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Spring 2001

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Torbit, Stephen and LaRose, Louis, "A Commentary on Bison and Cultural Restoration: Partnership Between the National Wildlife Federation and the Intertribal Bison Cooperative" (2001). *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*. 539.  
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**A COMMENTARY ON BISON AND CULTURAL  
RESTORATION: PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN THE  
NATIONAL WILDLIFE FEDERATION AND THE  
INTERTRIBAL BISON COOPERATIVE**

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**Summary**

In January 1997 the National Wildlife Federation and the InterTribal Bison Cooperative signed a memorandum of understanding formally recognizing our common goals of ending the slaughter of Yellowstone bison and working to repatriate buffalo to Native American reservations. It was the first time a formal relationship had ever been established between Native Americans and a national conservation organization. The partnership had two goals. The first goal was to reestablish management of North American bison as one of the premier wildlife species of the West, by restoring bison to those tribal and public land habitats capable of supporting their long-term survival. The second goal was to enhance the availability of wild bison to Native Americans for cultural and subsistence uses. Our partnership has been a rallying point for bison advocates and illustrates the importance of repatriating bison to tribal lands.

The partnership also presented opportunities for Native Americans to demonstrate their management capabilities and to affirm the importance of bison to the health of Indian people and the vitality of their culture. Our work together has opened up many new conservation avenues. One example

is the National Wildlife Federation's recent involvement with the newly established InterTribal Prairie Ecosystem Restoration Consortium, assisting with the development of prairie dog management plans on Indian reservations. Here we summarize the results of our partnership and look to the future of conservation and restoration of natural resources on tribal lands.

### **Introduction and History**

During the harsh winter of 1996-97, deep snow and a crust of ice forced hundreds of bison (*Bison bison bison*) to migrate west and north from Yellowstone National Park into the state of Montana. Under Montana statute, these bison are managed under the jurisdiction of the Montana Department of Livestock because they have been exposed to brucellosis (Keiter 1997). Brucellosis, a disease caused by the bacterium *Brucella abortus*, is localized in reproductive tissues and usually causes a pregnant female bovid to abort her first fetus after infection (Cheville et al. 1998 ). The Animal Plant Health Inspection Service of the US Department of Agriculture, in cooperation with state veterinarians, regulates management of the disease in cattle and other livestock. USDA's management can include imposing movement restrictions at state lines if an outbreak among cattle has been documented. Montana implemented a zero tolerance policy for any bison migrating from Yellowstone, and by winter's end 1,052 bison had been shot or sent to slaughter.

In mid-1996 the InterTribal Bison Cooperative and the National Wildlife Federation began discussing the threats to Yellowstone's bison from the brucellosis exposure and from the regulation of a wildlife species by agricultural agencies. Ultimately, the two groups formulated a memorandum of understanding describing their shared views regarding bison. This document outlined their concerns, provided their perspective, publicized the slaughter to the American public, and presented a commonsense wildlife management system for bison. The memorandum argued that bison should be managed by professional wildlife biologists under the authorities of wildlife agencies and that animals should be managed to minimize the likelihood of brucellosis transmission rather than eliminating bison that wandered out of the park. Both groups agreed that certified healthy bison migrating outside Yellowstone should be made available to the InterTribal Bison Cooperative for repatriation to tribal lands. The ultimate goal was a public-to-tribal transfer of Yellowstone bison and then a tribal-to-public transfer of healthy bison to reestablish wild bison on public lands. The

National Wildlife Federation and the InterTribal Bison Cooperative jointly recognized bison as central to the culture and spirituality of many North American tribes, and concluded that bison should not be exterminated as a matter of convenience (National Wildlife Federation 1997). The timing of the memorandum of understanding was serendipitous, for the slaughter of 1996–97 was just beginning. Both groups were soon involved in the public advocacy process to effect better and more culturally responsible management for the Yellowstone bison herd.

