

Bringing Bison Back National Wildlife Federation's Vision to Restore Bison to Tribal Lands and Cultures

Millions of bison once roamed the continent in vast herds that blanketed the landscape. Bison were essential to a healthy ecosystem on the plains and grasslands and crucial to the vibrancy of hundreds of plant and animal species. Simultaneously, bison were vital to the well-being of Native Americans. While we cannot recreate those vast herds, we can bring bison back in large numbers.

The National Wildlife Federation envisions tens of thousands of bison on tribal and public lands across the West – restored as integral to the environment, to our history as Americans, and to Native American culture. [The American bison officially became the national mammal of the United States when President Obama signed the National Bison Legacy Act into law on May 9, 2016.](#) This majestic animal joins the beloved bald eagle as the official symbol of our country, and much like the eagle, it can be one of the greatest conservation success stories of all time.

Bison in Times Past

The American bison, often called buffalo, are an iconic American wildlife species. Bison are the largest terrestrial animal in North America and once dominated its grassland and prairie ecosystems. As great herds of bison grazed and moved across the land, they had myriad positive ecological impacts on the soil, water, and plant life of their grassland habitats and existed in synergy with diverse wildlife from birds to prey. When the first explorers came to the Great Plains, an estimated 30 to 60 million bison roamed the land. By the late-19th century, barely 1,000 bison could be found on the continent, with only a handful of wild bison left in the American West. In the early 1900s, fewer than 100 remained in the wild.



What happened to the bison? Even with speeds of over 30 miles an hour, bison could not outrun hunters. Bison were killed for food and their hides, but often they were killed in large numbers just for sport. Starting after the Civil War, bison were exterminated en masse for two reasons: to make way for farmland as people settled the Great Plains and to “subdue” Native Americans by eliminating their bison-reliant nomadic culture and forcing them onto reservations.

The 1900s brought a change of fortune to the bison. Conservationists, ranchers and land owners began to see the importance of the bison to the American west ecosystem and indigenous cultures. Bison were bred, protected on federal lands and brought back from the brink. Species recovery was greatly facilitated by the fact that Native Americans themselves had preserved bison on tribal lands, and those animals became the source for herds established in Yellowstone National Park and other refuges.

Tribal Connections

Tribal people historically have had deep ecological and spiritual connections to bison, which were central to the Native American nomadic way of life. NWF and the Tribes share a common aspiration of establishing herds of genetically pure wild bison across the West and restoring Native Americans' cultural connection to bison in a modern day context.

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For over two decades, NWF's Tribal Program has worked with Tribes to bring wild bison back to their lands and cultures and restore this iconic American species to its rightful home on the prairies. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, NWF became concerned about the lack of scientific management of Yellowstone's bison population, the last free-roaming wild herd in the U.S. In particular, NWF believed that Yellowstone bison offered a source to start new conservation herds, rather than see the bison shot or sent to slaughter when they migrated outside the Park.

In 1997, NWF signed a memorandum of understanding with the Intertribal Bison Cooperative (ITBC), the **first ever conservation agreement between an environmental organization and an intertribal group**, to advocate for the return of wild bison to tribal lands. NWF and ITBC proposed a common-sense solution to the decades old practice of shooting and slaughtering bison as they exited Yellowstone National Park – a pasture facility where buffalo could be rounded up (rather than shot), deemed healthy, and then made available for restoration to tribal and public lands.

As a result, in 2012, after 20 years of hard work and legal battles, NWF and our tribal partners succeeded in convincing the state of Montana to transfer 64 Yellowstone bison to the Fort Peck Tribes in Montana. The next fall, 34 of those Yellowstone bison were transferred to the Fort Belknap Tribes in Montana to start their own herd. Then, in another landmark victory in November 2014, we successfully transferred another 136 Yellowstone bison to Fort Peck.



The political opposition to the return of the bison seemed insurmountable, as bison were seen as a [threat to domestic livestock](#). Overcoming these challenges was a significant conservation milestone and opened the doors today to moving wild bison onto additional large landscapes.

Re-Envisioning Bison

NWF's partnerships with Tribes, and efforts to restore bison, are unique because of our long shared history in working on these issues. Partnerships with Tribes have encompassed proposing bison conservation strategies that make scientific and cultural sense, and facilitating tribal empowerment to lead on these conservation efforts. We have engaged in these partnerships for over 20 years, built the respect and relationships to make successful bison conservation possible, and share a long-term commitment to seeing thousands of bison brought back to tribal communities. It is now essential that NWF build on these past successes to imagine the next phase of bison preservation on tribal lands.

