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## Introduction

Over the past century and a quarter, a phenomenal story of cultural perseverance has unraveled in Indian Country, as Native Americans have sought to preserve the bison as an extension of preserving themselves and their culture.<sup>1</sup> Many variables, including questions over the very survival of some tribes, were formed in Native America as a result of the dislocation of the past half millennium. However, one constant for a significant number of Indian people has been the desire for a landscape where the buffalo can roam. In the roaming of the bison, dreams could also then materialize for Native people to retain their cultural autonomy. This book attempts to tell the story of Native Americans working to save bison to keep alive the possibilities bestowed on them as residents in the North American landscape. In a fashion perhaps quite peculiar to many Euro-Americans, prominent Native leaders in the bison restoration movement provided a milestone event when, in the early 1990s, using a traditional ceremony, the leaders “asked” the bison if they wanted to return.<sup>2</sup> The leaders received an affirmative answer, validating their efforts past, present, and future.

The story of the Native American restoration of the buffalo nation warrants telling.<sup>3</sup> More importantly, the story requires a Native voice. Hence, this author drove fifteen thousand miles through Indian Country, from New Mexico in the south to the Northwest Territories in the north and from Washington in the west to South Dakota in the east. Dozens of interviews with Native North Americans and observations of Indian people interacting with bison emerged from these travels. The common threads in this research remained the bison and the land, which provided a rich environment both for the Native American discourse and the reflection offered here. The results of the fieldwork and archival labor spawned one journal article, a master’s thesis, and a doctoral dissertation that evolved into the present work.<sup>4</sup>

Several key topics of discourse emerge from the story of Native American bison restoration. Broad categorization of these salient features separates them into cultural, ecological, contemporary, and comparative considerations. Evaluating the story through the cultural, or ethnohistorical, lens leads to several conclusions. In analyzing these summations, we must understand that Native Americans developed diverse, vibrant cultures that defy stereotype. However, the relationship Natives developed with bison offers one homogenizing aspect of North American indigenous culture: wherever buffalo roamed, they impacted Native Americans, who sought to interact with bison as much as possible. Arguably, Native Americans established a virtually unprecedented human-animal relationship with the bison, in which buffalo country became Indian Country.<sup>5</sup>

It's difficult to think of another group of humans who have become so intertwined with a wild animal species that it pervaded their culture. Bison permeate virtually everything material for Native Americans as well as the spiritual, as exemplified by many of the plains groups and to a lesser extent groups located farther from the heart of the bison landscape. Moreover, Native people did not lose their physical relationship with the bison after the demise of the great herds. They retained access to smaller groups, or later captive herds, even after their alienation from their lands, which culminated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Native Americans never lost a spiritual relationship with their kindred mammal. Unsurprisingly for many students of Native American culture, the last steward of bison prior to the loss of physical contact was a woman, Sarah (Larabee) Philip.<sup>6</sup> In fact, she is just one of several women who have played key roles in bison restoration from the establishment of captive herds in the 1870s and 1880s to the activism for free-ranging bison in contemporary society. Additionally, close inspection of Native bison restoration reveals noneconomic, culturally substantive reasons for bringing back the bison, rather than the rationalist economic motivations often seen in mainstream Euro-American society.

The concern with bringing back the bison without a primary focus on economic benefit reveals an ecological side to Native bison recovery. Native Americans always sought a landscape that offered a habitat for bison. Indians fought to protect their home. In many areas, these homelands provided range for bison; hence, they fought to protect the bison homeland. Evidence that Native people entered into treaty negotiations to alter the landscape fails

to materialize, especially with respect to the plains. Prior to Euro-American hegemony, Native Americans did not engage in invasive land practices that would deny habitat to bison. In fact, even after full implementation of the reservation system, Indians who became stewards of bison herds ran their bison on ranges as unfettered as possible. Such protection of bison range and offering of sanctuary to bison on reservations to restore the buffalo nation in many ways nullifies revisionist arguments implicating Native Americans in the destruction of the bison.<sup>7</sup> Native Americans sought to maintain free-ranging bison herds as long as possible in the face of a landscape changing because of the Euro-American presence, which significantly differs from the Euro-Americans' idea of saving bison for parks and zoos while transforming the former range of the bison into regions of intensive agriculture. Thus, the historical analyst can conclude that by association with free-ranging bison, Native Americans became champions for a healthy ecosystem, or at least one capable of sustaining large mobile ungulate populations.<sup>8</sup>

Moving toward the present, the contemporary observer witnesses that many Native American bison stewards have entered into alliance with conservation biologists, proponents of range restoration, or ecosystem scientists as they explore options for providing the best oversight for a healthy landscape.<sup>9</sup> Bison restoration in Indian Country greatly accelerated over the past generation, as the growing number of tribes and private Indian owners acquiring bison testifies. The Intertribal Bison Cooperative (ITBC) emerged as a pan-tribal organization that provides a unifying force in Indian Country for restoring bison's "dignity," meaning as free from human manipulation as possible. At the same time, Native Americans have become more vociferous champions of the bison by rallying against the limitations placed on the bison herd of Yellowstone National Park, which tenuously possesses the status as the only free-ranging bison herd in the continental United States. Still, government personnel shoot the bison when they exceed various politically imposed boundaries. Many Native Americans view these bison as symbols of themselves and take great exception to the high-handed treatment of this icon.

Finally, the Yellowstone Park example touches on another aspect of Native bison recovery in that areas of Canada offer a stark contrast. For example, Canadian First Nations Indians help to manage select public herds at the Mackenzie Bison Sanctuary and Wood Buffalo National Park. These herds

can move with far less restriction than those in Yellowstone. Thus, in this respect the Canadian Indian movement to restore the buffalo nation surpasses that found in the United States. However, while this is true in public management, it does not hold true in tribal herd management. Canada does not yet possess a pan-Indian organization like the ITBC to provide cohesion and guidance in bison restoration. The indigenous effort in Canada therefore hinges somewhat more on economic rationale, though the substantive reasons abound there as well. Either way, in both Canada and the United States the history of bison restoration is a story of local people, westerners, bringing back an indigenous resource with indigenous people playing a lead role in restoring “bison as bison” rather than as a breed of woolly cow. Still, future expansion of bison restoration will require consensus building among Native American, government, and private entities in order for it to occur both north and south of the forty-ninth parallel.

A powerful metaphor from buffalo country was provided near the end of the nineteenth-century bison annihilation when a Blackfeet man described the scene as seeing the “tail of the last buffalo.”<sup>10</sup> Perhaps he would have been glad to know that the face of the buffalo has returned to its home in increasing numbers, with Native Americans providing stewardship. Still, much of the script for the Native effort toward bison restoration remains unwritten. Yet this effort already possesses a rich history of cultural tenacity and the tightly woven relationship between humans and animals.