer. As often happens at international meetings, I met a new colleague, Crister Kalen a state Swedish forester, who conducts similar research and is a forest modeler and has coined the term "sprucification" to describe the loss of Scotch pine and increase of Norway spruce as a result of moose browsing over 50+ years in Sweden. We will initiate collaborative research efforts and he plans to attend the 47th North American Moose Conference and Workshop to be held in New Hampshire in 2013. We were very amused by his love of "trashy" U.S. crime novels, given my preference for trashy Swedish crime novels, two of which were in my bag!



Norwegian colleagues Professor Olav Heljord, Erling Solberg, Eric Lund, and Jaren Vemund inspecting a severely damaged Scotch pine in Biebrza National Park

What is very clear is that moose management issues are similar throughout their range; the timing simply differs. In Norway as in New Hampshire, the moose population has declined gradually, raising questions about traditional biological assumptions, ecological relationships, the role of parasites, and population dynamics. For me, this cemented my plans to visit and work with my Norwegian colleagues during my upcoming sabbatical in spring 2014! For this wonderful and educational trip to Poland, and my future collaborations in Norway and Sweden, I sincerely thank the CIE and the Provost's Office for their travel support.



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