

Coordinating Diverse Environmental Interests:
Plains Bison Restoration Actors in Montana and Alberta

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Introduction

Amidst an accelerating environmental crisis, the plains bison seems to be a beacon of hope. Their population has risen from under a thousand in the late 19th century to hundreds of thousands today (McDonald, 2001, p. 104). But their success is not as clear-cut as it may seem. As of 2002, only 4% of all bison were in conservation herds. The rest are commercial stock (Freese et. al., 2007, p. 117). This lack of wild bison is particularly concerning because bison are a keystone species, vital to the rapidly disappearing North American plains ecosystems (McMillan, 2017, pp. 3-4). The need for bison restoration is clear, but those who wish to return the animal to the wild face an array of issues, from cattle gene introgression to disease, legal status, and local resistance (Bates and Hersey, 2016, p. 256). Still, there is continuous progress; a herd was reintroduced in Alberta's Banff National Park in 2018, for example, and conservation herds have been established throughout the United States, including in Montana (Government of Canada, 2020b; Freese et. al., 2007).

This progress is particularly astonishing when one considers the array of actors involved: government bodies, Indigenous peoples, non-governmental organizations, scientists, ranchers, and more (Freese et. al., 2007). A common thread across species conservation and other environmental issues is that often so many interests are involved that cooperation becomes both difficult and essential (Paloniemi et. al., 2012; Davenport, 2018; Defries and Nagendra, 2017).

This summer, I studied how current actors in bison restoration work and interrelate. I found that there are a myriad of actors involved in bison restoration, all with differing locations, goals, approaches, and levels of cooperation and involvement. Recent success, however, often occurs because of these differences, not despite them. The diverse actors involved in bison

restoration can make unique contributions to restoration as a whole; when their strengths are combined, massive restoration schemes can succeed.

Methods

I focused on achieving a comprehensive analysis of bison restoration actors in Alberta and Montana. The two areas border each other and both have recent bison reintroduction activity; the choice of one province and one state allowed me to examine cross-border interactions and possible differences between Canada and the US. Any statements about “bison restoration actors” made in this report are based only on actors in Alberta and Montana.

I began my research with a brief review of the academic literature on bison restoration, identifying about 30 actors. I recorded information about these actors through pages on their websites mentioning bison and searches for the organization name along with “bison.” I noted any goals the actor had surrounding bison restoration, the approaches they took to support bison restoration, and any other actors they mentioned partnering with or working alongside. I also recorded information surrounding the success of their work, using what results they provided. If I came across another organization that was directly involved in local bison restoration efforts, I would add it to the list. By the time I could find no new actors, I had recorded data on 114 between Montana and Alberta.

I then began to organize and standardize the information I had collected. First, I mapped the data on goals and methods to keys. Any information on approaches was limited to actions the actor themselves had taken, but members of the Interagency Bison Management Plan, the Buffalo Treaty, the Intertribal Buffalo Council, and the DOI Bison Initiative were assumed to share the goals of the organization they took part in.

Success and involvement were each rated on a scale from 1-3. For involvement, 1 was the least involved (eg. writing a letter, holding a webinar) and 3 was the most (eg. multifaceted programs dedicated to bison restoration). Success measures how successful that action has been, with 1 being least successful and 3 being the most successful. I measured success purely by each actor's choices and metrics. If they set out to prevent a bill, that bill's prevention was a success. If they set out to reach out to the public, public workshops would be a success. This approach allowed me to make replicable judgments of success across very different groups of actors.

I measured connections by noting any other actors one actor mentioned specifically working alongside. For example, an NGO that partnered with Yellowstone National Park to transfer bison had a connection with Yellowstone, while an NGO that referenced Yellowstone while contextualizing unrelated work did not have that connection. Due to time constraints, I did not assume connections were reciprocal.

Name	Type	Goals	Approaches	Involvement	Success	Connections
Department of Interior	Gov	Cultural Restoration, Disease Prevention, Wild Bison...	Herd Management, Research, Forum for Collaboration	3	3	National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management...

Figure 1: An example of the information I collected for each actor.

I examined the information I uncovered for patterns, working toward an understanding of the network of actors underlying plains bison restoration. By isolating and combining different

variables, I was able to identify the level of cooperation between different types of actors, common methods and goals, how location affects interaction, and similar relationships.

