



OCTOBER 2024

# **BISON**

## **SHARED STEWARDSHIP STRATEGY**

**BISON SHARED STEWARDSHIP COAUTHOR TEAM**

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR | BISON WORKING GROUP

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*Coauthors Jason Baldes and Brandon Small on the Wind River Reservation, NPS Photo*

## Bison Shared Stewardship **STRATEGY**

A comprehensive framework to guide bison restoration, including long-term bison conservation partnerships.



## PREFACE

This Bison Shared Stewardship Strategy (Strategy) was completed pursuant to Secretary's Order 3410, Restoration of American Bison and the Prairie Grasslands, signed by Secretary Haaland on March 3, 2023.

The Strategy frames a new, optimistic vision for partnership-based ecocultural restoration of American bison<sup>1</sup> to Tribes and all Americans. The DOI Bison Working Group (BWG) worked closely with all federally recognized Tribes through formal Tribal consultation to design an approach to move beyond consultation to invite coproduction of a shared vision. As we (the team of coauthors) began work, we collectively decided to prepare this document as a guiding strategy with principles and direction, rather than as a prescriptive plan. In this way, we aim to communicate the intent to frame a vision and the nature of partnerships that we hope will be supported by this document. We also wish to be clear that it is essential that place-based work among discrete groups of partners – Tribes, states, federal agencies, and others – must be built at those places and upon those partners' relationships. Shared stewardship is inherently about crafting the human relationships that will implement ecocultural restoration, and our decision to present this work as a more general strategy and not a prescriptive plan is offered in that spirit.

This Strategy does not dictate place-specific priorities for bison conservation and restoration, nor does it infringe upon Tribes' sovereignty, self-determination, or treaty rights, or the authorities and management responsibilities of states. In the spirit of shared stewardship, we hope this Strategy will inspire, encourage, and empower the ecocultural restoration of large, new herds of wild bison by diverse partnerships across the country for generations to come.

Bison Shared Stewardship Strategy Coauthors: Jason Baldes, InterTribal Buffalo Council and Eastern Shoshone Tribe; Linda Cardenas, U.S. Bureau of Land Management; Gerald "Buzz" Cobell, Blackfeet Nation; Wayne Frederick, Rosebud Sioux Tribe; Christina Justice, Cherokee Nation; Ted Knife, Jr., Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe; Robert "Robbie" Magnan, Fort Peck Assiniboine & Sioux Tribes; Thomas Mendez, Bureau of Indian Affairs and Mescalero Apache Tribe; Brendan Moynahan, U.S. National Park Service; Paul Santavy, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service; Kathryn Schoenecker, U.S. Geological Survey; Brandon Small, Northern Cheyenne Tribe; and Thomas "TJ" Swecichowski, Oneida Nation. Our coauthor team was also joined – physically and in spirit – by the buffalo. We considered buffalo as our 14th coauthor. We had a buffalo robe and skull occupy a place at our meeting table at each coauthor workshop and virtually represented at our online meetings and Tribal Consultation sessions. We thank all Tribes and Indigenous Peoples, states, federal government employees, and others that steward our national mammal.

For their work in providing exceptional guidance, counsel, facilitation, organizational support, and workshop hosting, we are especially thankful to: University of Montana, Center for Natural Resources and Environmental Policy staff Shawn Johnson and Travis Anklam; U.S. National Park Service staff: Cassandra Bissmeyer, Hanem Abouelezz, and David Gustine; and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service staff Amy Coffman. We also acknowledge several groups who graciously hosted our Coauthor group along the journey to developing this Strategy: The Rosebud Sioux Tribe and The Wolakota Regenerative Buffalo Range; The Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapahoe Tribes and The Wind River Tribal Buffalo Initiative; and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes and the Bison Range; and Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge. We also appreciate the continuous support and guidance from the DOI Bison Working Group. Finally, we extend a special thank you to Conservation Media and filmmaker Jeremy Roberts for capturing our efforts and the voices of the coauthors in a companion short film, *Ecocultural Restoration of American Bison: A Department of the Interior-Tribal Bison Shared Stewardship Strategy*. Learn more and watch the film on: [www.nps.gov/bison](http://www.nps.gov/bison)

*This Strategy was crafted under formal, national Tribal Consultation – government-to-government consultation between the federal and Tribal governments. As such, the process did not include involvement from state wildlife agencies. The DOI Bison Working Group (BWG) shared a review draft with the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA) concurrent with review by Tribes through the consultation process. We coauthors are deeply appreciative of the WAFWA-supplied comments, in which WAFWA recognized the Department of the Interior and Tribes working together to develop the Bison Shared Stewardship Strategy and noted that neither WAFWA nor any specific states participated in the process or development of the Strategy. WAFWA shared concern that the Strategy speaks to a wildlife resource of great interest and significance to many States and other potential partners but is limited to a shared vision of only federal and Tribal parties. The mention throughout the document of States as potential and welcome partners does not imply endorsement of the Strategy by WAFWA or any individual state. Finally, in their comments, WAFWA acknowledged that they can see that a great deal of thought and effort has gone into the development of the Strategy and it strives to appropriately give voice to historically underrepresented groups and tribal sovereign interests that are fundamentally part of the American Bison's existence and recovery in North America. In June of 2024, a WAFWA representative was invited and welcomed to the BWG, which aims to work with that representative to ensure transparent and active communication with WAFWA.*

<sup>1</sup> This Strategy uses the terms "bison" and "buffalo" interchangeably when referring to the American bison (Bison bison), to honor many Tribes and Indigenous Peoples preference to refer to bison as "buffalo". It recognizes that many Tribes and Indigenous Peoples prefer referring to bison in their own language.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We recognize the deep, interconnected relationships Indigenous Peoples and bison have shared across North America for over 10,000 years.

We acknowledge the U.S. Government's role in the removal and near eradication of bison, and the impact that eradication had on millions of Native American lives that were and are tied to those bison.

We recognize the resilience of Indigenous Peoples across the country and their leadership in honoring, protecting, and stewarding bison.

We recognize bison's status as our National Mammal and as a national symbol of unity, resilience, and health.

We applaud the Department of the Interior's recognition of bison as native wildlife and support of bison conservation and ecocultural restoration across successive administrations.

We fundamentally believe that partnerships among Tribes, states, federal agencies, and other stakeholders are essential to the future of bison conservation and restoration.

We acknowledge the fundamental role, interests, and authorities of Tribal and state wildlife agencies as expert wildlife managers, with demonstrated expertise in managing and conserving wildlife populations.

We acknowledge the U.S. Government's federal trust responsibility to Tribes, including a responsibility to restore bison populations and support the restoration of cultural connections to bison for Indigenous Peoples and for the benefit of all Americans.

