

## To Protect Wild Buffalo: Remove MT DOL, Re-Imagine Co-Management & Remember Relationships

The Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem has within it over 10 million acres of public land. Approximately 2.2 million are Department of Interior, i.e. Yellowstone National Park, with another 8 million acres being Department of Agriculture, i.e. United States Forest Service (USFS). This public land belongs to you and me.

Remember, this public land belongs to you and me. Meaning, this public land belongs to the people of our United States federal government and the people of our sovereign tribal governments of North America.

The United States federal government via the USFS uses our tax money to build roads for the timber industry, so this industry can cut our trees down and sell them back to us at Home Depot. This corporate giveaway must stop. Our trees need to remain standing to produce oxygen and sequester carbon, curb the climate emergency, and preserve biodiversity.

Both the USFS and the Bureau of Land Management lease our grass to the agricultural industrial complex, a.k.a the livestock industry, at rates that haven't changed since 1978. For 45 years, the lease price for cows grazing public land has been \$1.35AUM (Animal Unit Month). Who wouldn't love to have this business deal handed to them? Furthermore, the livestock industry alone has the funds for equipment and staffing to fully exploit these deals. They alone can afford the vast numbers of livestock. No effort is made by the federal government to rectify these power disparities, and thus, Big Business is uniquely capable of exploiting these giveaways. This corporate handout must also stop.

We prefer to share our public land, its trees and its grass, with wildlife conservation efforts. We prefer to have Buffalo utilize our grass on our public lands rather than corporate cows.

Buffalo are arid grassland ecosystem ecological engineers, maintaining biological diversity and overall ecological health. As Robin Wall-Kimmerer, PhD Botany and Citizen of the Potawatomi Nation, writes, "When a herd of buffalo grazes down a sward of fresh grass, it actually grows faster in response. This helps the plant recover, but also invites the buffalo back for dinner later in the season. It's even been discovered that there is an enzyme in the saliva of grazing buffalo that actually stimulates grass growth. To say nothing of the fertilizer produced by a passing herd. Grass gives to buffalo and buffalo gives to grass". In doing so, more oxygen is produced and even more carbon is sequestered. This is a secret weapon for resolving the climate emergency.

In a recent Op-ed written by George Weurthner and entitled, *Tribes Shouldn't Be Given Control Over Yellowstone Bison*, Weurthner stoked fear by misrepresenting the nature of the ongoing conversation regarding tribal co-stewardship of Wild Yellowstone Buffalo.

Weurthner writes, “A press release from the Buffalo Field Campaign described a proposal for the tribes to develop a plan to assume ‘primary jurisdiction’ over Yellowstone National Park’s bison. The first question anyone should ask is why any group, especially one based on a racial preference, should be given control of public wildlife.”

Ironically, this is a question Buffalo Field Campaign has been demanding be rectified since our inception. Montana Code Annotated 81-2-120 handed the Montana Department of Livestock (MT DOL) “primary jurisdiction” over the Interagency Bison Management Plan, i.e. our public trust: Wild Migratory Buffalo. Of course, we know why the MT DOL was given preference and control of our public wildlife. It’s the same reason the USFS leases public land for pennies on the dollar to livestock and timber industries: money, profit, and finite power.

What first must be clarified is that the [BFC Press Release](#) clearly spells out the definition of “primary jurisdiction”:

“According to Nez Perce environmental scientist James Holt, the Executive Director of Buffalo Field Campaign, such an historic agreement between **sovereign nations working with federal stewards** would represent nothing less than the beginning of “true reparations” for the long-standing practice of cultural genocide, or ethnocide, that is still being perpetuated by the cattle industry to preserve their monopoly on public lands forage in the West.”

“There are only two sovereign powers that have authentic jurisdiction over America’s buffalo, **sovereign Tribes and the federal government.**”

“According to a recent article in the Wyoming Law Review, [‘Re-Indigenizing Yellowstone’](#), the Park Service has ample authority and every reason to enter into **co-management agreements with the Tribes to protect Yellowstone’s wildlife without regard to Park boundaries.**”

That’s it. Incorporation. Co-stewardship. Partnership with Indigenous People. Diversity. Equity. Inclusion.

Why exactly are Weurthner and polite (or not so polite), tired, antiquity, good-ol’-boy conservationists so afraid?

In 2016, after years of BFC advocacy, field patrol activity, outreach and partnership with the residents of the Horse Butte Village, then MT Governor Bullock designated the Horse Butte Peninsula, our public land, as year-round habitat for wild migratory Buffalo. The only year round habitat where wild Buffalo would be tolerated in the state of Montana. Wild Bison calving grounds. What a victory it was!

Then, this past field season, the USFS sold logging rights to Horse Butte. The old growth and exquisite home to wild Buffalo, trumpeter swans, sandhill cranes, moose, elk, deer, bald and golden eagles, and the list goes on, was surrendered to a private logging corporation. BFC

Advisory Board Member, former volunteer, and environmental lawyer stalled this decision in court for almost 3 years. The corporation won, the USFS sold it, and the Butte's forests were DECIMATED! Completely decimated. Huge old growth trees were blown down after whole forests were leveled. Large scars of logging roads dug in. Huge piles of slash left to rot and smother soil underneath. Horse Butte was the only place for wild bison outside of the park and this is how the USFS treats this unique and precious habitat...and our public lands.

