Ecological and Cultural Recovery of the American Bison

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As many as 40-60 million buffalo
An iconic species that defined the West
Widely Distributed-Mexico to Northern Canada
Part of many tribal cultures
The rapid decline of bison spawned the conservation movement in North America.
- Nearly extinct at the turn of the 19th Century
- By 1889, 1091 bison were counted by WCS’s first director—William T. Hornaday
- Saved in 5 captive herds and only 2 remaining free ranging bison herds.
• 1905 The American Bison Society was Chartered
• First Recovery of Bison by the American Bison Society
  • 1907 Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge, Oklahoma
  • 1909 Montana National Bison Reserve
  • 1913 Wind Cave National Park, South Dakota
• Most (96%) of all bison are in private herds – raised for meat production.
• Most of the conservation herds are small (< 400)

500,000 in 5000 Ranches

30,000 Plains and Wood in Conservation Herds
Conservation Obstacles

- Historical Management Policies
- Genetic Integrity
- Confusing Legal Classification and Status
- Human Conflicts especially Agriculture
  - Fencing
- Complex Partnerships necessary to manage large landscapes
- Coordination of Policies, Rules and Regulations
What is the future of bison?

American Bison
Status Survey and Conservation Guidelines 2009

[Cartoon: Two bison in a field, one speaking into a microphone with a speech bubble saying, "We never call America..."]
Where We Might Conserve (Sanderson et al, 2007)

- Wood Bison Recovery Plan

- Private producer
- Potential Initiatives
- Current Initiatives
Conservation Planning

“Oh, give me a home, where the buffalo roam...”
Bison Belong—Banff National Park
Inter-Tribal Buffalo Council
Rapid City, South Dakota

• Mission: “Restoring buffalo to Indian Country to preserve our historical, cultural and traditional and spiritual relationships for future generations”
• Formed in 1992
• 57 member tribes in 19 U.S. States
• 15,000 buffalo in 1,000,000 acres of Indian Country
Wind River Reservation

- Large Scale - ~1 million acres available
- Intact mountain foothills habitat
- Historic Plains Bison habitat
- Strong historical and cultural connections - Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho
- Large predators associated with the landscape
- Agriculture conflicts are primarily with cattle under tribal mgmt.
Call to Action

Early calls (1820-1870) went unheeded
YNP was established in 1872
Wind Cave received bison 1913
Bison in Grand Teton (1948), Theodore Roosevelt (1956) and Badlands (1963)
7 Other DOI herds created on Nat. refuges.
The call for action remains valid today!
DOI Bison Conservation Initiative 2008
Renewed NPS Call to Action – 2012
  • affirmed the commitment to restoration of bison while working with partners

Might there be a place in the Crown?
Glacier-Waterton Front

- Cultural tie to Blackfeet People
- Historically important to bison
Rocky Mountain Front-Canada and U.S.

- Large tracts of intact fescue grasslands
- Portions are protected by Parks
- Bison legally classed as wildlife in U.S.
- Predator community is intact
- Community of Interest- but complex ownership
- Agriculture conflict primarily with livestock producers
Reinforcing Ancient Connections with Bison

• Tribal Dialogues
  – Siksika, Kainai, Pikanii tribal elders
    • A generation apart-connecting the youth
    • Dissolving boundaries
  – Transboundary discussion
    • Connecting, Healing the land and People
  – Linguistic legacy---Dialogue in Blackfoot language

• Iinnii Initiative “Kick-off”
  – Waterton May 2011
Innii Initiative

Vision Statement

Structured Workgroups
• Education/Outreach
• Research
• Strategy
• Cultural
Next Steps

• Research
  – Conservation Mapping
  – Baseline Monitoring
• Cultural
  – Host Clan Meeting
  – Special Events
• Strategy
  – Business Planning
  – Economic Summit
  – Conservation Planning
• Education/ Outreach
  – Native Science Field Center
  – Community Colleges
  – Engaging Youth
An American Buffalo Tale

How will we write the next chapter of this tale?