

# Ecological and Cultural Recovery of the American Bison



Keith Aune  
Wildlife Conservation Society

Leroy Littlebear  
University of Lethbridge



# Historical Cultural Context



- As many as 40-60 million buffalo
- An iconic species that defined the West
- Widely Distributed-Mexico to Northern Canada
- Part of many tribal cultures
- The rapid decline of bison spawned the conservation movement in North America.





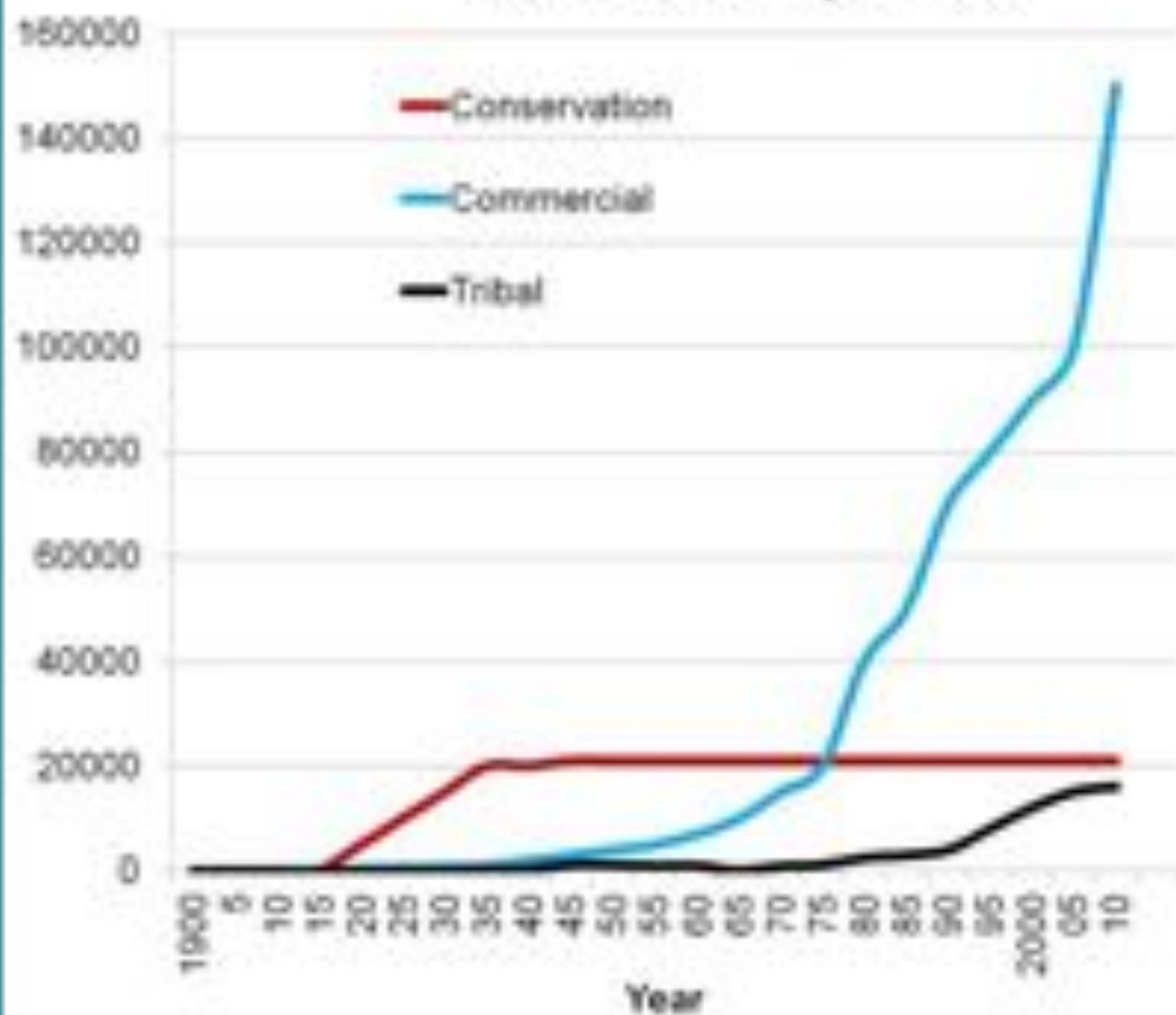
- Nearly extinct at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century
  - By 1889, 1091 bison were counted by WCS's first director-William T. Hornaday
- Saved in 5 captive herds and only 2 remaining free ranging bison herds.