The first step was for the InterTribal Bison Cooperative and the National Wildlife Federation to develop their own management plan for the Yellowstone bison herd. This alternative has become known as the Seven-Point Plan. The first objective of the plan was to establish a bison health certification center. The second objective was to scientifically manage the Yellowstone bison population through tribal relocation and managed harvest. The third objective was to acquire additional winter ranges and key migration routes outside Yellowstone National Park. The fourth objective was to adjust cattle grazing times and patterns on public lands bordering Yellowstone National Park. The fifth objective was to ensure cattle vaccination on a consistent and routine basis. The sixth objective was to evaluate winter management of Yellowstone's roads. Finally, the last objective was to develop a bison vaccination program inside Yellowstone. To provide momentum to the cattle vaccination provisions, the National Wildlife Federation offered in May 1999 to reimburse Montana ranchers in the conflict zone for the costs of vaccinating their cattle. The program offered to reimburse ranchers for vaccinating their cattle twice, as a calf and as a yearling heifer. Unfortunately, no cattle producers inquired about, or enrolled in, this reimbursement program.

In addition, both groups began to build support for this alternative to the options in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the Interagency Bison Management Plan for the State of Montana and Yellowstone National Park (National Park Service et al. 1998). We jointly operated an information booth inside Yellowstone National Park during the summers of 1997 to 1999, under a "First Amendment Permit" issued by the National Park Service. The purpose was to educate park visitors about the brucellosis issue, the management options in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement, the concerns of Native Americans, and our alternative management plan. We asked visitors if they wished to comment on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement. We then offered to forward their comments to governmental officials as formal public comments. Eventually, other conservation

groups joined our efforts and the name of the alternative plan was changed to the "Citizens' Plan" (National Park Service et al. 1999). The InterTribal Bison Cooperative and the National Wildlife Federation also attended all of the public hearings on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement to provide comment for the public record. Both groups reached out to their constituents and asked them to participate in the public process.

### **Outcome of the Public Comment**

Our efforts were successful in generating support for the Citizens' Plan during the public comment process. The National Park Service received a total of 67,250 individual comment documents (National Park Service et al. 1999). Comments were received from all 50 states and more than 50 foreign countries (Table 1). A total of 47,599 comments were received in support of the Citizens' Plan and over 25,000 comments were received in opposition to the Draft Environmental Impact Statement Preferred Alternative (National Park Service et al. 1999). In total, the partnership was responsible for generating over 45,000 of the comments, including a total of 715 comments originating from Indian people.

The results suggest the public rejected the government's proposal for management of the Yellowstone bison herd and supported the Citizens' Plan (Fig. 1). This endorsement has implications beyond presenting a more rational approach to managing this bison herd. A foundation has been built for reestablishing bison as a wildlife species and restoring wild bison in appropriate habitats on public lands across the western United States. The outcome also asserts the role of Indian people as advocates for bison nationally and internationally.

### **Future Directions for Research**

Current trends suggest avenues for future development and research. For example, at the Winnebago Reservation in Nebraska, buffalo restoration has resulted in the replacement of highly processed foods by meat from grass-fed buffalo and other native foods. The goal of the Winnebago Diabetes Project is to return to native diets as a method to combat diabetes among the Winnebago. It is believed that the lower-fat, lower-cholesterol buffalo meat will mean healthier tribal people as it replaces beef and other nonnative foods. Also, at the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation in South Dakota, buffalo restoration has grown within the reservation boundaries. Internal

TABLE 1

**GEOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC COMMENT ON THE INTERAGENCY  
BISON MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR THE STATE OF MONTANA AND  
YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK**

Number of Commenters by Country

Canada	370
United States	63,136
Mexico	2
Guatemala	10
Bahamas	2
Dominican Republic	1
Puerto Rico	10
Brazil	3
Bolivia	3
Argentina	2
Ireland	10
England	438
Norway	6
Sweden	13
Finland	4
The Netherlands	228
Belgium	319
Luxembourg	4
Denmark	15
Germany	553
France	195
Austria	38
Switzerland	954
Italy	728
Spain	36
Andorra	3
Portugal	1
Estonia	3
Latvia	1
Poland	33

Czech Republic	17
Slovakia	1
Hungary	5
Greece	1
Turkey	2
Syria	1
Lebanon	1
Israel	44
Saudi Arabia	1
Russia	1
China	6
Nepal	1
India	8
Japan	29
Taiwan	6
Phillippines	1
Thailand	2
Singapore	6
Indonesia	1
Guam	1
Australia	89
New Zealand	28
Morocco	1
Tunisia	1
Nigeria	1
Zambia	2
Tanzania	1
Swaziland	1