To minimize human error, I double-checked my work and followed up on every actor that was mentioned throughout my research. However, it is likely that some actors and information slipped through the cracks--unfortunately, this is an intrinsic danger of my approach. While I briefly considered computer-based data collection, the complexity of the data I was working with made that approach unrealistic for reaching my goals.

Findings - General

Out of the 114 actors that I analyzed, 76 were from Montana and 36 were from Alberta. 3 were involved in both areas.¹ The majority--69--were local, based directly in either Montana or Alberta. The other 45, while involved in conservation efforts in one of the areas, were national or international groups. Bison restoration actors as a whole were strongly skewed toward minimal involvement--the majority's involvement falls at 1, with slightly less at a 2, and even less at 3. Thus, many of the actors involved in bison restoration do not necessarily focus on wide-ranging involvement in rewilding bison as a whole. A select group of highly involved actors spearhead many of the bison reintroduction initiatives in Montana and Alberta, while a myriad of less involved actors take steps to tangentially support their work.

The actors widely vary in goals and approaches, with only a few goals being shared among all. However, 67% of bison restoration actors specifically support wild bison--they mention a need for bison to be wild, or treated as wildlife. This goal was by far the most shared; it would be difficult for an actor to have much involvement in restoring bison without a goal of eventual wildness. In fact, it is surprising that a third of bison restoration actors did not explicitly support wild bison. Some of these actors may focus on ecological restoration instead, looking for

¹ Database available upon request

bison to be restored to their ecological niche on the prairie but not necessarily treated as wildlife. These are the only two goals with relatively uniform support across different locations and different types of actors. In approaches, there is not even this small measure of uniformity; instead, approaches vary based on the type of actor.

In both Montana and Alberta, there are three central types of bison restoration actors: NGOs, Government bodies, and Native American/Indigenous groups.² In my analysis, I studied 67 NGOs, 24 Native American/Indigenous groups, and 28 Government bodies. Because these categories form the underlying foundation of action on bison restoration, each with its own shared goals and approaches, I will analyze them in turn before moving to discuss cooperation and connections between them.

Findings - Native American/Indigenous

Native American/Indigenous actors are the most uniform category of actors in bison restoration. 79% want to establish wild bison and 70% are in favor of specifically cultural bison restoration; no other category has over 70% of actors in support of one goal. In addition, 50% of these actors have expressed a goal of bison promotion--a goal to encourage others to value and support bison as a species. They also have unified approaches--approximately 70% are involved in bison management, making them the category with the most shared approach to bison restoration. The level of cross-border cooperation among Native American/Indigenous groups is also notable, with international ties stronger than those between government bodies or NGOs. Finally, about 17% of these actors act as a forum for collaboration--groups like the InterTribal Buffalo Council and the Iinnii Initiative have been created to facilitate communication and collaboration between Native American/Indigenous actors. Interestingly, while bison restoration actors as a whole skew toward less involvement, these actors are far more likely to make some

² This aligns with views held by Freese et. al. (2006) and Pejchar et al. (2021), among others.

sort of significant dedication to bison restoration--centering around 2 instead of 1 when it comes to involvement level.

Two groups fall within the Native American/Indigenous category: individual nations and forums for collaboration between nations. The Buffalo Treaty is a clear demonstration of the latter category. It maps out goals for over 29 signatories in both the US and Canada, facilitating collaboration and working to educate the public about the role bison play as an ecological and cultural keystone species (Buffalo Treaty, n.d., 2020, 2021). This is particularly significant in Canada, where the Treaty is the only wide-ranging agreement on bison between Indigenous peoples. In Montana, the InterTribal Buffalo Council, founded in 1991, plays a similar role, facilitating bison transfers and distributing information among 69 tribes in 19 states (Kolipinski, 2014, p. 357; InterTribal Buffalo Council, n.d.). While these organizations do not directly manage herds, they work to give individual tribes access to bison (Hance, 2018). These agreements create consistency between Native American/Indigenous actors and allow for more international cooperation; while there may be forums for NGOs to collaborate, there is no comparable agreement between them, and thus no set list of goals for all to follow.