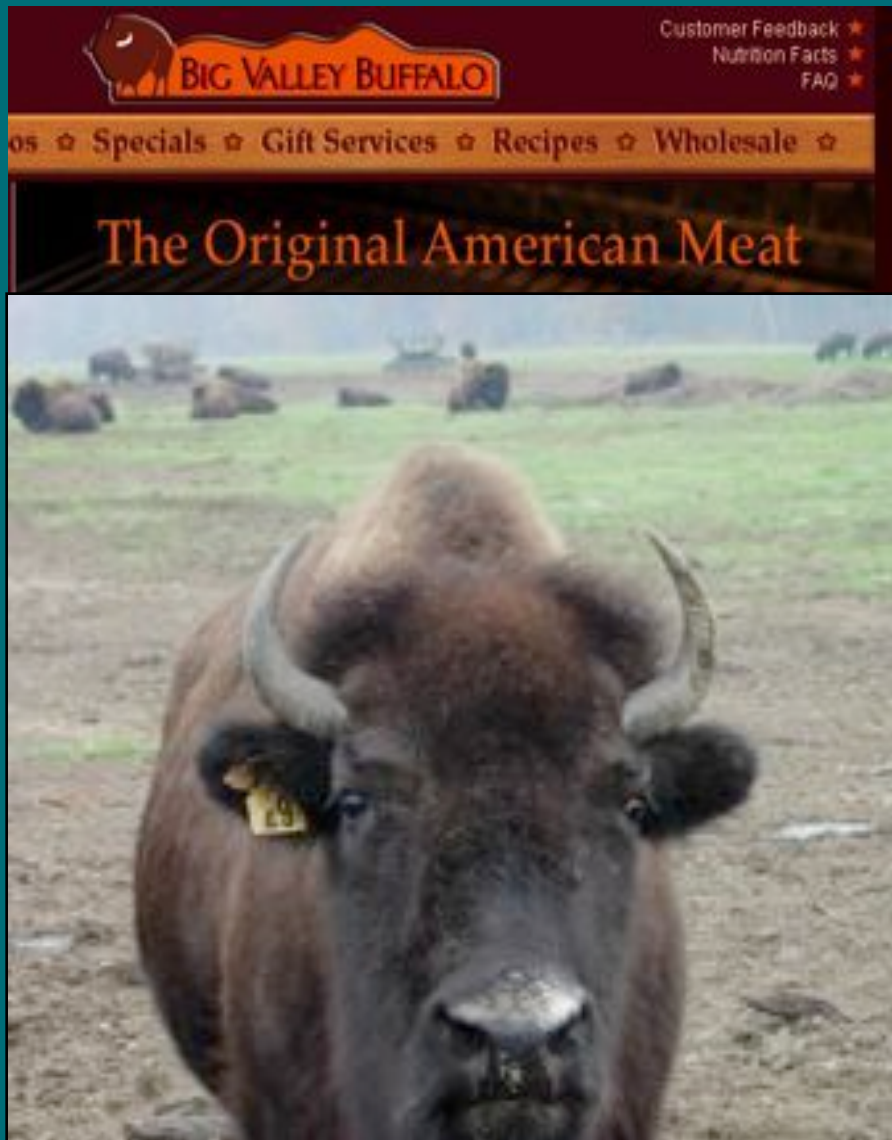




- 1905 The American Bison Society was Chartered
- First Recovery of Bison by the American Bison Society
  - 1907           Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge, Oklahoma
  - 1909           Montana National Bison Reserve
  - 1913           Wind Cave National Park, South Dakota