We believe that Department of the Interior bureaus can meet their individual missions and trust responsibilities while concurrently supporting Tribes, states, and others in their visions to restore and manage wild bison.

We celebrate the resilience and vital role of bison in sustaining and restoring the health of ecosystems, human communities, and Indigenous cultures across the country.





## ***Giving Voice to the Buffalo***

*For countless generations, we, the buffalo, nourished you, our two-legged relatives. We gave ourselves to shelter you, provide you with tools and fuel, teach you about our shared world, and offer purpose and meaning to your lives. We were your brothers and sisters. You revered us, prayed to us, and celebrated our seasonal movements and inseparable connection with each other. We managed the grasslands together. We helped each other thrive.*

*Then the bad times came. You slaughtered us. You took our gifts out of greed, wasted them, and stopped respecting us. You destroyed our grasslands and stole our lands. You destroyed many of our two-legged brothers and sisters. You drove those of us who survived into captivity and destroyed our lifeways. Our ancient ways of reciprocity and respect were abruptly broken and even persecuted. When you finally came to your senses and started to protect us, our grasslands, and the other parts of our wild community – you forgot us. You left us behind when you helped restore the elk, the deer, the pronghorn, the lion, the wolf, the bear, and the winged ones. But we are still here. We have never left; it was you that left us.*

*Our lessons of tolerance, kindness, honesty, love, sacrifice, patience, endurance, sympathy, compromise, kinship, hope, determination, high-spirit, and confidence are offered freely. Our example of persistence can fuel your awakening and your work to promote ecocultural sustainability. We are very communicative through sounds, body language, habits, and so many ways that are not visible to everyone. If a two-legged has the privilege, patience, and wisdom to view us in our natural environment, they may be gifted with a deeper understanding of the knowledge and spirit that has helped us both to continue to survive, even in times of hopelessness.*

*Now we find ourselves on the cusp of a widespread healing of our lifeways, of respecting and revering each other as brothers and sisters again. Some of the two-legged have always remained with us, but many have not. We are pleased that a growing number of humans are now recognizing our ecocultural connections, the gift of lifeways we can share, and the good work we can do together in restoring the grasslands for all life that exists here.*

*We are encouraged now by your work here. It represents a unique opportunity for you to share and emulate what you have learned about our power and perseverance. You can develop and strengthen partnerships among yourselves and with us, the buffalo, that can be the means for human reconciliation between diverse cultures, with the natural world, and to foster a reciprocal relationship with nature. We are eager to restore our strength and once again work together to be the stewards of our home. We urge you to follow your heart.*



## FOREWORD

We, the coauthor team of the Department of the Interior's Bison Shared Stewardship Strategy, greatly appreciate the opportunity to participate in this monumental endeavor. The varied backgrounds, perspectives, and insights of each team member have been instrumental to the production of a strategy informed by both conservation science and Indigenous culture. Our process of co-creation has recognized the scientific, historical, and cultural significance of bison and seeks to achieve a measure of healing of generational wounds to Indigenous Peoples, while having lasting impacts on the land and all living things through the ecocultural restoration of wild bison across American landscapes.

Much work has been done in bison conservation by both the federal government and Tribes alike. Despite genuine effort and sincere intention, those of us who are neither Indigenous nor carriers of ancient knowledge of the relationship between Indigenous Peoples and buffalo cannot fully know the significance of buffalo to Indigenous identity, culture, song, story, art, and prayer. Buffalo represents a connection to ancestral lifeways and culture for Tribal people that cannot be overstated. As a keystone species in grassland ecosystems, they are critical to the physical and spiritual health of the land and all living things. As relatives to buffalo, Tribal people are driven at a fundamental level to preserve and protect buffalo. Understanding and embracing this connection is critical to the development of any successful strategy for the long-term preservation of the species.

Although the federal government has, and exercises, its trust responsibilities to consult with Tribes, the process to develop this strategy has been a unique experience. This co-production process created an environment for developing shared knowledge and an increased understanding of the significance of the loss of buffalo. Tribal consultations, in every agency, can benefit from the experiences here for the mutual benefit of all. The desire to create understanding and incorporate the unique perspectives that Indigenous people bring to issues, particularly those surrounding conservation, is greatly appreciated.

Our collective charge at this moment is to collaboratively lead the next chapter of this conservation story. Our chapter is one in which we cooperatively articulate and pursue shared goals to move beyond the success of conservation of the animal, and toward the restoration of the animal and the fullness of its relationships to ecosystems and human culture. We embrace the fact that bison conservation is inextricably intertwined with human, wildlife, and environmental health. We humbly look to learn from the buffalo and to embrace those lessons of resilience, strength, patience, and adaptability. In support of an ecocultural approach, this Strategy embraces, for new conservation and partnership purposes, many of the principles of lifeways long known and practiced by Indigenous Peoples.

At the invitation of the BWG, the coauthors of this Strategy were nominated by their Tribes and organizations to craft a collective vision for innovative collaboration toward restoration of new herds of wild bison. Recognizing variation in acreage, herd size, jurisdiction, and social, economic, and management considerations that are inherent to any proposed new herd, we focused this strategy on relationships – between and among people, buffalo, and the land. We paid particular attention to encouraging new relationships of co-creation among the federal government and Indigenous Peoples, and we warmly welcome the forming of the same with willing State and non-governmental partners.

As we came together to begin this process, each of us carried our own ideas, expectations, and reservations. In learning from each other and building shared understandings, it quickly became apparent that each of us was there for the same reason: the return of wild bison to the land and to people. Even if each of us had a different initial interest in participating in this work, a unified, collective purpose emerged in short order. A bridge between Indigenous and Western understandings, as it relates to the ecocultural restoration of bison, has been forever forged and it is the sincere hope of this team that this Strategy carries this sentiment forward to readers and prospective partners in ecocultural restoration.





## INTRODUCTION

### Cultural & Historical Context

For over 500 human generations and 1,500 bison generations, Indigenous Peoples have relied on, honored, and stewarded the buffalo across the North American continent. For millennia prior to European colonization, an estimated 30-60 million bison sustained a substantial proportion of the 4 million Indigenous People in what is now the United States, Canada, and Mexico. Bison and Indigenous Peoples became inextricably interconnected through ecological and cultural lifeways that sustained diverse and thriving human communities and natural systems at a globally significant scale.

Bison were vital to sustaining rich and resilient ecosystems, creating habitat for a myriad of wildlife species, promoting biodiversity, and contributing to nutrient cycling, water and soil health, and wildfire behavior. Individual Tribes sustained deep cultural connections to the buffalo through song, prayer, ceremony, dance, art, and language. Buffalo are widely regarded by many Indigenous Peoples, quite literally, as relatives who were and still are central to cultural, material, and spiritual life.