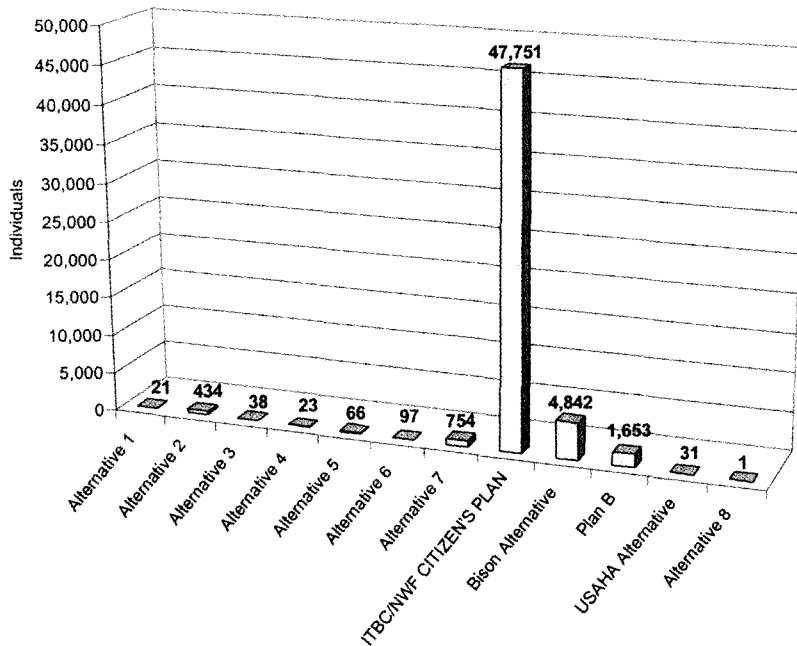


Figure 1. Public support was overwhelming for the bison management plan of the InterTribal Bison Cooperative and National Wildlife Federation partnership. Of all bison management alternatives presented, 85.7% of the public who commented favored the ITBC/NWF Citizen's Plan.

nontribal ranching corporation lands are being bought and restored for buffalo habitat. There is hope at Cheyenne River for the establishment of the Cheyenne River Sioux National Park (DuBray 1998, personal communication) and the restoration of native plants and animals, including bison, on the reservation, thereby restoring the Lakota culture. And, on the Fort Belknap Reservation in Montana, a growing buffalo herd shares its habitat with black-tailed prairie dogs (*Cynomys ludovicianus*), burrowing owls (*Athene cunicularia*), and mountain plovers (*Charadrius montanus*), wildlife species present on the prairies before the European influx (Fox 1998, personal communication). These species are in decline, and two are proposed for listing under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended. The Fort Belknap Tribes allowed the black-footed ferret (*Mustela nigripes*), one of the rarest mammals on the North American continent, to be reintro-

duced to their lands in 1997. The Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe has finalized federal rules allowing black-footed ferrets to be reintroduced, and ferrets were returned to Cheyenne River in the fall of 2000. Thus, opportunities to improve our understanding of prairie restoration are enhanced by this movement.

Significant potential exists on prairie Native American reservations for ecological and sociological research. Tribal lands offer large acreages of relatively intact grasslands occupied by a nearly complete array of prairie wildlife. Research investigating the ecological interactions of multiple prairie species could occur on a scale not available elsewhere. Opportunities exist to discern more completely the interactions of large and small herbivores on both mixed-grass and shortgrass prairies. The consequences of sympatric grazing by both bison and prairie dogs on prairie dogs, black-footed ferrets, and mountain plovers could be investigated. Management issues regarding invasive plant species and the restoration of prairie plants could be studied simultaneously. Finally, sociological researchers could monitor and evaluate the social response to changes aimed at reducing tribal diabetes through a bison-dominated diet, and developing and implementing tribal conservation efforts, including development of tribal parks. A significant social experiment will occur eventually when a tribal government seeks cooperation and approval of federal land managers for co-management of a tribal bison herd on public lands. As many reservations adjoin federal lands, inevitably a tribe will propose to a federal land agency that the tribal bison herd be allowed to roam freely between tribal and public land. The process and outcome will test our social commitment to cultural as well as ecological restoration.

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