## Plains Bison Populations





500,000 in 5000 Ranches

- Most (96%) of all bison are in private herds – raised for meat production.
- Most of the conservation herds are small (< 400)



30,000 Plains and Wood in Conservation Herds



# Conservation Obstacles

- Historical Management Policies
- Genetic Integrity
- Confusing Legal Classification and Status
- Human Conflicts especially Agriculture
  - Fencing
- Complex Partnerships necessary to manage large landscapes
- Coordination of Policies, Rules and Regulations

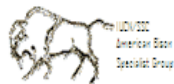


# What is the future of bison?

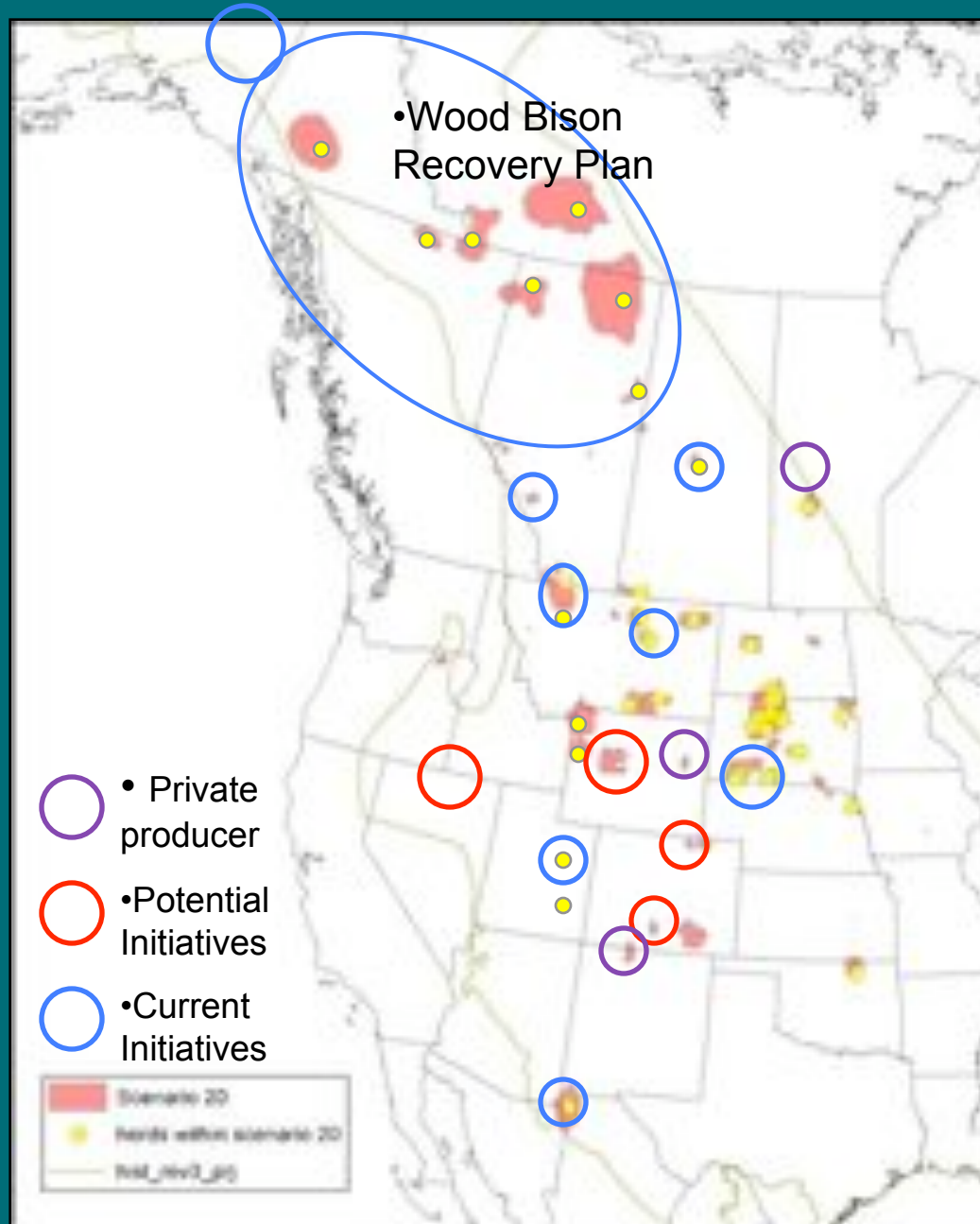
## American Bison

Status Survey and Conservation Guidelines 2009

Edited by C. Cormack Gates, Curtis Freese, Peter J.R. Gogan and Mandy Koltzman



# Where We Might Conserve (Sanderson et al, 2007)



# Conservation Planning



"Oh, give me a home, where the buffalo roam ..."



### Atsihthik Wood Bison Herd Management Plan

#### PUBLIC REVIEW

The Herd Management Plan is a guide to managing the Atsihthik Wood Bison Herd and address local industry and recreation. We invite you to read this plan and share your public review comments.

**MEETING:** December 8  
High Country Inn - 7-7 pm

**INPUT SESSION:** December 9  
Columbia Lodge - 7-8 pm

**COMMENTS:** Submit to  
Comments Center - 6-8 pm - 7:00am - 4:00pm

**ON OUR WEB ONLINE SUBMIT**

The plan and survey are available online at:  