As European and American settlers colonized the continent in the 1700s and 1800s, bison were nearly driven to extinction by unregulated market hunting and U.S. Government policies designed to control, remove, eradicate, and assimilate Indigenous Peoples. By 1889, only a few hundred wild bison remained. Vital, ancient lifeways were severed and Indigenous People that had been reliant on bison were killed, starved, impoverished, and relocated. As recognized by a U.S. Senate Joint Resolution 14 from the 111th Congress, this slaughter and decimation of bison populations coincided with the U.S. Government signing and then violating many treaties ratified by Congress and other diplomatic agreements with Tribal Nations; illicitly acquiring Tribal land, resources, and assets; condemning the traditions, customs, and beliefs of Native Peoples; and committing wrongs to Native Peoples that have contributed to the challenges facing Native communities today. Tribal lands were significantly reduced, with many Indigenous People forced onto reservations while others were left landless. Despite this history Indigenous Peoples have been resilient and Tribes continue as sovereign entities sustaining, restoring, and developing their unique cultures and lifeways for future generations.







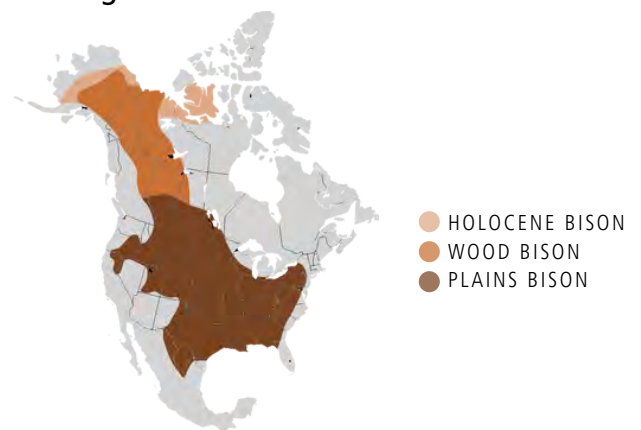
## Federal Trust Responsibility

Increasingly, the U.S. Government is working to better meet federal trust and treaty responsibilities, address past wrongs, and work in partnership with Tribes and Indigenous Peoples to honor and support Tribal sovereignty and self-determination. The U.S. Constitution and numerous treaties establish the legal and political relationship between the U.S. Government and American Indian and Alaska Native Tribes, corporations, and villages. At its core, the federal trust responsibility is an obligation on the part of the U.S. Government to protect Tribal treaty rights, lands, assets, and resources, as well carry out the mandates of federal law with respect to all federally recognized American Indian and Alaska Native Tribes, villages, and Peoples. For many Tribes and Tribal members, this trust responsibility includes the U.S. Government contributing to and supporting restoration of bison, other wildlife, and ecosystems on federal, Tribal, and private lands, to restore Tribal food sovereignty, nutritional health, and cultural and spiritual connections to bison.

## Ecological Role of Bison

Bison historically played a pivotal role in sustaining and enhancing grassland ecosystems. As the largest land mammal in North America, they modified ecosystems through herbivory and fecal deposition, increasing plant production and nutrient cycling. Their decomposing carcasses, wallowing, and hoof action created microhabitats, captured waters, promoted seed establishment, improved soil health, and increased biodiversity of plants, pollinators, birds, mammals, and herpetofauna. Their keystone role in grassland ecosystems was unmatched, thus restoring bison will alter and provide habitats for diversity of species and taxa at multiple scales, including at-risk and other culturally important species. Today, most bison exist in private livestock herds managed for commercial meat production. Only ~13,000 buffalo are managed as wildlife in public herds on state and federal lands across the nation, and most bison across the country are in relatively small herds – numbering in the hundreds – largely confined to a single jurisdiction and typically behind fences. Tribally managed herds range from a few dozen buffalo to over a thousand individuals. It has long been recognized that creating new, large herds that can move across broad landscapes at ecologically relevant scales is key to the functional conservation of bison and the ecosystems upon which they depend.

## Estimated Historic Range of Bison across North America





## Embracing Ecocultural Restoration

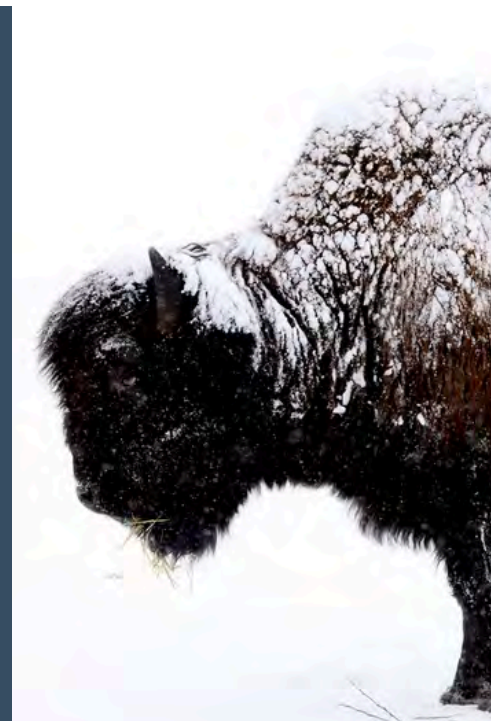
Today, owing to work led by Tribes and Indigenous Peoples, conservation organizations, states, individual landowners, and the federal government, we can celebrate that survival of the species is secure. Since the federal government shifted from policies of eradication to conservation in the early 1900s, federal and state led conservation efforts have been grounded in western science and models protecting bison populations in U.S. National Parks, Monuments, National Wildlife Refuges, and the Bureau of Land Management's National System of Public Lands, and State lands. While this approach has improved the species' security, it has been insufficient to restore the ecological function of bison to imperiled temperate grasslands. However, bison conservation has been built largely under a model of 'fortress conservation,' where wildlife and protected lands are expressly conserved separate from traditional interactions with humans. This approach has been inadequate to fully restore Tribes' and Indigenous Peoples' cultural, spiritual, and material connections to buffalo. This approach has also fallen well short of the potential to create opportunities for rich connections to bison for all Americans. Consequently, the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI), has embraced ecocultural restoration as an essential component of the federal trust responsibility to Tribes and Tribal members – and successful, durable, meaningful bison conservation.

Ecocultural restoration embraces place-based connections between ecology and human – particularly – Indigenous culture. The approach concurrently pursues species, ecological, and cultural conservation goals by reestablishing essential lifeways and spiritual connections vital to the healing and wellbeing of Indigenous Peoples and all Americans. Tribes and Indigenous Peoples have embraced this approach to buffalo stewardship for millennia and continue to advance ecocultural restoration of bison today through the establishment, growth, and stewardship of Tribally managed herds. The responsibility for expanding this work is borne by Tribes, the federal government, and diverse organizations and partners.

