WILDLIFE FACTS

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Sharing the Range:
A Place for Wild Bison on Today's Landscape

Tens of millions of wild plains bison—also known as buffalo—once roamed the grasslands of North America, but the slaughter of the late 1800s so devastated the famous herds that at one time only a few dozen animals remained in the wild, tucked away in a remote valley in Yellowstone National Park. Though they have since bounced back from the brink of extinction, today the vast majority of bison in the United States are raised as livestock on private property. And of the "conservation" herds scattered across the West, most of these are small, fenced-in, and intensively managed. But there is great potential for restoring wild bison to the landscape, and living with bison is possible. Residents who live near the few existing free-roaming, wild herds say that bison have brought both economic and ecological benefits to their regions. And some ranchers attest that a successful cattle industry can coexist with the presence of wild bison herds. The Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) believes it is time to recover bison as a wildlife species and give wild bison more habitat—room to roam in the American West.

BISON TODAY

Bison are an American treasure, an iconic symbol of the vast Western landscapes they once roamed by the tens of millions. Bison are also a keystone species bringing important ecological benefits to the landscape, including positive impacts on native plants, wildlife, soils, and nutrient cycles; they can therefore play a key role in helping restore native ecosystems, if given the chance.[1] Bison also remain culturally important for many Native American tribes that once depended on them for food, clothing, shelter, tools, and medicine.[2]

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But, today, American bison occupy less than 1 percent of their original habitat, which once spanned most of North America. And conservation herds—bison populations managed for conservation of the species and preservation of native ecosystems, rather than for commercial production of meat or hides—occupy just a small fraction of that 1 percent. Moreover, just a few of those conservation herds can be considered truly wild and free-roaming.[3]

Restoration of wild bison as a true wildlife species—like wild deer or elk—would mean bringing bison back in large numbers on some of their former habitat and managing them as free-roaming wildlife. Unfortunately, the current approach of small, scattered herds contributes little to this goal. Particularly worrisome is the fact that even the bison in conservation herds have been broken up into smaller and smaller herds over time, reducing their long-term health and genetic viability. Scientists say smaller herds lose genetic diversity over the long term, so larger herds contribute much more to the conservation of the species. With 75 percent of today's bison in herds of less than 400 animals, and with just 5 herds containing greater than 1,000 animals, there is clearly a great need for larger herds of wild bison.[4]

The general public supports restoring wild bison populations. A national survey showed that 75 percent of Americans believe the bison is an important symbol of wild America, and more than half have positive attitudes toward bison conservation.[5] A Montana-specific survey showed that a majority of Montanans (63 percent) say it is possible to manage bison in the same way as other wildlife species, and even more (70 percent) would support the state investigating possible locations for restoring wild bison. Moreover, of those who support bison restoration, a vast majority (89 percent) believe that bison will be an economic asset to rural areas through tourism and hunting.[6] With such strong public support—and a strong scientific basis—the time is right for wild bison restoration.

BISON HELP LOCAL ECONOMIES

Where wild bison herds do exist, they have proven to be a boon for the local economy through tourist- and hunting-based industries. Ranchers and tour operators alike note that wild bison benefit the tourism industry in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, where wildlife is the number one draw for visitors,[7] partly thanks to the successful marketing of bison as an icon of the American West. The opportunity to capitalize on wildlife-viewing exists in Montana as well, but this potential has not been fully realized, as continued hazing and slaughter of wild bison outside Yellowstone National Park have been a black eye for the state. Therefore, some business owners in Montana's tourism and services sectors would like to see bison roam more freely in the state, in part because of the increased tourism they would bring.[8]

Wild, free-roaming bison can also bring significant economic revenue through fair-chase hunting opportunities. Fair-chase hunting—meaning hunting wild game using ethical methods, usually for meat—is generally accepted as a primary tool for managing sustainable populations of wild game animals in the American West. Given that opportunities to hunt free-roaming bison are so scarce, hunters will pay a

Bison in the Henry Mountains, Utah

CREDIT: UDWR

significant amount of money for the chance to hunt bison, including purchasing an expensive hunting license and often paying local outfitters and guides. In Jackson Hole, the bison hunt instituted just four years ago has already drawn huge interest and high demand for hunting tags.[9] In Utah's Henry Mountains, demand for bison hunting tags far exceeds supply, and hunters enter a once-in-a-lifetime lottery for the chance to hunt wild bison, paying between $400 and $1,500 if they do draw a tag. Non-resident bull bison hunting tags sell for up to $5,000 in some states and even resident tags can reach $1,000, providing a significant source of revenue.[10]

Hunters often travel long distances for this opportunity to hunt bison, meaning that they also contribute to the lodging and food services industries in local communities. Studies of big-game hunters in Montana show that out-of-state elk hunters spend an average of $384 per day in the communities near where they are hunting. Even in-state elk hunters contribute to local economies, spending $81 per day, on average.[11] A wild, free-roaming, sustainably hunted population of bison in Montana could draw similar or even more revenue, as hunters are often willing to spend more money on a bison hunt than on a deer or elk hunt.

