

Mysterious Bison Death Fuels Corruption Row

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Visitors watching a bison at the Prioksko-Terrasny reserve, one of the few breeding centers for the species.

SERPUKHOV, the Moscow Region — An adult female European Bison turned around and leisurely defecated in the direction of a group of tourists from Moscow.

The children giggled. Their parents looked embarrassed. The other Bison Bonasus in the pen barely shrugged and carried on chewing at hay from a manger.

From the serene expression of disinterest with which the giant beasts regarded their visitors, one would hardly guess that they are at the center of a ferocious employment dispute, a drugs overdose, and a suspected murder.

European bison, or zubry, once roamed in their thousands from the British Isles to Eastern Siberia, but they were almost completely wiped out in the 20th century. The Priokso-Terrasny

nature reserve two hours south of Moscow is one of a handful of breeding centers in the world devoted to saving the species.

The reserve — located, as its name suggests, on a terraced landscape descending to the left bank of the Oka River — is a favorite destination for day-tripping families, who pay 200 rubles (\$6.50) a head to be introduced to the creatures, the largest mammals in Europe.

Its protected landscape also provides shelter for wild deer, boar and mink. The staff reckon there are even three or four European lynx living there.

But the idyll was shattered when Shponti, a 16-year-old breeding bull relocated to Russia from Germany in 2011, was found dead in his paddock on Jan. 6.

And an official investigation launched by the Natural Resources and Environment Ministry in mid-February concluded that he may have been murdered.

"Results of laboratory tests suggest intentional poisoning in the death of the breeding bull Shponti. Materials concerning the death of the bison were sent to law enforcement agencies, who are conducting an investigation," the Natural Resources and Environment Ministry, which presides over the country's network of nature reserves, said in a statement released Feb. 15.

Although 16 is a respectable age for a bison in the wild, they can live for more than 20 years in captivity, and staff have said Shponti was healthy and active before his death.

Tests carried out by vets in Moscow and Serphukhov, the nearest town, found caffeine and an amphetamine called gepefrine in the bison's blood — leading to speculation that someone intentionally fed Shponti an overdose of the drugs.

But a delay in the autopsy meant that some key forensic evidence had deteriorated.

"Unfortunately, the analysis was only conducted on the fifth day [after the death]. We can't tell exactly what killed him. All we can say is that there were several signs consistent with poisoning," said Mikhail Stishov, the head of the WWF Russia's Arctic Biodiversity program and one of several conservationists brought in by the Natural Resources and Environment Ministry to investigate the deaths.

The ministry did not respond to requests to comment on the progress of the criminal investigation.

But whatever the outcome, the claims have thrown a spotlight on a dispute between staff and management at the reserve that some disgruntled staff have described as a "war."

Shponti's death hit the headlines in January partly thanks to the tireless work of bloggers and former employees who still control the park's former website.

The reports — quickly picked up by national media — suggested the bison had been poisoned by rotten tangerines and tomatoes carelessly dumped in the park over the New Year's holidays.

And they laid the blame squarely on the shoulders of the park's allegedly "corrupt"

management.

"The Natural Resources and Environment Ministry continues its experiment called 'Can a former paratrooper who is under investigation for major theft manage a nature reserve?'" one statement on the website danki.ru said.

That was a reference to Andrei Ivonin — a tough talking former paratrooper and veteran of the Soviet war in Afghanistan whom some employees have accused of brusque manners and corrupt practices since he was appointed to head the park in 2010.

One serving employee who spoke to The Moscow Times on condition of anonymity said Ivonin's behavior had led to a state of "civil war" between management and staff.

"There was no problem at first. He presented himself as this tough-talking fighter against poaching," the park employee said.

According to the employees' account, growing discontent with the former soldier's "dictatorial" management style peaked when he appointed himself sole administrator of the 7.5 million ruble petty cash fund for the park.

That led 22 employees to sign an open letter to the ministry asking for an investigation of Ivonin's management in the autumn of 2011.

A subsequent investigation revealed systemic fraud involving tour groups not being registered on arrival and the fees they paid being siphoned off.

"He blamed it on the poor women working in the ticket office. But we know for a fact that some of the money [from the petty cash fund] went straight into his pocket," claimed the employee, who added that most of the signatories of the letter were subsequently fired.

In a confusing twist, some of the fired employees retained control of the nature reserve's website, which continues to launch blistering indictments of Ivonin's management style.

Ivonin was on holiday when The Moscow Times tried to reach him for comment. Repeated calls to his deputy went unanswered.

The guide who conducted a guided tour of the bison enclosures one weekend earlier in February had little time for the accusations, saying that the scandal had been caused by disgruntled former employees and local "poachers" upset by Ivonin's crackdown on their sport.

But the employee who asked to remain anonymous denied any staff members had been involved in poaching and claimed the management had issued what he called "an absolutely illegal" instruction that no staff were to talk to the media without their permission.

Those who carried out the investigation chose their words more carefully, however.

"The current director is not ideal. I can say that straight up," said Stishov. But there is also little doubt some of the fired staff did indeed have cosy look-the-other-way arrangements with local poachers, he added. And it is very likely that Ivonin's hands-on style has earned

the ire of locals who had become accustomed to illegally hunting on the territory.

Six animals have died in the past year, but in general, the death rate is perfectly "within norms," Stishov said. The investigative commission found that two other suspicious deaths in the same period were actually due to natural causes — one of inflammation in the digestive tract and another of a respiratory infection. A fourth had to be put down because of a broken jaw.

Stishov did say there were "some shortcomings" at the reserve, including several instances of feeding the bison inappropriate fruit still in its packaging, though he said he doubted they could have contributed to the death.

The one thing everyone agrees with is that Shponti's death is mysterious.

"It stinks of crime," Natalia Treboganova, the head of the bison section at the reserve, told the regional website Oka-info.

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