

Editorial Board

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Return bison to the West

Since time immemorial, the Tribes of the Western United States and Canada have had a unique and powerful relationship with buffalo. For generations, buffalo have been our relatives: buffalo are part of us and we are part of buffalo, culturally, materially and spiritually. This relationship has endured even after buffalo were slaughtered to near extinction in the late 1800s.

For decades, buffalo have been almost completely absent from the grasslands of the West. In their absence, their role as the ecosystem engineer of the great plains has been forgotten. Their patterns of grazing, their hooves and even their wallows created a vibrant mosaic of grasses that captured and sequestered carbon, supported a vast diversity of other species and built the soils that continue to sustain agricultural economies.

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FYANT**

**ANDY WERK
JR.**

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MONROE JR.**

For years, only a few small herds of buffalo are maintained in parks and refuges, almost like artifacts in a museum. Almost nowhere are large herds of wild buffalo allowed to roam. Although federal and state wildlife agencies have restored large numbers of elk, bighorn sheep, antelope and other wildlife, buffalo are the forgotten species of American wildlife conservation.

Twenty years ago, many Tribes began restoring buffalo to their reservations. These efforts have been enormously important to our peoples and it is with pride that we can point to herds on reservations in many western states. But as important as this work has been, our reservations are not large enough to truly restore wild buffalo. This can only occur by bringing buffalo back to public lands where millions of acres could sustain thousands of buffalo.

In 2014, our Tribes began joining together under a Buffalo Treaty that calls for restoring buffalo as wildlife that is an important part of ecological systems of the West. In 2020, the U.S. Department of Interior issued its Bison Conservation Initiative that endorsed establishing bison herds on appropriate large landscapes in cooperation with Tribes and other stakeholders. With this shared vision, we believe the time has come to move forward with returning our brothers and sisters, the buffalo, to the Great Plains and the intermountain West.

Let us be clear that while there are millions of acres of public land, we ask for buffalo restoration only on those landscapes where there is a confluence of both Tribal and public interests. In Montana, where our Tribes live, there are at least two areas that stand out. One place is on the eastern slopes of Glacier National Park where the potential exists for a transboundary herd between the U.S. and Canada and where there is a mosaic of tribal and public lands on both sides of the border. Another is on the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge in eastern Montana, where one million acres of public land is dedicated to wildlife and where CMR's management plan already calls for reintroducing wild buffalo. There are other public lands in the West where similar alignment clearly exists.

We recognize that there are challenges that must be solved before buffalo can return. Cattle grazing occurs on much of the public domain and treating ranchers fairly must be an important component for any buffalo restoration plan. We have the tools to do this and over the last 20 years, several well-regarded programs for resolving wildlife-livestock conflicts have been developed.

Another step is developing agreements between federal agencies and the Tribes for shared management on public lands. While Tribal biologists have significant expertise in managing buffalo through their work on the Reservation lands, for bison restoration to be successful, generations of traditional Tribal knowledge should be interwoven into buffalo management programs. Tribal voices, particularly those of our elders, can help integrate cultural and spiritual values with management and operational realities. This integration will enrich our collective approach to wildlife management even while ensuring Tribal traditions are preserved and passed through the generations.

In 1855, at the confluence of the Missouri and Judith rivers in Montana, the U.S. government and several Tribes of the northern Rockies and northern plains signed the Lame Bull Treaty. This treaty provided that a large common hunting ground would remain open in the heart of Montana's buffalo country. While the government soon broke the treaty, 166 years later the buffalo common is largely intact on public land, and our Tribes too, remain. Only the buffalo are absent. Now is the time to work for their return.

Shelly Fyant is chairwoman of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation. Andy Werk Jr. is president of the Assiniboine and Gros Ventre Tribes of the Fort Belknap Reservation. Lauren Monroe Jr. is secretary of the Blackfeet Nation Tribal Council. All these reservations are in Montana.



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