

THE UNFOLDING COMEBACK STORY OF THE AMERICAN BISON

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No story of the American West would be complete without mention of the bison, the grand icon of the Plains, the thunder of its hooves heard for thousands of years across a sea of prairie stretching from the Mississippi



to the Rockies and from Canada to Mexico. The largest land animal of the Americas, the bison (or buffalo) dominated its world and became the stuff of legend to early explorers and to the Native American tribes that revered it, hunted it and depended on it.

Once considered “ecosystem engineers” – animals that profoundly affects their environment and all species living there – bison altered the prairie ecosystem by carving pathways and creating wetlands by wallowing and trampling. They fertilized the vegetation and provided food for hunters and scavengers. Birds, prairie dogs, coyotes, wolves and pronghorn antelope all thrived in a land sculpted by millions of bison, roaming free.

These iconic animals were brought to near-extinction in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, victims of massive overhunting and of the westward expansion of a swelling American population. Perhaps 1,000 surviving bison were kept privately, while, by the turn of the 20th century, fewer than 50 remained in the wild. Like the passenger pigeon, they seemed doomed to annihilation.

But the bison refused to quit. With the help of pioneering public and private conservation efforts, and with help from notables such as President Theodore Roosevelt, bison numbers increased yearly; today they number nearly 500,000. More than 90 percent of these, though, are raised domestically for meat. Fewer than 30,000 make up conservation herds, and only 5,000 are not confined by fences. Many of these also contain cattle genes, a result of early efforts to produce hardier cows or more docile bison.

The World Wildlife Fund is working hard to improve the bison’s status and benefit the northern Plains ecosystem. By partnering with Native American tribes, public and private land managers and other conservation groups, the WWF hopes to spearhead the restoration of bison herds, benefiting both the

health of the ecosystem and communities. By returning multiple healthy herds to more than 100,000 acres of northern prairie, the WWF and others hope this vast, overlooked ecosystem will again flourish with full biodiversity, shaped in large part by this keystone animal's presence.

"The plains bison is emblematic of the power and prominence of the American West's sweeping prairies. They are an American icon," says Martha Kauffman, managing director of the WWF's Northern Great Plains Program. Its goal is simple: to restore bison and their ecological role to portions of the northern Plains in South Dakota, Montana and neighboring states.

Returning thousands of bison to the land must be done responsibly, with those who own and manage the land. Creating solutions to address the concerns of neighboring landowners will also be a key in gaining public support.

To that end, supporters have identified existing areas in the northern Plains large enough to accommodate substantial bison herds. These include the American Prairie Reserve in Montana; the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota; the Fort Belknap and Fort Peck reservations in Montana; and the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge in Montana. Each has the acreage to support herds large enough to conserve the bison's genetic integrity and restore its keystone ecological role, while also minimizing potential conflict with ranching concerns.

Native American connections to the bison run deep, so tribes across the country are joining with other groups to bring the bison back. "It's time to stand up and rally around this animal, which is sacred to us and so important to the future of Montana," says Mark Azure, director of the Fort Belknap Fish and Wildlife Department. He says that carving out a place for bison on reservations can again contribute to Native American well-being.

Kauffman agrees: "Bison hold enormous spiritual and cultural significance for Native Americans and are a potent symbol for the future of the Plains. WWF is working to support the tribes' vision of returning bison to their lands."

A coalition of organizations has proposed to make the bison our country's national mammal. The bison could soon stand beside the bald eagle as a national symbol of strength, freedom and survival. From dominion to near extinction and back, it's an epic story of an icon's will to endure, and of the efforts of a broad band of differing peoples pledged to help the bison return to the life it once knew, out there on the Great Plains of North America.