The DOI recognizes and has committed itself to ecocultural approaches to conservation and restoration of bison. In 2020, the DOI released the 2020 Bison Conservation Initiative (BCI), which identifies goals, principles, and four core actions to guide DOI-led and supported bison conservation across the country. One of those actions committed the DOI to work to improve and expand mechanisms to support ecocultural restoration of wild bison for Tribes and Indigenous Peoples, and to do so through principles of shared stewardship.

## Bison Conservation Initiative 2020 Goals

- 1 Wild, Healthy Bison Herds:** A DOI commitment to conserve bison as healthy wildlife.
- 2 Genetic Conservation:** A DOI commitment to an interagency, science-based approach to support genetic diversity across DOI bison conservation herds.
- 3 Shared Stewardship:** A DOI commitment to shared stewardship of wild bison in cooperation with states, tribes, and other stakeholders.
- 4 Ecological Restoration:** A DOI commitment to establish and maintain large, wide-ranging bison herds on appropriate large landscapes where their role as ecosystem engineers shape healthy and diverse ecological communities.
- 5 Cultural Restoration:** A DOI commitment to restore cultural connections to honor and promote the unique status of bison as an American icon for all people.



## **The DOI Commitment to Shared Stewardship**

While the foreseeable future of bison as a species is secure, there is both great need and opportunity for long-term partnerships to advance ecocultural restoration of bison for the benefit of Tribes, Indigenous Peoples, the American People, and ecosystems across the country.

DOI recognizes that shared stewardship – partnerships with Tribes, State fish and wildlife agencies, and others who are deeply invested in shared goals – is essential to durable conservation and restoration. Through co-production of this Strategy, federal agencies can commit to meeting their trust responsibilities, while concurrently supporting partners’ realization of their own bison conservation and restoration visions.

Many bison stewards, old and new, acknowledge the need for shared stewardship and are working to conserve and restore the species. The Intertribal Buffalo Council (ITBC; a federally chartered Tribal Organization) has worked over three decades to activate partnerships to restore buffalo to Tribal lands for cultural, spiritual, and traditional use. ITBC efforts have been central to Indigenous-led delivery of buffalo, skills, and capacity to Indigenous Peoples. ITBC has been an important partner to DOI, having distributed tens of thousands of live buffalo from parks and refuges to Tribes across the country. Other creative and impactful initiatives have emerged. The Buffalo Treaty, originally signed by Tribes in 2014, has had U.S. Tribes and Canadian First Nations providing a rich vision for partnership-based ecocultural restoration. Nearly a dozen States manage conservation herds, some of which are co-stewarded in partnership with Tribes and DOI bureaus across complex landscapes that support other land uses including hunting, cattle grazing, and recreation. And many non-governmental organizations and private herd owners are working together to advance bison conservation, science, ecological benefit, and cultural revitalization at a range of scales. These and other initiatives, including several highlighted in this Strategy, offer proven models of buffalo restoration for the benefit of varied human and natural communities.

For its part, DOI has worked across four successive federal administrations - both Republican and Democratic - to empower U.S. National Park Service (NPS), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), and U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) career staff to coordinate bison conservation among federal herds through the BWG. In the first 10 years after its initial charter in 2008, the BWG focused largely on attending to bison health considerations and the development of science-informed approaches to improving genetic conservation of isolated herds through measured exchange of individuals. Increasingly, the BWG works toward establishing and catalyzing partnerships between and among federal agencies and diverse partners – particularly Tribes and States – to advance ecocultural restoration.

In 2023, DOI affirmed the approaches described in the 2020 BCI and directed the BWG to consult with Tribes to create this Strategy to establish a comprehensive framework to guide partnership-based, ecocultural bison restoration. Through a national tribal consultation process, a team of eight Tribe-nominated coauthors and five DOI Bureau coauthors worked to create this Strategy.

The Strategy recognizes that each agency represented on the BWG (NPS, FWS, BLM, USGS, and BIA) has a distinct mission, authorities, capacities, and governing laws, regulations, and policies, none of which are superseded here. Though not all future proposed projects that appeal to this Strategy will involve each of those agencies, we aim to articulate a common vision to which all subscribe. The BWG has been tasked by consecutive Secretaries of the Interior with developing and implementing of this Strategy, and the BWG commits work with partners to periodically update the strategic pathways as collaborative efforts are implemented and results are documented, assessed, and shared. We acknowledge the complexity and variety of existing legal authorities, regulations, policy, resources, and diverse interests that drive the outcomes of this important work. This Strategy aligns with the goals and actions of the 2020 BCI and conforms to the principles outlined in Secretarial Order 3410.



## VISION & GUIDING VALUES

### Our Shared Vision

*Myriad partnerships steward large and numerous herds of wild bison across the U.S., restoring cultural and spiritual relationships with Tribes and Indigenous Peoples while renewing ecosystems and increasing access to bison for the benefit of all Americans.*

### Guiding Values for Shared Stewardship of Bison

These guiding values for the shared stewardship of bison are informed by the ethics and values of many Indigenous cultures and bison conservation practitioners across the United States. We drew inspiration from two Indigenous scholars in framing “The Seven Rs” of Tribal and Indigenous education, partnership, and conservation.<sup>2</sup>

**Respect.** Honor bison, the inextricable links between buffalo and Native Peoples, and bison’s role in promoting the health and resilience of cultures and ecosystems across the continent. Learn from the buffalo as a practitioner of conservation and a teacher. Forge human partnerships that emulate the respect given to the buffalo by Indigenous Peoples.

**Responsibility.** Uphold the federal trust responsibility to Tribes and Tribal members by supporting the ecocultural restoration of buffalo by and with Tribes, Tribally led organizations, and Tribal members. Recognize the shared responsibility to forge partnerships to conserve and restore bison, the ecosystems they rely on, and the benefits that bison provide to landscapes and human communities across the country. Honor our responsibility to each other to be good, trustworthy, committed partners in ecocultural restoration of buffalo.

**Relationships.** Center the interconnected relationships tying buffalo, Indigenous Peoples, ecosystems, and the American people together in all efforts to conserve and restore bison. Pursue approaches to ecocultural restoration that provide mutual and multiple benefits for Indigenous Peoples and all Americans.

**Reciprocity.** Follow the leadership of the buffalo and Indigenous Peoples who have nurtured one another since time immemorial, to develop mutually beneficial partnerships that equitably advance the ecocultural restoration of bison for the benefit of Tribes, Indigenous Peoples, and all Americans. Steward the ecosystems that sustain a flow of connectedness and health between bison, environment, and people across the country.

