



Herd Mentality

*How has Utah managed to sustain
a wild herd of bison for over 50 years?*

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Utah proudly boasts that it manages the only wide-ranging, huntable population of bison in the lower 48. I know what you're thinking—Utah? Why Utah? It may lay claim to the best powder snow for skiing, but Montana is the state best-known for wildlife. Can it really be that Utah **is a step ahead of Montana when it comes to managing for all big-game animals?**

For a state whose motto is "Industry" and where public-land, big-game hunting is extremely limited, it seems an unlikely success. But it's true: Utah has something Montana doesn't.

At least at the moment. Montana's Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks has begun work on an environmental study and draft plan for managing bison as wildlife. Eastern Montana's million-acre Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge (CMR) has emerged as, perhaps, the best place to reestablish wild, free-ranging bison. At this point, the Department is merely investigating the possibility and implications. The question is, can bison be managed – somewhere in the state – as wildlife. If so, how?

And that brings us back to Utah.

In 1941, Utah's Carbon Emery Wildlife Federation, a local rod and gun club, worked with that state's Division of Wildlife **to introduce bison originating from Yellowstone National Park**. The original 18 bison were released near [Robbers Roost Ranch](#), which is north of the Dirty Devil River on the San Rafael Desert.

That effort to restore a herd of bison half a century ago has proved a tremendous success.

Today, nearly 300 bison roam in the area widely referred to as the [Henry Mountains](#), where they graze largely on Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands with **minimal conflict with private landowners**.

In 1962, brucellosis was detected in the Henry Mountains herd (then a population of 72 animals), most likely contracted from domestic cattle. The following year, 69 animals were captured, tested and inoculated. Animals suspected of brucellosis infection were marked and harvested by hunters. Utah proved decades ago that **the threat of disease can be managed**. Since 1963, animals have been tested yearly through hunter harvest and the herd has been certified brucellosis free. Proposals for restoring bison in Montana aim to prevent problems in the first place by using only certified disease-free bison to begin a new herd.

Because Utah's Henry Mountains bison herd lives primarily on BLM lands, domestic livestock graze the same landscape as bison. Although there is considerable overlap between the diets of livestock and bison, forage has been allocated through a [willing seller purchase of grazing rights](#) to reduce conflict between the species.

Wildlife biologists recognize the Henry Mountains herd as a key population in maintaining the bison genome. Geneticists and biologists have recommended, however, that the population have at least 430 individuals to maintain a viable population and minimize the negative effects of inbreeding.

The Henry Mountains offer the only truly fair-chase bison hunting opportunity in the lower 48. This once-in-a-lifetime opportunity provides a unique experience for sportsmen to pursue bison in a wild landscape. **Since 1950, nearly 2000 hunters have taken afield to pursue bison in the Henry Mountains.** Non-residents are offered 10% of the available permits. Conservation permits are also available and sold at auction to the highest bidder (namely by [Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife](#) to pay for elk feeding and other "conservation work"). All this hunting feeds families, contributes to the economy, and bolsters outdoor traditions and heritage.

If wild bison can thrive and be successfully managed in Utah, why not Montana? Indeed: If Utah can do it, Montana can do it. The Henry Mountains bison herd serves as a fine example for Montanans to follow. **For well over 50 years bison and cattle have coexisted in the Henry Mountains, creating tremendous public benefits and recreation opportunities** – all with little conflict or financial burden to the livestock industry.

Montana is only beginning to consider finding a home for wild bison. The process may take a year or more. Montana has a long record of basing wildlife management on good facts and the best science, and that takes time. But we don't have to reinvent the wheel here. When it comes to restoring bison, Utah has blazed a pretty clear trail.

This is Kit Fischer of the National Wildlife Federation in Missoula. Thanks for listening.