[www.fws.gov/atsihthikwoodbison/](http://www.fws.gov/atsihthikwoodbison/)

Checklist  
Contact: Tom Sprague, Wildlife and Wildlife Management Branch - [tom.sprague@fws.gov](mailto:tom.sprague@fws.gov)



# Bison Belong-Banff National Park



in BANFF  
National Park

[www.bisonbelong.ca](http://www.bisonbelong.ca)

# Inter-Tribal Buffalo Council

Rapid City, South Dakota

- Mission: “Restoring buffalo to Indian Country to preserve our historical, cultural and traditional and spiritual relationships for future generations”
- Formed in 1992
- 57 member tribes in 19 U.S. States
- 15,000 buffalo in 1,000,000 acres of Indian Country



# Wind River Reservation

- **Large Scale- ~1 million acres available**
- **Intact mountain foothills habitat**
- **Historic Plains Bison habitat**
- **Strong historical and cultural connections- Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho**
- **Large predators associated with the landscape**
- **Agriculture conflicts are primarily with cattle under tribal mgmt.**



# NPS “ Call to Action”



- Early calls (1820-1870) went unheeded
- YNP was established in 1872
- Wind Cave received bison 1913
- Bison in Grand Teton (1948), Theodore Roosevelt (1956) and Badlands (1963)
- 7 Other DOI herds created on Nat. refuges.
- The call for action remains valid today!
- DOI Bison Conservation Initiative 2008
- Renewed NPS Call to Action – 2012
  - affirmed the commitment to restoration of bison while working with partners

Might there be a place in the Crown?