**Reverence.** Celebrate and support the sacred cultural, spiritual, and economic ties between the buffalo, Indigenous Peoples, and the ecosystems to which they are inextricably linked. Recognize bison as our National Mammal and promote connections to buffalo for all Americans.

**Reasoning.** Weave together Indigenous Knowledge, western science, and local knowledge to inform the ecocultural restoration of bison. Engage in humility, inclusive dialogue, and shared learning to advance the practice of shared stewardship.

**Resourcefulness.** Work in partnership to advance innovations and approaches that increase resources and capacity essential to the ecocultural restoration of bison. Creatively overcome organizational, informational, and capacity obstacles to bison stewardship by joining expertise and empowering others.



NPS staff aging bison by tooth eruption, NPS Photo

<sup>2</sup> Kirkness, V. J. and R. Barnhardt (2001). First Nations and Higher Education: The Four R's - Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, Responsibility. In Knowledge Across Cultures: A Contribution to Dialogue Among Civilizations. R. Hayoe and J. Pan. Hong Kong, eds., Comparative Education Research Centre, The University of Hong Kong.



These guiding principles for the shared stewardship of bison are informed by the values listed above, the principles of the 2020 Bison Conservation Initiative, and direction in Secretarial Order 3410.

- **Conserve and Restore Wild Bison.** Restore and manage wild bison as native wildlife and promote high levels of bison genetic diversity while minimizing cattle introgression.
- **Promote Herd Health.** Emphasize an affirmative responsibility to manage for bison health. Manage diseases in bison that may affect domestic livestock or other bison herds. Advance application of low-stress handling principles.
- **Prioritize Tribally Led Opportunities.** Prioritize Tribally led and proposed opportunities to establish new, large herds, including new types of herds managed by Tribes, Tribally led organizations, and Tribal members, and advance shared stewardship with Tribes on Federal Land.
- **Honor Tribal Sovereignty.** Respect Tribal sovereignty and self-determination while fulfilling the federal trust responsibility to Tribes and Tribal members.
- **Consider State and Private Landowner Interests.** Take into consideration State interests and authorities in wildlife management, wildlife and livestock health, and private property rights.
- **Integrate Indigenous Knowledge and Western Science.** Ensure herd management is informed by the best available science, including Indigenous Knowledge and adaptive management techniques, and engages with scientific and Indigenous partners to fulfill natural, cultural, and human dimensions information needs.
- **Support Bison Conservation at all Scales.** Support efforts to advance ecocultural restoration of bison across scales, including for Tribes, Tribally led organizations, and Tribal members with small herds and limited access to land.



# PATHWAYS TO ADVANCE SHARED STEWARDSHIP

Building on the Vision, Guiding Values, and Principles of Bison Shared Stewardship – and incorporating the interests and perspectives of the buffalo – this section highlights four pathways that DOI bureaus, Tribes, Tribally led organizations, and Tribal members, state fish and wildlife agencies, non-governmental organizations, and other partners can follow to promote ecocultural restoration of buffalo.

All pathways promote ecocultural restoration of bison as an overarching objective, thereby aligning future activities in a manner that integrates restoration and healing of ecosystems, cultures, and lifeways. Each pathway connects to strategic directions to encourage, invite, and inspire action among diverse perspectives and partnerships. They are intended as a menu of possible actions rather than a comprehensive list. As shared stewardship activities continue, these strategic directions will be periodically revised with additional insights, lessons, and actions that incorporate best practices and lessons learned.

1

## Support Place-based Opportunities

The continued expansion of bison populations across multiple jurisdictions and geographies is needed to ensure the survival of the species and restore Tribes', Indigenous Peoples', and the American public's connections with buffalo. Restoring buffalo to new places and in new models of conservation and restoration will require people coming together to identify opportunities where ecocultural restoration can be successful over the long term. This pathway supports efforts to identify lands where restoration or herd expansion may be possible and appropriate.

2

## Support Diverse Partnerships

Advancing ecocultural restoration requires people working together across sectors and interests to imagine and work toward a shared future. This pathway endorses partnership-based approaches and encourages a range of activities to provide these partnerships with information, training, funding, internships, positions, and other critical resources. It acknowledges that there is no one perfect model of what a partnership might look like, and that each must reflect the specific geography, context, needs, and partners involved. This pathway seeks to amplify successes and functions of the ITBC, Native American Fish and Wildlife Society, Buffalo Treaty Tribes, the DOI Bison Working Group, States, non-governmental organizations, and other ecocultural restoration efforts.

3

## Increase Awareness and Recognition of Ecocultural Approaches

Many are unfamiliar with the concept of ecocultural restoration, bison's status as our national mammal, the special relationship between Tribes and Indigenous Peoples with buffalo, and the important role of bison in shaping the health of ecosystems and cultures across the continent. This pathway supports efforts to reach new audiences (public, professional, and partner), improve existing education and outreach efforts, and communicate the importance of ecocultural restoration of bison for both natural and human communities.

4

## Provide Ongoing Leadership and Coordination

As DOI and Tribal partners deepen partnerships, collaboration, and experience, sustained leadership and coordination will be essential. This pathway supports activities that keep leadership voices connected and engaged across DOI bureaus, other Federal agencies, and in partnership with Tribes, Tribally led organizations, and Tribal members, States, nonprofit organizations, and other partners. It recognizes the need to apply active learning to develop, implement, and sustain creative shared stewardship efforts. It acknowledges the importance of learning from the experiences and leadership of Tribes and Indigenous Peoples, the transfer of expertise among all bison conservation stewards, and the need to integrate Indigenous ways of knowing and western science. It recognizes the need for a community of bison conservation professionals with the skills, knowledge, and practices needed to effectively and equitably advance ecocultural restoration and shared stewardship. It also recognizes the need to increase the resources available to Tribes, Tribally led organizations, and Tribal members – as well as other partners. Finally, it recognizes the need for a federal government-wide approach to fulfilling the federal trust responsibility to Tribes and Indigenous Peoples through bison shared stewardship.

## Pathway 1: Support Place-based Opportunities

### Establish New Herds

- 1.1 Cooperatively identify priority locations in partnership with Tribes, Tribally led organizations, and Tribal members, States, and all other willing partners to establish new, large herds of wild bison multi-jurisdictional landscapes.
- 1.2 Encourage the establishment co-stewarded herds on those landscapes.

