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Wild Bison Recovery Jeopardized by Commercial Interests

By Shirley Bray

When Alliance for Public Wildlife president, Darrel Rowledge, was unceremoniously dis-invited from a recent bison workshop, it had the unintended effect of opening up to public scrutiny a subject the government has been keeping pretty quiet—commercial bison grazing on public land. And that inevitably opens a window on the conflict between those who want commercial bison for profit and those who want wild bison for conservation.

Who doesn't want to see magnificent herds of bison roaming freely across a rich and diverse resurrection of the North American grassland "Serengeti" that greeted explorers two centuries ago? The question is which bison? How free? And who makes the decisions?

While various agencies and conservation groups are working on an international project to bring wild bison back to the Northern High Plains, Alberta bison producers are getting ready to graze their commercial bison on public land as well. And while both sides make the claim that this is essential for restoring our native grasslands, bison producers are turning commercial bison into far different creatures than their wild ancestors, hampering recovery plans for wild bison, and manipulating multi-stakeholder processes to get their way.

Multi-Stakeholder Mayhem

When Larry Simpson of the Nature Conservancy of Canada asked Rowledge if he would sit as an advocate for wildlife and wild lands at an April 27 workshop in Edmonton to discuss fencing for commercial bison grazing on public lands, Rowledge agreed. After two interviews, he received a formal invitation by email from the government. The interviewers had described the workshop as balanced and collaborative, with decisions drawn from a "consensus of interests."

The decision to graze commercial bison on public lands under grazing disposition had already been made by a multi-stakeholder committee in 2001. It was enshrined in the Public Lands Act in 2003 (see *W/LA* April 2003). The Bison Confinement/Wildlife Permeability Workshop was convened to determine how to fence these public lands to keep the privately owned bison from escaping but allow wildlife to pass through.

Two days later, Dr. Cormack Gates, a recognized expert in bison ecology and management at the University of Calgary, and a member of various national and international bison committees, phoned Rowledge and told him that the bison producers didn't want him to attend the workshop. If Rowledge wasn't willing to back out, the workshop would be cancelled. Gates said the producers had given no specific reasons for disqualifying Rowledge, they just complained that he was a well-known opponent of the commercialization of wildlife.

"That complaint," remarked Rowledge, "would disqualify virtually every wildlife scientist on the planet." He condemned the attempt to impose "consensus by exclusion."

The Alberta Fish and Game Association advocates against game farming. In 2001 they recommended against bison grazing on public land because fences would exclude wildlife and the public, fail to contain bison completely, and escaped domestic bison would cause serious problems. Yet they were not excluded from the workshop.





Tom Olson, a lawyer, owner of several bison ranches in southern Alberta, and president of the Alberta Bison Association is being taken to court by the Nature Conservancy for violating a conservation easement on a property he purchased from them and adjacent public leased land. He erected wildlife impermeable fencing and refuses to take it down. He was not excluded from the workshop either.

Rowledge refused to withdraw from the workshop. He had consulted several scientists regarding the issue of fencing: Dr. Vince Crichton, Manitoba government Senior Scientist of Wildlife and Ecosystem Protection; Dr. Val Geist, internationally know wildlife scientist; Dr. Bill Samuel, Associate Dean at the University of Alberta; Dr. Steve Torbit of the National Wildlife Federation; and Dr. Paul Paquet, a Saskatchewan-based ecologist.

While these scientists supported improving wildlife permeable fencing design in general and provided Rowledge with good background information for the workshop, they expressed serious reservations about the wisdom of allowing or encouraging commercial bison on public land. They also told Rowledge he must attend the workshop.

Then John Laarhuis, from Sustainable Resource Development' s (SRD) Range Management Branch, threatened to dis-invite Rowledge if he refused to commit his comments exclusively to the narrow issue of fences. Rowledge made it clear that denying participants the ability to establish accurate and validating context, in any process, was untenable, unscientific and undemocratic. He offered to restrict the bulk of his comments in the workshop to the fencing issue, if he could include a simple caveat for the public record.

The caveat stated that although there may be merit in improving fencing guidelines to allow wildlife permeability, wildlife scientists, resource economists, wildlife and conservation organizations and the general public maintained serious reservations about the wisdom of allowing commercial bison on public lands grazing dispositions. Furthermore, support for such a policy must not be construed from stakeholder participation to achieve or endorse an improved fencing design.

Laarhuis was also unhappy that Gates had made Rowledge aware of the bison producers' prejudice, which he had attempted to deny. Then he claimed that their concerns had been met and the dis-invitation had only to do with Rowledge' s disagreement with the policy of commercial bison on public land.

