

# An Ecologist's Optimism On the Proposed Introduction of Bison to Banff National Park

By Dennis Jorgensen, Vice-Chair IUCN North American Bison Specialist Group



In a time in which the greatest challenge to conservation is the 6th mass extinction in the history of life on Earth, I'm surprised when some dedicated conservationists argue that a native species should not be reintroduced because they would thrive and proliferate to the point of requiring management to regulate their abundance. As someone who works to conserve and restore species, if I could have my choice of wildlife management problems, it would be this one: successfully reintroducing a species to the point where we must manage their numbers to limit their abundance. What a rare and wonderful problem to have in an era where we fight daily just to hold onto the incredible diversity of species that time and evolution have yielded. Despite the century-long absence of bison managed as wildlife in the greater Banff ecosystem, bison were once one of the most widespread large mammals in the history of North America. To suggest, as Dr. Carbyn did, that they would now be an invasive species is just plain wrong in my opinion. It amounts to blaming bison for being the last of North America's large ungulates to

be the focus of such restoration efforts.

The near extermination of the North American bison in the late 1800s was a concerted effort to eliminate the species for political and economic gain. It reduced a species that once numbered tens of millions of animals to an estimated 1,000 Wood and Plains bison in North America in 1886. Today, one might ask "why do bison need to be restored anywhere" when bison now appear ubiquitous in North America as a result of the rise of the bison livestock industry. This industry has increased bison numbers to approximately half a million in North America. However, wild Plains bison that exist with a mandate to be managed as wildlife in North America number only 20,000 animals in 62 herds. Seventy-five percent of those herds consist of fewer than 400 individuals; one-third have fewer than 50 members.

The American Bison Society, established in 1905 by Theodore Roosevelt and William Temple Hornaday, felt their job was done and that recovery was achieved by the 1930s when 20,000 Plains bison were being managed as wildlife. This Society represented the birth of the modern

species conservation movement and was a success by most measures of that era. However, the modern science of genetics has revealed that the predominantly small bison populations in North America have steadily lost genetic diversity and, therefore, species health and resilience. In order to secure the recovery of the species as wildlife there is a need to identify sites of sufficient scale to restore bison populations to more than 400 adult bison and, preferably, more than 1,000 adults.

Establishing several large herds of bison to secure the recovery of the species might sound easy given that today the grasslands of North America support approximately 89 million cows managed as livestock. Surely, there is enough grass to go around to establish sufficiently large herds of wild bison to secure their recovery. However, the very success of the livestock industry in replacing bison with cows and becoming the dominant land use on grasslands throughout North America, is the reason it has become difficult to identify sites where there is a willingness to consider "tolerating" the reintroduction of bison. In most cases, in most places, the discussion is a non-starter and it's absolutely necessary to consider other alternatives.

Generally speaking there are two alternatives that become immediately apparent for future bison restoration efforts: National Parks and protected areas located within the historic range of Plains bison, and tribal lands where Aboriginal communities embrace bison as central to their culture and future prosperity. National Parks have both a role and a responsibility to assess



Bison in Custer State Park, South Dakota. PHOTO: © CHARLES R. PETERSON

the critical part they can play in conserving and restoring species that once existed within their boundaries. Despite the challenges and, in some cases, the controversy associated with the management of a species like bison, conservationists prize National Parks for their goal and mandate of being a haven for wildlife species to exist.

There are many proponents in the community of Banff of restoring bison to the landscape. Such an expression of local support is a rare situation among prospective restoration sites in North America and I believe this opportunity must be seized. Reintroducing bison to Banff National Park won't exclude opponents or ignore practical questions of wildlife management. This process would benefit from a community consisting of proponents and opponents and creates fertile ground for a balanced discussion in which actual costs and challenges will be considered.

Both proponents and opponents must be realistic. They should acknowledge that management will be a necessary compo-

ment of a bison reintroduction and that success will eventually require culling, the potential for strategically erected fences, and the establishment of agreements with adjacent landowners and managers regarding steps that will be taken if bison leave the boundaries of the park. There was a time when National Parks were considered islands of conservation within a sea of alternative land uses, but we have entered an era in which it is increasingly recognized that the success of conservation rests upon community-based conservation efforts in which neighbours are viewed as partners in gauging and managing challenges and success.

As a Calgarian working towards the recovery of bison as wildlife in the United States, I believe it is important for AWA members and their fellow Canadians to recognize just how rare and pivotal the decision to restore bison in Banff could be for the future recovery and health of the species and the ecosystem. For conservationists to suggest that National Parks, one

of the last refuges for new and significant progress in the recovery of bison, should refuse them is troubling and difficult to reconcile with the hope and inspiration that success in such an endeavour could hold for the conservation movement as a whole. Living near Yellowstone National Park I recognize that the remarkable success of bison recovery in the park has contributed to daunting management challenges. But I can also attest to the fact that it has produced one of the greatest wildlife spectacles in the world. Bison restoration in Yellowstone serves to demonstrate the value of conservation to millions of people each year and develops new advocates who might not otherwise give conservation a second thought. That's why this ecologist is optimistic about the proposal to reintroduce bison to Banff National Park. ↗

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Bison Crossing the Lamar River, Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming. PHOTO: © CHARLES R. PETERSON