### Expand Existing Herds

- 1.3 Partner with Tribes, Tribally led organizations, and Tribal members, the ITBC, state fish and wildlife agencies, DOI bureaus, non-governmental organizations, and others to integrate ecocultural restoration practices into the management and growth of wild bison herds.
- 1.4 Partner with Tribes, Tribally led organizations, and Tribal members, the ITBC, state fish and wildlife agencies, DOI Bureaus, non-governmental organizations, and others to establish protocols and pathways for accessing and moving bison, which may include:
  - Multiple objectives for internal movements to support implementation of the BWG's Metapopulation Strategy;
  - Protocols for supplying bison to establish new herds;
  - Protocols for delivery of live bison to Tribes for their own purposes and objectives;
  - Resources and training to support intertribal bison transfer efforts; and
  - Increased opportunities for Tribes, Tribally led organizations, and Tribal members to access bison for cultural and spiritual practices.

### Identify Appropriate Lands for the Ecocultural Restoration of Bison

- 1.5 Co-produce a resource guide outlining diverse opportunities for Tribes and Indigenous Peoples, the ITBC, state fish and wildlife agencies, DOI Bureaus, non-governmental organizations, and others to increase availability of and access to land for ecocultural restoration. The guide may include:
  - Diverse mechanisms to remove obstacles to bison restoration on multi-jurisdictional landscapes;
  - Opportunities to support State-initiated and State-led bison conservation, restoration, and management; and
  - Strategies that respect Tribal sovereignty and considers private property rights, livestock health, and State interests and authorities in wildlife management.
- 1.6 Pursue opportunities to support acquisition of fee lands (fee land is under complete control of its owner) for Tribes, Tribally led organizations, and Tribal members that will support ecocultural restoration.
- 1.7 Support partnerships to increase availability of, and access to, lands for ecocultural restoration.
- 1.8 Pursue opportunities to increase availability of, and access to, federally managed and trust lands for Tribes, Tribally led organizations, and Tribal members for ecocultural restoration.
- 1.9 Affirm Tribes' sovereignty and ability to identify Tribal lands for ecocultural restoration, including co-stewardship partnerships with the federal government and others.
- 1.10 Work with other federal departments to identify appropriate non-DOI lands that may support ecocultural restoration.

## A BISON SHARED STEWARDSHIP PROJECT HIGHLIGHT

# InterTribal Buffalo Council

**PROJECT LAUNCHED:** 1992

**YEAR BISON RESTORED:** 1992

**# OF BUFFALO RESTORED TODAY:** OVER 20,000

### ABOUT ITBC

The mission of the InterTribal Buffalo Council (ITBC) is to restore buffalo to Tribal lands for cultural and spiritual enhancement and preservation. American bison, also known as buffalo, have always held great meaning for American Indian people. To Indian people, the buffalo represent their spirit and remind them of how they once lived free and in harmony with nature. In the 1800s the white man recognized the reliance Indian Tribes had on the buffalo. Thus began the systematic destruction of the buffalo in an effort to subjugate Tribal nations. The slaughter of over 60 million buffalo left only a few hundred remaining.





**Proliferate Partnership Approaches to Bison Shared Stewardship**

- 2.1 Cooperatively create a resource guide outlining diverse partnership approaches that Tribes, Tribally led organizations, and Tribal members, the ITBC, state fish and wildlife agencies, DOI bureaus, non-governmental organizations, and others can utilize to work together to advance ecocultural restoration of bison across a range of scales.
- 2.2 Create templates for appropriate cooperative instruments (e.g., co-stewardship agreements, memoranda of understanding) that advance creative approaches toward shared stewardship.
- 2.3 Establish new and enhance existing partnerships among the federal government, Tribes, Tribally led organizations, and Tribal members to fulfill federal trust responsibilities and obligations through training and capacity building, technical assistance, planning, and funding.

**Support Bison Shared Stewardship Partnerships**

- 2.4 Identify and address barriers to partnership and intergovernmental relationships.
- 2.5 Formalize a dedicated national Bison Shared Stewardship Leadership Panel to advance partnership approaches to bison conservation by elevating effective, diverse leaders shared stewardship and ecocultural restoration. The Panel would promote best practices, amplify successful models, support resource sharing and information exchange, and establish and cultivate new and existing long-term bison conservation partnerships.
- 2.6 Support partnerships that enable multiple Tribes to propose cooperative projects.
- 2.7 Establish an online resource hub for successes and best practices, with an emphasis on animal health and welfare, management tools and approaches, emerging science and knowledge, and creative partnership models.
- 2.8 Engage in data sharing and learning that emphasizes the interrelationships of wildlife, environmental, and human health.
- 2.9 Create opportunities that facilitate Tribes' and Tribal members' active, two-way exchange of technology, bison handling expertise, and cultural perspectives to enhance the management of conservation herds, irrespective of the managing entity.
- 2.10 Increase engagement with partner organizations including but not limited to the ITBC, Intertribal Timber Council, Intertribal Agriculture Council, and Native American Fish and Wildlife Society.

**A BISON SHARED STEWARDSHIP PROJECT HIGHLIGHT**

## Wolakota Project

ROSEBUD SIOUX, SOUTH DAKOTA

**PROJECT LAUNCHED:** 2009

**YEAR BISON RESTORED:** 2020

**# OF BISON TODAY:** 1,200

**Partners involved:** Sicangu Lakota Oyate, US National Park Service, US Fish & Wildlife Service, and American Prairie

**WHY SHARED STEWARDSHIP?**

The Wolakota Regenerative Buffalo Range will provide meaningful cultural and educational opportunities, initiate ecological regeneration, combat climate change, strengthen food sovereignty, and create economic opportunity for the Sicangu Lakota Oyate.



# 3

## Pathway 3: Increase Awareness and Recognition of Ecocultural Approaches

- 3.1 Explore interest, need, and potential mechanisms to establish a special designation for bison as a national keystone species that recognizes their cultural and ecological significance.
- 3.2 Increase recreational opportunities that enable the American public to view and experience wild bison in a range of settings across the country.
- 3.3 Support the establishment of new, culturally appropriate bison harvest opportunities that contribute to the ecocultural restoration and shared stewardship of bison across the country, including through establishment of new State-managed, publicly hunted herds on public land.
- 3.4 Develop and implement a communications strategy to increase public understanding regarding the value of bison as wildlife critical to the health of ecosystems and cultures across the country.
- 3.5 Invest in the education of Tribal youth by supporting the ITBC and other partners in developing and proliferating curricula regarding ecocultural restoration and shared stewardship of bison. Support may include providing grants, developing and sharing training courses, and working with state Indian Education for All programs.
- 3.6 Create a National Buffalo Shared Stewardship Award, administered by the task force described in 2.5, to annually recognize exceptional models of and advances in shared stewardship and ecocultural restoration.