Keith Lyseng, SRD' s executive director of range management, sent Rowledge an email stating he was retracting his invitation " as bison grazing on public land is not the workshop topic."

Gates says that workshop organizers were looking for " collaborators," and Rowledge apparently didn' t fit their definition. But Rowledge points out that all those who wanted him to withdraw were attempting to skew the " collaborative process."

John Ralston Saul has pointed out that multi-stakeholder processes are by nature exclusionary. They are certainly political. Yet they have become a popular method governments use to increase public input into their decision-making processes.

The stakeholder process, says Rowledge, only works if it' s a truly balanced and legitimate public process, with everyone contributing rational analyses and committing to full disclosure. Instead, in Alberta stakeholders are encouraged to come to the table with their wish lists and provide anecdotes instead of science.

The government told Rowledge that they had done no comprehensive environmental or economic analyses to determine whether bison grazing on public land will offer any net benefit. The fencing issue seems to be faring somewhat better, but it' s less political.





“If you don’t do rational analyses,” says Rowledge, “don’t be surprised if you end up with irrational public policy.”

AWA past-president, Cliff Wallis, says the government needs to do broad public consultation before making a significant shift in public policy. Wildlife scientist Brian Horejsi believes that every significant issue should go to public hearings, so that everyone has a chance to express their views. The current process is corrupt, undemocratic and unfair, he says.

“You’re not doing anyone favours when you take part in these kinds of processes because they’re designed specifically to defeat the public interest.”

Bison Grazing on Public Land

Is allowing commercial bison to graze on public land a good idea?

The bison producers think so. Olson says grazing commercial bison on public land is their way of being environmentally responsible because it will help restore the natural grasslands (*Calgary Herald*, May 29/05).

The government thinks so. They say bison grazing on public land is based on their integrated resource management philosophy. SRD spokesperson Dave Ealey said the debate on this issue is over and the regulations are being fine-tuned to make sure best practices, and public safety (which generally means denying public access) and environmental concerns are in place (*Calgary Herald*, May 8/05). They plan to “limit the consequences and effectively mitigate the risks of disease transmission from wild to domestic bison” by not allowing bison grazing in northern Alberta, but they are leaving the southern grasslands wide open.

But many conservationists and wildlife scientists don’t think it’s a good idea. “It’s a harebrained idea that’s being put forward by people who haven’t done their homework,” says Geist decisively (*Calgary Herald*, May 8/05). Rowledge says the bison producers are trying to disguise their profit-based agenda by using all the conservation-based arguments for wild bison restoration. None of them can reconcile the disconnect between commercialized bison and the wild genome, he says.

Bison are considered superior to cattle in self-sufficiency. They digest forage more efficiently, gain weight on lower quality feed, and have a strong immune system. Their pelvis is better designed for walking than cattle, so they will graze further from water sources, resulting in less destruction of riparian areas. They eat primarily grasses, giving forbs more opportunity to survive, and therefore contributing to greater biodiversity.

But there are several problems with grazing commercial bison on public land. Commercial bison must be contained by fencing in relatively small pastures, which doesn’t mimic the natural grazing pattern of free-ranging bison, and may not mesh with wildlife users of the same land and vegetation.

It is uncertain how genetic changes by domestication or hybridization with cattle will affect grazing behaviour. Wallis says it just muddies the water to add another user with so many unknowns. He thinks it’s unlikely bison grazing will be much of an improvement over cattle grazing if better management practices are not followed.

If these bison are placed on public lands, he asks, what lands will be available for wild bison recovery? Although bison-proof, wildlife permeable fences are in the works, many believe domestic bison will inevitably escape and likely contaminate wild bison populations.





“ If bison in adjoining pastures make up their minds that they want in with the other herd, practically no fence will keep them apart,” writes USDA’ s Kristin Miller (Center for Grassland Studies Newsletter, Winter 2003).

Making Bessies Out of Bison

There are other ways to destroy a species besides simple slaughter. Threats to bison as a wild species, wrote Delaney Boyd in her 2003 University of Calgary master’ s thesis on bison conservation, include: loss of habitat due to agricultural and other land development, reduction of genetic diversity, hybridization, domestication, disease, inconsistent legislation and policies.

Privatization, commercialization, and domestication of bison have a long history, but the concerns are the same as for other game-farmed species—threats of disease, parasites, habitat fragmentation, and genetic pollution.

The push to make wildlife part of the agricultural enterprise, which requires the private ownership and a market in dead wildlife, is in direct opposition to the principles of wildlife conservation, writes Geist in his book, *Buffalo Nation*. “ A wildlife farming industry bodes no good for native wildlife populations and poses a perpetual risk to their survival.”