Imagine over 1,000 wild bison roaming hundreds of thousands of acres on the Wind River Reservation. Imagine these bison as free-roaming herds on tribal lands – reviving tribal culture and reinvesting in the tribal communities' connections to nature. Tens of thousands of bison can be restored to millions of acres of tribal and public lands in the next generation. Restoring a sizable herd on Wind River will be the first step towards achieving this vision. The Wind River Reservation has 2.4 million acres, much of which is prime bison habitat. In fact, the

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Reservation has more bison habitat for free-ranging bison than currently exists in Yellowstone National Park.

Investing in bringing bison back to tribal lands on the Wind River Reservation will help heal historic environmental and societal wounds from the absence of bison, revive tribal cultural and ecological connections to bison, and contribute to Native community health and economies. Americans have successfully recovered all of the large species – such as deer, bighorn sheep, moose, and pronghorn – that were decimated by overhunting, settlement, and other factors in the 19th and 20th centuries. Bison remain the one large ungulate (hoofed animal) species to be fully restored to our western landscapes, an effort we are fully capable of achieving, and tribal lands offer one of the best opportunities for recovery. By bringing bison back to Wind River, we will revitalize a landscape, a habitat, and a diversity of wildlife while also re-establishing Native Americans' cultural and historic connections to wildlife and the land. Bison restoration will ultimately foster a new conservation economy for Wind River – creating a nexus between cultural and historical revival and community vibrancy – that will help to alleviate some of the economic and social challenges that have faced the Tribes for decades.

Boy-zshan Bid-en: Bringing Back Bison

For the last few years, NWF has been working with the Eastern Shoshone Tribe of the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming to bring bison back to their lands. The Shoshone Tribe has initiated a bison restoration project, called Boy-zshan Bid-en (Buffalo Return), and set aside 300 acres as an initial site for bison. This site will transition to an adaptation area as more bison are released to additional habitat. We have begun to prepare the land to receive the buffalo and to develop plans to both add nearby property and increase the number of animals. The Shoshone Tribe is also exploring the concept of an ecotourism program and Visitor's Center to attract tourists on their way to Yellowstone. This Center could offer varied educational and experiential programming for tribal youth, tribal members, and the general public.



**The National Wildlife Federation Vision to Restore Bison Herds on Tribal Lands --
Priorities and Outcomes:**

- On tribal lands, promote incremental restoration and conservation of bison.
- Reestablish tribal members' cultural and environmental connections to bison.
- Promote environmental education to enable tribal youth to become conservation leaders and consider conservation and science careers.
- Establish bison conservation as a vehicle for new tribal economic development opportunities.

The National Wildlife Federation welcomes your partnership and investment fueling the vision to restore genetically pure bison on the Wind River Reservation. Estimated

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funding needed is \$1.5 million over 5 years:

- Establish and wildlife-friendly fence over 2,500 acres on the Wind River Reservation to receive transferred bison.
- Set aside 15,000 acres for free-ranging bison habitat on the Wind River Reservation over the next five years with the goal of 30,000 to 50,000 acres in the next decade.
- Restore and establish a herd of 300 bison over the next 5 years with the goal of restoring 1,000 bison within 10 years.
- Implement the Wind River bison management program, including hiring a full-time tribal bison manager and ensuring proper range, food, and water for the bison herd.
- Develop and implement a tribal youth and community education program on the cultural, historical, and ecological importance of bison.
- Establish a business plan to launch a bison ecotourism program with community education and tours for the public.

Bison Restoration Timeline

Year One:

- Erect wildlife-friendly fencing around the existing 300-acre bison habitat enclosure on the Wind River Reservation.
- Restore 25 bison to the Wind River Reservation.
- Convene 4 community informational meetings on the Wind River bison restoration program.
- Hold a bison restoration event, including media, when bison are released on the Wind River Reservation.
- Hire a buffalo manager for the Wind River Tribes.

Years Two - Five:

- Acquire and wildlife-friendly fence an additional 2,000 acres for bison habitat.
- Restore an additional 250 bison.
- Develop and begin implementing a plan for the setting aside of an additional 10,000 acres of bison habitat.
- Develop and implement a youth and community education program on the cultural, historical, and ecological importance of bison.
- Craft a business plan to address bison as a vehicle to build an ecotourism program.

Ten Year Vision and Beyond:

- Set aside a total of 50,000 to 100,000 acres for free-ranging bison habitat on the Wind River Reservation.
- Establish a herd of 1,000 bison.
- Fully implement a bison ecotourism program, including a visitors center and bison educational tours for the public.