# Glacier- Waterton Front



- **Cultural tie to Blackfoot People**
- **Historically important to bison**





## Inferred Late Prehistoric and Early Historic Relative Bison Densities



Highest Densities



Lowest Densities

No Color = No Substantial Bison Population



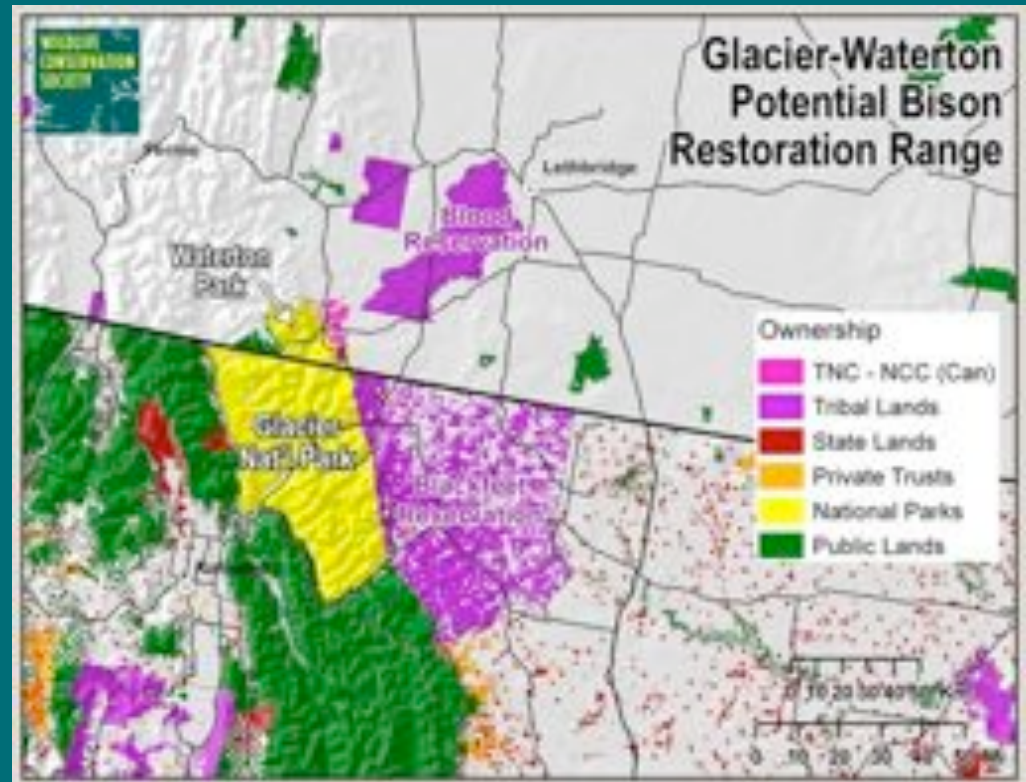
This map was generated using a density map tool (ArcGIS) with data extracted from the literature. The density map represents the relative density of bison populations in the Great Plains region, based on the distribution of bison populations in the late prehistoric and early historic periods. The map is based on the distribution of bison populations in the late prehistoric and early historic periods, based on the distribution of bison populations in the late prehistoric and early historic periods.

© 2011 American Museum of Natural History

AMNH.org/arcgis/arcgis/arcgis/arcgis/arcgis

# Rocky Mountain Front- Canada and U.S.

- Large tracts of intact fescue grasslands
- Portions are protected by Parks
- Bison legally classed as wildlife in U.S.
- Predator community is intact
- Community of Interest- but complex ownership
- Agriculture conflict primarily with livestock producers



# Reinforcing Ancient Connections with Bison

- Tribal Dialogues
  - Siksika, Kainai, Pikanii tribal elders
    - A generation apart-connecting the youth
    - Dissolving boundaries
  - Transboundary discussion
    - Connecting, Healing the land and People
  - Linguistic legacy---Dialogue in Blackfoot language
- Iinnii Initiative “Kick-off”
  - Waterton May 2011



# linnii Initiative

Vision Statement

Structured Workgroups

- Education/Outreach
- Research
- Strategy
- Cultural



# Next Steps

- Research
  - Conservation Mapping
  - Baseline Monitoring
- Cultural
  - Host Clan Meeting
  - Special Events
- Strategy
  - Business Planning
  - Economic Summit
  - Conservation Planning
- Education/ Outreach
  - Native Science Field Center
  - Community Colleges
  - Engaging Youth



# An American Buffalo Tale



How will we write the next chapter of this tale?