Boyd pointed out that experience with animals like cattle shows that recovery of original genetic diversity is virtually impossible once domestic breeds are highly selected for specific traits and wild stocks are extinct. She suggested it would be of advantage to commercial producers to help maintain wild bison herds so that the genome will be available for their future use.

“ Bison ranching is not conservation,” wrote Geist; “ it is domestication, the deliberate or inadvertent alteration of bison to make them tractable and a source of products desired by their owner or the marketplace.”

The issue of large numbers of bison in private ownership seems to stymie people trying to restore wild, genetically pure bison. There seems to be little hope in getting rid of an industry so favoured by the government. Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada supports bison ranching as an important diversification of the livestock industry. It claims the bison industry not only contributes to genetic health but also sustainable land management with some cultivated land converted back to forage and the preservation of native pasture lands.

But Geist is unequivocal. “ If bison are to survive in the future, conservation must focus on the long-term maintenance of public bison on public land by public institutions and find a way to deal with agricultural bureaucracies and their call for the destruction of wildlife under the banner of ‘ progress’ .”

“ Conservation aims both to prevent species extinction and retain adaptive variation within a species,” he said. Diversity requires normal ecological conditions, conditions that continually challenge the species, such as native climates and vegetation, predators, and freedom. In captivity, selection favours individuals that adapt to captivity.

“ Large herds on large tracts of land and little hindered by fences are more likely to remain close to the native genotype of bison, while small herd closely managed and in contact with humans are likely to be more altered by domestication and inbreeding.”





Bison, he noted, have evolved to be long-distance runners, known for their speed and endurance, to escape predators. A bison' s hump, for example, allows it to extend its stride with the front legs, and the longer the stride, the faster the bison.

“ Commercialization is the single greatest threat to the genome,” says Rowledge. With ease of handling and efficient, marketable meat production as goals, bison producers are intent on turning the majestic bison into hump-less, short-legged, fat-assed, docile non-jumpers. Selection for hunting trophies will also occur.

In *Buffalo Nation*, Geist notes that bison were the only large grazing herbivores left after the extinctions at the end of the Ice Age. Populations were kept in check by predation by native North Americans until the 1600s. The coming of the Europeans brought diseases which wiped out many of the native peoples. This allowed many wildlife populations to expand their numbers and territories. Bison expanded east of the Mississippi and the great herds noted by explorers of the 1800s were born.

In his book, *Buffalo: Sacred and Sacrificed*, Grant MacEwan tells of an Assiniboine Elder who said that these newcomers “ would show no conscience in destroying buffalo, birds, fish, soil fertility, fur-bearing animals and even good scenery if there was money to be had.”

It took less than 20 years in the 1800s to reduce the massive bison herds to near extinction by mass slaughter, largely due to politics (specifically the goal of eliminating the resistance of native Americans by eliminating their food supply), commercialization (hunting safaris, hunting competitions, and markets for bison products, particularly tongues and hides), and the sheer entertainment of killing. Even after the bison had disappeared, there was a market for bones left scattered on the prairie, until they too disappeared after a decade.

“ These great, noble North Americans,” wrote MacEwan, “ which had withstood 10,000 years of droughts, floods, natural enemies, famine, disease, extremes of winter cold and summer heat, blizzards, fires and a lot more,” could not withstand the greed, guns, politics or economics of the new westerners.

Yet hunting did not end. Although banned in 1883, it was revived in the Northwest Territories in 1959 until an outbreak of anthrax in 1962. But hunting returned on game farms, licences for which were initially handed out in the early 1980s. Alberta allows penned hunting of commercial bison.

In Canada, initial attempts to domesticate bison and breed them with cattle in the early 1800s met with little success. In 1916, cattlemen began a “ cattalo” project, crossing cattle with bison, hoping to increase the efficiency of beef production. The experiment at Manyberries ended in 1964, with the cattalo shipped off to market, “ ending very much like other buffalo chapters, in extermination, one way or another,” remarked MacEwan.

Prior to 1951 there were no privately owned herds of bison in Alberta because it was contrary to the Game Act. But that year, Fred C. Burton bought surplus animals from the Manyberries Range Experiment Station that had been shipped to auction to be sold for meat, and brought them back to his ranch in southwestern Alberta. A subsequent court challenge ruled in favour of Burton, who was allowed to keep the private stock. From then on private herds proliferated and a market in bison products grew.

