



## Leading European zoos and aquariums call for immediate halt to destruction of Białowieża Forest

**Amsterdam, the Netherlands, 17 July 2017:** The European Association of Zoos and Aquaria (EAZA) has noted with concern the destruction of the Białowieża Forest in Poland and supports wholeheartedly the European Commission's call for the immediate ban on logging in Europe's most ancient forest. The EU is calling on the European Court to authorize the ban, which is vital for the protection of this UNESCO designated World Heritage Site. Białowieża is also a European Union Natura 2000 Special Area of Conservation.

Białowieża is the last primeval forest in Europe, and one of the most biologically diverse areas on the continent. It is home to the world's largest population of European bison, a species brought back from the brink of extinction by zoos and still classified as Vulnerable by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. In addition, the forest is home to self-sustaining populations of Eurasian lynx and grey wolves, as well as thousands of less charismatic species no less vital to the preservation of this cornerstone of European natural heritage.

The Polish government's conduct in this case, which is based on discredited science<sup>1</sup> and shows total disregard for the intrinsic value of the site, is extremely misguided. By providing permits for the felling of this ancient woodland, the government demonstrates its continued prioritisation of business interests over the natural world that makes all human economic activity possible.

A biodiverse planet is not only vital to the survival of animal and plant species, it is also key to the survival and prosperity of humans; the willful destruction of protected biodiversity areas not only shows a lack of care for the environment, it also has consequences for the health and survival of humans. Destroying Białowieża forever will not only damage immeasurably Poland's natural heritage, but will also make the country more vulnerable to the effects of climate change and habitat loss. In the short term, the destruction of the forest will lead quickly to the extinction of the local population of 800 European bison, and many other native species that have survived there for centuries despite extensive political turmoil. It is widely recognized that over the long term, the felling of trees leads to soil erosion, the pollution or loss of water supplies and the reduced sequestration of greenhouse gases. Other serious consequences will only become clear if the government continues to allow logging until the habitat is no longer viable.

UN World Heritage Sites are protected by international treaty, and by allowing logging within Białowieża, the Polish government appears to be in violation of international law. In addition, as a Member State of one of the world's wealthiest regions, there is no economic excuse for Poland to take this unilateral action. It is for these reasons that the European Commission, as political guardian of the natural heritage of Europe, **[is aiming to bring about a legal ban on the forest's destruction](#)**. EAZA fully supports the EU's decision to take legal action in this case, and stands ready to provide any expert assistance as may be useful in the successful prosecution of this vital case. In the meantime, EAZA calls on the government of Poland to reconsider its position and restore immediately all protections to the Białowieża Forest World Heritage Site.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.iucn.org/content/eu-has-act-save-bia%C5%82owie%C5%BCa-forest> quoting Forest Biology Mar 2016 paper: *The dispute over the future of the Białowieża Primeval Forest: myths and facts* Wesolowski, Kujawa et al.

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### **About EAZA**

EAZA is a non-profit conservation organisation, with members across Europe and the Middle East. Its mission is to facilitate cooperation within the European zoo and aquarium community towards the goals of education, research and conservation. EAZA believes that zoos and aquariums have a strong role to play in the conservation of nature and wildlife both at our Member institutions and out in the field.

EAZA strives for its community to be a significant contributor to and driving force for global conservation and towards building the capacity, skills, and resources to prevent species extinction. With 400 members in 44 countries, out of which 26 are EU Member States, EAZA is the world's largest regional zoo association and is represented in EU Member States through National Zoo Associations and individual zoos. Every year 140 million visits are made to visit EAZA institutions ensuring we reach one in four European citizens.