And now, we, BFC, will have to file red-tape public records requests via the [Freedom of Information Act \(FOIA\)](#) and [apply massive pressure](#) to the North Hebgen District Ranger to demand that the USFS ensures the corporation begins restoration efforts, assuming that was part of the sale contract. BFC will have to FOIA for that as well. Why? BFC cares about the Buffalo and its habitat. And now, more habitat for a threatened and once nearly extinct species is ruined.



*Horse Butte Peninsula, our public lands, decimated by a USFS timber sale  
Drone footage courtesy of Nick DiPietro, BFC Intern, Summer 2023*

Weurthner continues to put his faith and support in the USFS to manage wild Buffalo, despite their actions in the only habitat for wild bison outside of the boundaries of Yellowstone National Park. Wuerthner says that the federal government, and the federal government alone, has good science and fair practices on their side. This when the National Park Service's best [alternative](#) offers only 3500-7000 Wild Buffalo, all contained inside Yellowstone National Park! The colonial wheel continues to spin.

Wuerthner goes on to mock Traditional Ecological Knowledge while defending his cronies and the status quo:

“Superstition and religion guided their relationship with buffalo, and hunting success would continue if one did the correct dance and followed the proper procedures.”

What self-important hubris, the variety reserved for the most hardened colonial mind. Ritual and ceremony are a way of life recognizing and respecting the connectedness of all things. No different than genuflection respected in other spiritual practices. It is with respect and humility that earth-based ancient cultures walk upon the earth and make spiritual connections with our 4-legged relatives, the Buffalo. Reciprocity, respect and humility are a life-way for indigenous cultures, not a gesture or empty genuflection. What have the colonizers given back to the Buffalo, what reciprocity? Eight million acres of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem outside the Park boundary is a good start.

Then we have the following statement which shows an adherence to an ancient colonial race-based "doctrine of discovery" that the Vatican themselves have abandoned:

“Regarding treaties, none of the tribes in the West has a legal right to hunt bison in Yellowstone. The so-called treaty rights are privileges in reality. Tribal advocates extract clauses from the treaties without providing the full context or legal decisions that refine the meaning of treaties.”

"Treaty rights are privileges" Hummm? Seems the author could also benefit from an elementary international and foreign policy course. The delusion here confuses white male privilege (usually considered a birthright) with legal government to government binding relationships.

The author appears frozen in a time of the polite racist–so-called, “liberal”–conservationists who founded the Sierra Club. At least, Aldo Leopold reversed his thinking somewhat. Those days have long passed, so too, the same tired race-based arguments. There is a solid framework of [context and legal discussion](#) to the contrary. The [invitation to 31 tribes](#) with ancestral ties to Greater Yellowstone spells out sovereign supremacy (federal and tribal).

Weurthner goes on to cite his own tripe published earlier in 2023 that merely expresses his opinion. He cites one legal review to hide behind while ignoring the volumes of Indian case law over the past 150 years. This, on top of a lack of any notions of forward thinking and a holistic approach to securing the ecological health of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem that tribes want to pursue, further demonstrate a myopic and outdated mindset.

“Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.”  
-Albert Einstein

The Last Wild Bison of Yellowstone belongs to all of us: U.S. Citizens, Sovereign Tribal Nations, and all Earth-lings! You're welcome to observe them and take pictures, from a distance of course, in Yellowstone National Park. You can even be upended by a Buffalo if you're among those inclined to get too close to a 1-ton wild animal. That is if one's prefrontal cortex and emotional center is now so disconnected from the natural world after 2,000 years of so-called

evolutionary progress that such a poor decision yields “natural consequences.” Heaven knows the reptile brain would never make such a choice.

We two-legged with our alleged logic and reason have unnaturally become damagingly disconnected from the natural world. We now see and believe that we are separate from the natural world rather than part of it. This disconnect has set us on a path to upend our own existence. The natural world is not a mere tool in our insatiable need for extraction and exploitation. Indigenous wisdom tells us we are a part of nature and with respect, harmony, balance, reciprocity and humility, we must live within the natural world. Any of our actions that ignore natural law leads to imbalance and the large-scale destruction we currently witness.

We see an opportunity to preserve biodiversity and, yes, help to reverse climate warming. Preserving and conserving America’s National Mammal, Wild Migratory Buffalo, is a strong step forward and it takes a diversity of thought and experience to achieve.

We are of a mind to have our Wild Free-Roaming Yellowstone Buffalo utilizing our entire 10 million acres in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem and eating our grass among our rooted live standing trees. This solution is pragmatic, moral, practical, socially beneficial and even romantic.

These holistic solutions are not new. Corporations, and most particularly the fossil fuel industry, have known this for decades. We have, in our heart of hearts, known this too, but feel helpless to change it. The challenge is to embrace change, to look for it all around us; in our local communities, in our national dialogues, in our global commitments. Biodiversity wins by embracing diversity. Let’s leave the past fear behind us and work together, with all people—especially Indigenous Nations—to honor and protect the sacredness of the Wild Buffalo.

**Buffalo Field Campaign’s Mission, written in 1996-97 and Co-founded by Rosalie Little Thunder, Sicangu Lakota Sioux & Mike Mease, Buffalo Warrior:**

To stop the harassment and slaughter of Yellowstone’s wild buffalo herds;  
protect the natural habitat of wild, free-roaming buffalo and other native wildlife;  
and work with all people—especially Indigenous Nations—to honor and protect the sacredness  
of the wild buffalo.

Onward...for the Buffalo,

Justine Sanchez, Buffalo Field Campaign Board President  
Dallas Gudgell, BFC Board Member, Yankton Dakota/Assiniboine Tribes, Montana