In 1967, in celebration of Canada' s centenary, the government proposed testing a small herd of bison for suitability on a ranch. They noted that the idea of bison ranching had been around for years but had met stiff resistance until now, notably in Alberta, which was opposed to wild species in captivity at the time. The Alberta Game Act designated bison as big game animals that could only be kept legally in captivity in licensed game farms, which required 160 acres of land and a suitable environment.





When the Alberta government legalized game farming in the late 1980s, it promised that game farms would not be allowed to expand onto public land. Only livestock, defined as cattle, horses and sheep, were allowed on grazing dispositions. From the 1990s to the present the government authorized some 50 pilot projects for bison grazing on public lands, even though there were no regulations in place; that number was halved with the downturn in the market due to mad cow disease. Plains bison are excluded as wildlife from current legislation, and individuals from private herds are no longer considered wild. The Agricultural Lease Review of 1998 pointed out that grazing dispositions with bison often resulted in exclusion of multiple uses, notably public access, and the fencing required to contain bison restricted wildlife movement.

This led to the formation of a 2001 multi-stakeholder committee to review bison grazing on public land that included the Alberta Bison Association, Alberta Beef Producers, Alberta Association of Municipal Districts and Counties, Peace Country Bison Association, Alberta Grazing Leaseholders Association, Alberta Chapter of the Wildlife Society, Federation of Alberta Naturalists, and Alberta Fish and Game Association, with support from government staff and the University of Calgary.

Not everyone was happy with the recommendations, but the main goal of getting legislation allowing grazing of bison on public land was achieved in 2003.

Saving Wild Bison

Most bison today live in managed herds. But in May 2004, 50 bison from Elk Island National Park, deemed to be disease-free and genetically pure, were let loose in the 5,300 hectare Old Man on His Back Prairie and Heritage Conservation Area, jointly owned by the Nature Conservancy and the Saskatchewan Government. It was considered an historic occasion to see these bison freely roaming native prairie again. Well, almost freely, it took three years to fence the land.

North America' s Northern High Plains is one of the most threatened ecosystems in the world. The World Wildlife Fund, the Northern Plains Conservation Network, and other groups are working to restore native prairie ecosystems and bison restoration is an important part of these initiatives.

“ We need to start seeing bison as wildlife again,” says Gates.

According to Boyd, of the approximately half a million bison in North America, at least 95% are under commercial production. There are about 230,000 commercial bison in Canada and 1900 producers. Of more than 19,000 plains bison in conservation herds (public herds and private herds managed for conservation purposes), less than half are free-ranging. There are only 1300 free-ranging, disease-free bison within their original range. Of these, only about half are not subject to regular handling.

In 2004 COSEWIC listed the plains bison as threatened. However, in May 2005 federal environment minister, Stephane Dion, failed to add plains bison to the list of species protected under the Species at Risk Act (SARA).

“ Canada' s refusal to list plains bison under SARA limits the ability to use this keystone species in recovery efforts and will also hamper recovery plans for several other species at risk,” says Wallis. “ The Minister should have accepted COSEWIC' s recommendation.”

The minister' s primary reason was the difficulty of distinguishing domestic from wild bison. Wallis says that it is important to distinguish, not domestic from wild bison, but genetically pure from hybrid bison, which is not a problem with current testing methods.

The minister' s second reason was the potential economic implications for the Canadian bison industry.





“ This is the sort of political interference in listing species at risk that AWA was most concerned with when we commented on drafts of SARA,” says Wallis. “ The Minister has chosen to listen to the concerns of a handful of bison producers over the thousands of Canadians who want to see wild bison back in the prairies.” The decision, says Wallis, panders to the decades of unsustainable agricultural land use in Canada’ s threatened grassland region.

Commercial interests have to stand out of the way and allow space to put wild bison back onto public lands, says Wallis. “ We could probably bring the bison producers on side, but I think that their judgment is clouded, and the way they’ ve attacked this tells me that they’ re not there in good will. If you read their vision statement, not one of their goals applies to natural ecosystems and getting wild bison back in there. In fact, they don’ t even address the genetic issue.”

However, Wallis is pleased the minister has not closed the door on the listing, just putting it on hold and studying it further, and that he’ s continuing to work with the public on wild bison recovery plans. “ We are committed to working with the minister to find a path forward on this issue” and to securing a listing under SARA for plains bison, he says.

“ The buffalo is the true American hero, a symbol of freedom and strength,” says Dan Thiel, owner of the Terry Ranch in Colorado and Wyoming. “ People look at the buffalo as a survivor.”

Hopefully, the main survivor in the future is the wild bison and not domestic Bessie.

