



American Bison

Background

The conservation and recovery of American bison in Alberta is complex. Alberta Wilderness Association's (AWA) main concern is that wild bison herds remain wild and they be managed as such. 'Wild' bison are those that have not been subject to gene introgression through hybridization with cattle. Bison are a keystone species to the prairie ecosystem, as they directly affect plant composition and maintain grasslands and meadows through grazing. They are also an important part of the nutrient cycle.

Current State

Plains bison are listed in Alberta as 'extirpated'. They are not listed under the *Alberta Wildlife Act*, and are legally considered livestock. Efforts by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) to have the plains bison listed under the Species at Risk Act (SARA) in 2005 were not realized as it was decided that at that time, it was not in the best interest for commercial producers of the Canadian Bison Industry. COSEWIC has once again recommended the subspecies be listed as 'threatened' under SARA this year. The only wild plains bison herds left in Alberta are in Elk Island National Park (~400 individuals).

Wood bison is listed under SARA as 'endangered'. Their status is up for consideration this year. COSEWIC is considering down-listing the species to 'special concern'. Currently there are six subpopulations of wood bison in Alberta; Wood Buffalo National Park (WBNP; the largest at around 4,189 – 5,727 individuals); Elk Island National Park; Ronald Lake; Wentzel/Wabasca; Hay Zama and; Etthithun.

Limiting factors to the recovery of American bison include habitat fragmentation, disease in Wood bison, (bovine tuberculosis, bovine brucellosis and anthrax is common in many herds in North America) and legislative and policy obstacles.

AWA Position

1. AWA supports reintroduction of extirpated species.
2. AWA does not support the down-listing of the wood bison from 'threatened' to 'special concern' under SARA.
3. AWA believes that wild Plains bison must be up-listed by SARA to 'endangered' from extirpated.
4. Wild herds must be managed as wild.
5. Alberta needs a strategy to differentiate the status for wild bison and domestic bison based on ownership. Their status would depend on whether they are located on a commercial farm, a private conservation herd or in the wild.
6. AWA recommends Suffield National Wildlife Area, with its large prairie grasslands be considered as an important area for reintroduction of bison.

Points of Emphasis

- Disease is prevalent in the WBNP. In Alberta diseased bison are considered non-wildlife and are not protected under SARA. Wood bison that roam out of WBNP are therefore often presumed diseased and not protected from poaching and hunting.
- Government of Alberta must act to identify the Ronald Lake herd (Wood bison) as wildlife. Recently, a bison that was poached outside of WBNP, was found to be part of the Ronald Lake herd (located



southeast of WBNP) where testing between 2010 and 2014 confirmed them to be disease-free (WLA article 2015 Vol. 23 No. 2).

- COSEWIC has stated that populations have increased; however, their assessment does not consider that the WBNP herd is not considered wildlife in Alberta. Discounting the large number of wild wood bison that are present in the WBNP population significantly reduces the Canadian population and should be taken into consideration by COSEWIC. Until the WBNP herd are once again considered wildlife under the Alberta *Wildlife Act*, AWA does not support the down-listing of Wood bison.
- From the last census completed in 2011, there were 124,848 farmed bison in Canada, the majority being in Alberta. There are 10 conservation herds in Canada, however, COSEWIC does not consider all of them to be 'wild by nature' as four are used for educational purposes and are managed intensively. COSEWIC defines 'wild by nature' as not having any obstruction to migration, no supplemental food or water and in conditions that allow natural selection to take place. Plains bison require an adaptive management plan in Alberta to recover in the wild, developing long-term conservation goals, while protecting economic interests. This will need to involve bison producers, managers, other stakeholders and conservationists in order to succeed. Montana maintains a dual status for wild bison and domestic bison based on ownership. Their status depends on whether they are located on a commercial farm, a private conservation herd or in the wild. Alberta must adopt a similar strategy.
- The addition of new bison herds is limited by habitat availability caused by habitat fragmentation.
- Reintroduction should present an opportunity to educate visitors about the positive impacts that bison once had on the area and will have in the future.
- GPS collars for reintroduced herds may help determine the exact location of the bison and assist in their management.
- Risks to visitors must be minimized and managed through education and awareness programs. As reported in the draft Environmental Impact Statement for Bison Conservation and Management in Montana, bison often avoid hikers and human injury is rare.

Banff National Park Reintroduction

The recently approved reintroduction of plains bison back into Banff National Park (BNP), provides natural landscape for these grazers to roam but there is significant concern that it is not enough space for year-round grazing and that fencing will not hold these animals if they decide they want to roam for better grazing opportunities. Any fencing required for wild bison management must be minimal and "wildlife friendly". As well, the reintroduction in this part of BNP presents significant challenges to contain commercialization of the herd's presence in the park. AWA is concerned with the reintroduction of plains bison into Banff National Park (BNP) noting the following issues that must be dealt with:

- *Minimal use of appropriate fencing, allowing for other wildlife population connectivity and the free roaming of the reintroduced bison. AWA does not support penned bison paddocks such as those used historically in BNP.*
- *National Parks staff must develop a strong relationship with ranchers on the eastern slopes as well as provincial AEP staff to effectively manage bison roaming outside of the park; the spread of disease from cattle; and the possibility of inter-breeding with domestic cattle.*
- *A plan for dealing with escaped bison that leave BNP must be formalized.*





- Roads and other incursions into the wild natural areas planned for bison reintroduction must not be upgraded for access that would provide tourist attractants and further commercialization of Banff National Park.

Approximate original distribution of Bison pre-settlement - COSEWIC

