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Rewilding, biodiversity improvement and forest recreational value: How does the reintroduction of large herbivores for the purpose of promoting biodiversity impact the recreational value of forests?

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Grazing and herbivore reintroductions are increasingly being used as a nature management tool to promote biodiversity in the human dominated natural landscape of Europe. The impact of grazing and large grazers in Europe has been studied extensively in terms of the ecological impact, yet their effects on the recreational value of nature areas has drawn less attention. As outdoor recreation is important for overall societal welfare, it is key to investigate the consequences of large grazer introductions for recreationists, and in particular, whether potential negative effects can be mitigated by design. Through a discrete choice experiment, the impact of the (re)introduction of herbivores and the consequential fencing structures on the recreational value of forest visits in Denmark are investigated. Through the use of a latent class model, we show highly polarized preferences for the introduction of herbivores. Results reflect a polarized debate in Denmark, with a minority of the population expressing a strong negative opinion on the introduction of herbivores in recreational fenced forests, and the majority being supportive of visiting a forest with introduced animals in fenced forests. Structural elements of the forest, dog access and level of access through the fence significantly affect the choice of forest visit site for the Danish public. However, we also find that the design of the fence is only of limited importance for the recreational experience. Overall, for certain groups, improvements in these other attributes are not sufficient to offset the negative consequences of the potential of encountering large herbivores.