STRONG CATTLE INDUSTRY COEXISTS WITH FREE-ROAMING BISON

Living with wild bison is possible for livestock producers and their cattle herds. Near Yellowstone National Park, much of the concern over bison is centered on a disease called brucellosis, which some bison carry. The worry is that bison will transmit the disease to cattle, causing female cows to miscarry and subjecting ranchers to strict regulations. The risk of such a transmission is extremely low, however, and transmission from bison has never been documented in the wild. Even absent any actual transmission, Montana ranchers say the stigma of the disease affects their industry. But ranchers in Jackson Hole, where free-roaming bison and elk likewise carry brucellosis, say they do not generally have problems marketing their cattle. They note that their rigorous testing means out-of-state buyers can be confident that the cows are disease-free before they are shipped out of Wyoming.[12]

In addition, ranchers say they were already accustomed to living with wildlife by the time bison started showing up near ranches, and therefore they were used to employing good coexistence practices like fencing their haystacks and being vigilant when wildlife wandered near their livestock. Many ranchers in Jackson Hole and elsewhere also recognize that elk—not bison—pose the greatest risk of transmitting brucellosis to cattle, as elk also carry the disease and are much more numerous and widespread than bison.[13]

Moreover, the federal government recently overhauled the rules and regulations governing brucellosis, which significantly decreases the economic risk associated with disease and lightens the burden for any producer whose herd does get exposed to the disease. The new regulations also make it easier for ranchers to give their cows "booster" vaccinations against brucellosis, further protecting ranchers from the risk of the disease. Montana's cattle industry remains strong and vibrant, despite the past years of controversy over bison. Any negative economic impacts resulting from a case of brucellosis transmission to a cow are now significantly less than they were a decade ago, when the current bison management policies were put in place; it is time to shift bison management accordingly.

Regarding wild bison restoration outside the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, any restoration projects would involve disease-free bison, so brucellosis would not be an issue. Some ranchers near proposed relocation sites have expressed concerns about wild bison breaking fences, but communities are finding solutions to these concerns. In Utah, hunters who are thrilled to have wild bison back on the landscape help deal with concerns of property damage by volunteering to repair any fences damaged by free-roaming bison.[14] Moreover, other wildlife species already roam these landscapes, including those that sometimes cause headaches for landowners. Other communities should take notice, as collaborative solutions, combined with good ranching practices and sound wildlife management policies, can help make the vision of restoring wild bison become a reality.

Bison in Jackson Hole, Wyoming

CREDIT: KIM OLSON PHOTOGRAPHY

Bison in Yellowstone National Park

CREDIT: DANA LEONARD

LANDMARK FREE-ROAMING HERDS SHOW US WE CAN LIVE WITH BISON

Free-roaming wild bison in Jackson Hole, Wyoming—as well as other wild herds, such as those in Utah's Henry Mountains, for example—show us that living with bison is possible even on our modern landscape. The Jackson Hole herd of more than 1,000 bison has captivated people for decades, even in the town of Kelly, where bison occasionally roam the streets and visit residents' front yards. When the bison population first began to expand, as one local explained, residents simply learned that they had to start doing things differently.

Over time, Jackson Hole residents erected stout pole fences, where necessary, to protect their homes, and learned to give bison a wide berth.[15] Most ranchers realized that the occasional wandering bison caused less overall damage and posed less of a threat than the many elk that break fences much more frequently.[16] By modifying their practices slightly, ranchers and residents have had relatively few conflicts with bison over the years, and most of them enjoy having the bison there. Jackson Hole's bison population is now managed through a highly popular big-game hunt that maintains a sustainable population—as are most free-roaming bison populations, including Utah's Henry Mountains herd.

Bison roaming free on Horse Butte, Montana

CREDIT: WHITNEY LEONARD

Recent policy changes have begun to give bison more room to roam on the landscape outside Yellowstone National Park, with the expansion of seasonal habitat on the Horse Butte Peninsula in Montana, on the western border of Yellowstone, and with the expansion of seasonal habitat in Montana's Gardiner Basin, just north of Yellowstone. These steps have been met with mixed reactions, particularly in the Gardiner Basin. But many of the same measures taken in Jackson Hole could make it easier for residents to coexist with bison in Montana. In fact, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, with the support of conservation organizations, is currently working with landowners to install appropriate fencing to protect private property from free-roaming bison in the Gardiner basin.[17] And residents on Horse Butte say bison rarely damage their property except when pressured by unnecessary government hazing operations.

GOING FORWARD

We saved the bison from extinction more than a century ago, yet we still do not treat this iconic animal as a wildlife species. With ample public lands outside Yellowstone and elsewhere in Montana and the American West, it is time to restore truly wild, free-roaming bison populations to some of the abundant habitat on today's Western landscape.

NRDC works to protect and restore wild, free-roaming bison by advocating for the expansion of their habitat outside Yellowstone National Park and elsewhere in Montana and the West.

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