### A BISON SHARED STEWARDSHIP PROJECT HIGHLIGHT

## DOI Bison Conservation and Transfer Program

**PROJECT LAUNCHED:** 1980s

**# OF BISON TRANSFERRED:** >10,000

#### WHY SHARED STEWARDSHIP?

Tribes need access to live bison to support cultural connections between people and bison. Bison that are excess to management objectives on National Park Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service lands are made available for transfer directly to Tribes, and through the InterTribal Buffalo Council. Tribes utilize these bison to restore and supplement bison herds to Tribal lands, and these bison directly support Indigenous Peoples' communities, spirituality, food security, landscape restoration, and economic development. Over nearly 40 years, DOI has transferred more than 10,000 bison to Tribes for their own purposes and objectives.





# Yellowstone Bison Conservation Transfer Program

FORT PECK TRIBES &  
YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK, MONTANA

**PROJECT LAUNCHED:** 2019

**# OF DISEASE-FREE YELLOWSTONE BISON  
TRANSFERRED TO TRIBES:** OVER 400 TO 26 TRIBES  
ACROSS 12 STATES

**Partners involved:** Defenders of Wildlife, Greater Yellowstone Coalition, ITBC, NPS, State of Montana, U.S. Department of Agriculture Animal Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), and Yellowstone Forever

## WHY SHARED STEWARDSHIP?

Due to presence of brucellosis in Yellowstone bison, animals need to be held and tested to allow their transfer out of Yellowstone National Park to Tribes elsewhere. Bison are held in federal facilities near or within the park until they are released by state and federal animal health officials. At that point, the Fort Peck Tribes receive these animals, hold them in a secure facility, and complete one year of additional assurance testing in cooperation with the State of Montana and APHIS. After this testing is completed, the Fort Peck Tribes work with the ITBC to distribute the animals and their offspring to Tribes across the country. This partnership has led to the largest transfer of Yellowstone-origin bison in history. In addition to Indigenous harvest outside the park and donating bison to Tribes for their meat and hides, the Bison Transfer Program provides an additional tool for the NPS to collaboratively manage bison numbers with Tribes. This cooperative effort, and efforts like it, will be a critical part of implementing this Strategy.

## Tribal Food Transfer Program (TFTP)

Yellowstone transfers bison to Tribes who then sacrifice them for their meat and hides at meat-processing facilities. The program supports Tribal food independence and provides bison as food to Tribal members who may not be able to participate in harvests outside the park.



**Support Learning to Advance Professional Excellence**

- 4.1 Partner to identify and share best practices, highlighting the diversity of approaches that can be conducted across a range of scales, jurisdictions, and partnership contexts. These may include:
  - Techniques and skills for responding to ecosystem change, mitigating disease, integrating cultural practices and knowledge, fostering education and training, and other operational best practices;
  - Approaches to utilizing multiple forms of knowledge including Indigenous Knowledge, western science, and local knowledge;
  - Holistic management of soil, water, and ecosystem health alongside bison herd health;
  - Management of infrastructure including fencing, water, and facilities;
  - Intertribal and interagency coordination; and
  - Capacity for long term operations, maintenance, and herd expansion.
- 4.2 Host a regular Bison Shared Stewardship Symposium open to diverse partners and interests, to broaden engagement and the diversity of perspectives informing ecocultural restoration of bison. The symposium may feature:
  - Innovative and successful examples of shared stewardship and/or ecocultural restoration;
  - Opportunities to address challenges and barriers; and
  - Training and workshop opportunities to build practitioners' skills and active learning.
- 4.3 Support formal and informal meetings, publications, and all manner of information exchange and human relationship-building.
- 4.4 Promote regular federal representation at meetings of Tribal and non-Tribal organizations interested or engaged in ecocultural restoration and shared stewardship of bison and bison habitats, including organizations such as the Native American Fish and Wildlife Society, ITBC, Intertribal Agriculture Council, Intertribal Timber Council, and others.
- 4.5 Provide resources to support Tribal participation in learning and training opportunities related to ecocultural restoration and shared stewardship of bison.

**Grow the Workforce of Bison Shared Stewardship Practitioners**

- 4.6 Create and support training, professional development, and experiential learning opportunities for youth and young leaders in bison conservation, including opportunities led by Tribes, Tribally led organizations, and Tribal members and colleges to support professional development for Tribal youth seeking to work in bison conservation.
- 4.7 Create and support training and professional development opportunities for new and existing DOI positions to equip professionals with skills needed to advance ecocultural restoration and shared stewardship of bison.

**Increase Coordination to Advance Bison Shared Stewardship**

- 4.8 Increase coordination with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and other federal departments to advance a government-wide approach to ecocultural restoration and shared stewardship of bison in partnership with Tribes, Tribally led organizations, and Tribal members.
- 4.9 Establish an interagency working group including representatives from DOI and other federal departments to facilitate a whole-of-government approach to supporting Tribal Nations and Peoples in advancing ecocultural restoration and shared stewardship of buffalo;
- 4.10 Establish new, dedicated partnership positions within DOI Bureaus to facilitate coordination and communications with diverse partners to advance ecocultural restoration and shared stewardship of bison.
- 4.11 Increase the partnership orientation of existing positions within DOI Bureaus and use flexible hiring authorities and capacities to work with Tribes and other partners.

**Increase Resources Available to Advance Bison Shared Stewardship**

- 4.12 Through active, diverse partnerships identify priority resource needs to advance implementation of the spirit of this Strategy.
- 4.13 Encourage interagency and interdepartmental funding for training, exchange, and coordinated ecocultural restoration work.

**Support the Ongoing Implementation of the Strategy**

- 4.14 Engage in outreach regarding the Strategy and opportunities to support strategy implementation, prioritizing outreach to Tribes, Tribally led organizations, and Tribal members.
- 4.15 Update the Strategy as needed to integrate new priorities and ensure its success.
- 4.16 Host an annual Bison Shared Stewardship meeting with partners to report progress and support implementation of the strategy.



## DOI BISON CONSERVATION HERD DEFINITION

Department of Interior (DOI) bison conservation herds (conservation herds) are native North American wild bison conserved for the long-term viability of the species *Bison bison*. They are among the last remnants of the large herds of bison that ranged across much of the North American continent prior to European colonization; are the closest extant bison to that ancient morphological, physiological, behavioral, and genetic heritage; and are an irreplaceable resource for the restoration of self-sustaining wild bison herds and naturally functioning ecosystems. Conservation herds are managed by DOI, or in cooperation between DOI and Tribes, States, or other conservation partners as wildlife through the Public Trust Doctrine, for the benefit of all Americans.

