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NO RETURN FOR AUROCHS. A LETTER TO SCIENCE*

Abstract. The rejection of the publication of the letter *No return for aurochs* intended for the journal *Science* as a reaction to the article *Bringing back the aurochs* constitutes a revolting act. The story of the false aurochs has actually been well-known for many years: it is a relatively new cattle breed, bred by the Heck brothers in the thirties and claimed to be *aurochs* or *revived aurochs* by Nazi propaganda. For that matter, the transformation of this Nazi fraud into a commercial fraud has been the subject of diverse publications. To call the Heck cattle by the name of aurochs is simply a misuse of the zoological nomenclature, which goes, moreover, very often with ordinary financial frauds on public funds. However, a powerful lobby, which manages to obtain grants to *study* and *introduce* this false aurochs, still exists. The authors of the letter *No return for aurochs* were deeply shocked to notice that such lies could be published in a serious and respected scientific journal. The rejection of the publication of the letter (manuscript number: aaf3907) by *Science*, which has not been

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* This letter was sent on Feb. 2, 2016 to *Science* in reaction to E. Stokstad, *Bringing back the aurochs* in: *Science* 6265, 2015, pp. 1144–1147 and refused by the Editor who gave the following answer on Feb. 9, 2016: Dr. Samojlik / Polska Akademia Nauk Instytut Biologii Ssaków / Białowieża 17–230 / Dear Dr. Samojlik, / Manuscript number: aaf3907 / Thank you for sending a Letter to Science. We have read your contribution but will not be able to publish it. We invite you to leave an online e-letter instead. To do so, go to www.science mag.org and find the published paper to which your comment refers. Then click e-letter to submit. Excerpts from e-letters are occasionally published in the print Letters section of Science. / If your comment does not refer to a paper published in Science, then the e-letter option is not available. / Please do not reply to this email, as it will not be read by Science. Unfortunately, the volume of submissions precludes specific discussions about individual submitted letters. / Sincerely, / Jennifer Sills / Science.

justified by any scientific motives, was even more shocking, as it goes against the ethical standards of the research field.

Keywords: Heck's false aurochs, Nazi fraud, introduction of domestic cattle to the wild, ecological risks.

The article *Bringing back the aurochs* (in: *Science* 6265, pp. 1144–1147) is filled with disputable statements and shows only one side of the facts. It misses that the *aurochs reconstruction* project has been controversial from its beginnings. Launched by the Nazi dignitaries Heinz and Lutz Heck, it was strongly opposed at that time by the German scientists Erna Mohr and Kurt Priemel, distinguished zoologists and co-leaders of the restitution project of the European bison *Bison bonasus*. Both Mohr and Priemel were repressed by the Nazis and removed from their positions because of their opposition to Heck's views¹. The article only mentions in passing the Nazi propaganda context of Heck's work, and rather focuses on the *romantic* aspect of the endeavor. It is important to remind that after WWII Lutz Heck was prosecuted for his war crimes in Poland and USSR².

The paper ignores also the ongoing scientific debate on this rewilding approach, as well as the lack of scientific support and the associated risks and uncertainties, particularly when the original species is not available and taxon substitution is involved³. Conservationists' concerns, such as the potential impact on native fauna and flora connected with releasing alien domesticated animals into to the wild, the unpredictability of the ecological consequences, or the overlook of the long evolutionary history of the vanished communities and species, are not mentioned. Ethical questions regarding funding and conservation priorities are also neglected, e.g. why funding goes to creation of a new breed of cattle when many old, local breeds of cattle are dying out and would benefit from such funding⁴. The paper also skips the polemics that this project triggered, for instance, in France and Poland at the turn of the century, and which finally led to the suspension of any financial support to projects connected with *false aurochs* by the French Ministry of Agriculture⁵. In Poland, the State Council for Nature Conservation objected the release of this new breed of cattle because of the ecological risks of such project, particularly for the vulnerable European bison⁶. During WWII, Heck's cows released in different parts of Poland, the last country where aurochs lived, did not survive

¹ See P. Daszkiewicz & J. Aikhenbaum, *Aurochs: le retour ... d'une supercherie nazie*.

² See P. Daszkiewicz & J. Aikhenbaum, *Aurochs: le retour ... d'une supercherie nazie*.

³ See Caro T., *The Pleistocene re-wilding gambit*, L. G. R. Oliveira-Santos & F. A. S. Fernandez, *Pleistocene rewilding ...*, J. Lorimer, C. Sandom, P. Jepson, C. Doughty, M. Barua & K. J. Kirby, *Rewilding: science, practice, and politics* & J. Carey, *Rewilding*.

⁴ See D. Kuijper, *Tauros*.

⁵ See P. Daszkiewicz & J. Aikhenbaum, *Aurochs: le retour ... d'une supercherie nazie*.

⁶ See P. Daszkiewicz & J. Aikhenbaum, *Aurochs: le retour ... d'une supercherie nazie* & A. Wajrak, *Powrót hitlerowskiej krowy*.

more than few years in the wild¹. This and other weaknesses, such as aggressiveness², are also overlooked.

Finally, the title is completely misleading. The *false aurochs* or *Heck's cow* is just a recent hybrid of several breeds of cattle, not a *wild* or *reconstructed* species that once occurred in nature. Specialists used to fob off remarks on *preserving chunks of ancient animal's genome* reminding that *wolf genes* survived in different breeds of dogs³; yet, it would be unthinkable to call a Malamute a *wolf* or to release a pack of stray dogs and claim to reintroduce wolves.

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¹ See P. Daszkiewicz & J. Aikhenbaum, *Aurochs: le retour ... d'une supercherie nazie* & A. Wajrak, *Powrót hitlerowskiej krowy*.

² See www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/05/devon-farmer-forced-offload-nazi-bred-super-cows.

³ See P. Daszkiewicz & J. Aikhenbaum, *Aurochs: le retour ... d'une supercherie nazie*.