The functional definition of a conservation herd is focused on management priorities that are directly linked to the five DOI bison conservation goals established in the DOI Bison Conservation Initiative 2020. This definition and these goals pertain only to DOI and conservation herds. One, some combination, or all of these goals may be of interest to other bison managers to prioritize and adopt for their own purposes and objectives, and DOI recognizes all contributions to any of these goals as worthwhile and valuable. DOI is committed to maximizing the simultaneous pursuit of all five goals, and to anchor management of conservation herds to the long-term viability of the species and their interaction with ecological and human communities. When opportunities for establishing new conservation herds arise, DOI will prioritize the selection of bison sources that are of high genetic conservation value and managed as wildlife.

### **DOI aligns management and the establishment of conservation herds to these five conservation goals:**

- 1. Wild, Healthy Bison Herds** – Bison are conserved as wildlife. To the fullest extent possible, past and current management maintains the wild character of bison, minimizes artificial selection, and allows forces of natural selection to operate, including natural age and sex demographics, competition for breeding, and the natural expression of behavior and resource selection. Bison are generally not vaccinated or provided medical intervention outside of exceptional circumstances that threaten the conservation value of the herd. Supplemental feeding only occurs when there are urgent conservation needs due to extraordinary conditions or required holding, and only then for the shortest necessary duration. When possible, populations are regulated through natural predation, and/or human hunting, and/or removal selection practices that contribute to maintaining a natural age class demographic.
- 2. Genetic Conservation** – Conservation herds are managed utilizing a science-based approach to maximize the maintenance of genetic diversity, minimize loss of diversity due to genetic drift, and preserve adaptive capacity of bison as a wildlife species. This can be facilitated through establishing large herds or managing several small populations as a metapopulation. To mitigate the loss of genetic diversity within herds and across the DOI bison metapopulation, management of gene flow across conservation herds follows the DOI Bison Metapopulation Strategy. Cattle gene introgression is monitored in conservation herds and managed to minimize cattle introgression through time, prevent the introduction or amplification of novel segments of cattle genetic material to individual herds or the metapopulation, and to not exacerbate cattle introgression (nuclear or mitochondrial) in any individual herd or the metapopulation.
- 3. Shared Stewardship** – Conservation herds promote and support diverse partnerships to address the scale, complexity, and ecological and cultural significance of conserving and restoring wild, healthy bison as native North American wildlife. Bison partnerships promote ecocultural restoration, and embrace place-based connections between bison, ecological processes, and human cultures.
- 4. Ecological Restoration** – Bison are maintained or restored in historically occupied ecoregions dominated by natural habitats and, to the fullest extent possible, express their roles as ecosystem engineers and as keystone species to shape healthy and diverse ecological communities. Bison densities and other native flora and fauna are managed in support of overall ecological health, using the best available science and knowledge to inform management.
- 5. Cultural Restoration** – Bison support and restore cultural connections between bison and people, support reconciliation between diverse human cultures and the natural world, and foster a reciprocal relationship between people and nature. Bison that are excess to management objectives can support Indigenous Peoples' communities, spirituality, food security, landscape restoration, and economic development through both the direct use of bison and by supporting the restoration of bison to Tribal lands. Conservation herds unite communities to honor and promote the unique status of bison as the National Mammal and as an icon for all Americans.

## CONCLUSION

This Strategy is the culmination of nearly 20 years of dedicated work by DOI wildlife professionals. Each Presidential Administration since 2008 has recognized wild bison as an icon of American culture and supported the BWG's efforts to strengthen scientific understanding of bison biology and ecology, develop science driven plans and tools to improve conservation efforts, and improve coordination within DOI and with other bison conservation partners.

Through that work on internal coordination and commitments to best science in support of bison conservation, DOI wildlife and land management professionals have developed a better understanding, clearer recognition, and deeper respect for the cultural, spiritual, and relational significance of bison for many Indigenous peoples. Many in the BWG have experienced a maturation of professional and personal perspective that extends well beyond our years of training in measuring ecological attributes and still not being able to put a finger on precisely what is behind the sense of awe, inspiration, and humility that we all feel when we 'connect' with the beauty and complexity and resilience of the natural world. Many came to an enlightening realization that ecological restoration of bison is inextricably tied to cultural restoration of bison. This is a truth for all Americans, and is undeniably special for Indigenous peoples, many of whose very identities, both individual and ancestral, are inextricably tied to past, present, and anticipated relationships with bison. This is how, through human relationship and commitment to each other, we arrived at this Strategy's focus on establishing an ecocultural vision, framework, and pathways for restoring large herds of wild bison.

We suggest a new and exciting model for the U.S. Government in relationship to and collaboration with Indigenous peoples. Rather than instinctual application of the traditional government model of agency staff writing a document in isolation and then, perhaps, consulting with Tribes for reaction, the BWG invited Tribes to co-produce, to co-create the Strategy. The BWG sought equal Tribal and DOI author representation and initiated a national scale Government-to-Government Consultation with Tribes and ITBC, not just to elicit perspective, insight, and assistance, but to invite author nominations. Interest was keen, strong nominations arrived, all nominated Tribes were welcomed, and the Strategy author team was formed with more Tribal than government authors.

We developed a Strategy that is inclusive of many representative voices, perspectives, ideas, and beliefs found in both Tribal and Western cultures. We explicitly considered the perspectives of the buffalo themselves, giving voice to their ancient, shared lifeways with humans. Our work acknowledges the atrocities of the past to both Indigenous peoples and bison, and the on-going space between actuality and obligation of DOI's Trust Responsibilities to Tribes. Still, we worked from a place of optimism, affirmative responsibility, vision, and commitment to work toward a measure of reconciliation of historic significance. The Strategy recognizes that the ecocultural restoration of bison, along with the restoration and celebration of lifeways between Indigenous peoples and buffalo, *are* Federal Trust Responsibilities.

Our intent is that this Strategy serve as a guide for building and strengthening diverse partnerships in support of the ecocultural restoration and shared stewardship of wild bison. We believe the pathways outlined in the Strategy will be durable, productive, and healing approaches that will assist generations of bison conservationists – across varied affiliation and ancestry – to create new and exciting alliances, and that these human relationships will generate innovative models for the ecocultural restoration and shared stewardship of new, large, wild herds. More large herds of wild bison will improve the long-term security and adaptability of bison as a species, reconnect lost ecological pathways, reinvigorate nearly lost lifeways between Indigenous peoples and buffalo, and amplify the sense of connection for all Americans and our national mammal.

When you, our reader and our current or future partner, consider how you yourself can utilize this Strategy to promote ecocultural restoration of bison, please follow the buffalo's voice, and follow your hearts.



*Bison shared stewardship coauthors and team on the Wind River Reservation, Photo Jeremy Roberts*



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The Bison Shared Stewardship Strategy coauthor team, under the direction of the DOI Bison Working Group, authored this Strategy, which aims to establish a comprehensive framework for American bison conservation and restoration, including strengthening long-term bison conservation partnerships.