Individual nations play a less public role in bison restoration--few advertise their goals or the fact that they have bison at all. However, many still make significant contributions to bison restoration. The Blackfeet Nation, located in northern Montana, is one example. As a member of the Buffalo Treaty, the InterTribal Buffalo Council, and the Iinii Initiative, the nation has committed itself to restoring wild bison on the plains and promoting bison as a species (Blackfeet Nation, 2021; Buffalo Treaty, 2020). They have partnered with the Wildlife Conservation Society, other Blackfoot Confederacy Tribes, and others to reintroduce bison to their lands and to “memorialize the story of the Blackfeet and buffalo” (Blackfeet Nation, 2021).

They reintroduced 88 bison in 2016, and, along with other Montana tribes, exercise their treaty right to hunt bison in Montana--a form of cultural restoration (Wildlife Conservation Society, 2016;).³

Between Montana and Alberta, 16 nations currently manage bison herds, some numbering over 1000. Ecoffey (2009), conducting interviews with Native American tribal bison managers, found that such herds are often managed with a hands-off approach, unlike a classic cattle ranching scheme. If other Native American/Indigenous herds in Montana and Alberta are similar, they may be a source of bison raised with minimal human interaction--essential for wild bison restoration. NGOs and Government bodies have actively worked with tribes to reintroduce bison to their lands; Elk Island National Parks has given tribes hundreds of bison throughout Canada and the US, and the World Wildlife Fund works with tribes to establish thriving conservation herds (Government of Canada, 2020a; World Wildlife Fund, 2021). These ever-growing herds, combined with a relatively unified stance in favor of bison restoration and wild bison, make Native American/Indigenous groups a foundational part of the greater bison restoration system in both Montana and Alberta.

Findings - Government Bodies

Government actors are the least likely to have a goal of introducing wild bison, with only 56% in support. At the same time, they are the most likely to emphasize genetic conservation and disease prevention--56% explicitly expressed concerns about disease among bison. They are the second greatest bison managers in Alberta and Montana; over half of all government actors play some role in managing bison. By my analysis, there are two subcategories a government actor could fall into: governing bodies and parks (I considered each park's management to be a separate actor). In Alberta, national parks play a significant role in bison restoration, but the

federal government is rarely involved. In contrast, a wide variety of local and national governing bodies participate in Montana bison restoration.

Two key governing bodies in Canada and the US are Parks Canada and the US National Park Service. Parks Canada oversees decision-making for individual park bison management (Government of Canada, 2018). However, even they have no overarching scheme or guidance for bison restoration. In sharp contrast, US government bodies have multiple set plans for bison. The National Park Service is guided by both the Department Of Interior (DOI) Bison Conservation Initiative and the Interagency Bison Management Plan (U.S. Department of Interior, 2020; *Interagency*, n.d.). The DOI Initiative sets out clear goals for bureaus and agencies within the Department of Interior, charging them to ensure genetic integrity in bison herds, seek partnership efforts, and work toward large, wide-ranging bison herds (Kolipinski, 2014, p. 372; Department of Interior, 2020). Similarly, the Interagency Bison Management coalesces goals for US agencies and tribes (*Interagency*, n.d.). The National Park Service also has its own initiative, "A Call to Action," under which it lays out a goal to return plains bison to the American plains landscape (Kolipinski, 2014, p. 372). In contrast, Alberta and Canada focus government efforts on the closely related, and recognized species at risk, wood bison.

In both Alberta and Montana, government bodies can set the playing field, changing rules and approaches to bison management. Actors like the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada decide whether to list plains bison as endangered species or species at risk--choices that define the landscape in which restoration action can occur (COSEWIC, 2021; U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2020). For a more local example, The Bureau of Land Management is charged with deciding when and how bison can be grazed on lands typically designated for cattle use (Bureau of Land Management, 2021). This

type of decision-making power is beyond that of any Native American/Indigenous or NGO actor, a unique characteristic of government bodies in bison restoration.

National Parks also play a key role in bison restoration; their wildness and size allow for bison herds unlike any other. In Montana, Yellowstone National Park is the only place consistently recognized as having truly wild bison, one of only 6 free-ranging bison herds in the country (Freese et. al. 2007, p. 177-180; Bates and Hersey 2016, p. 256). The park is one of the central figures in bison restoration, so iconic and divisive that NGOs like the Buffalo Field Campaign are dedicated solely to supporting its bison (Buffalo Field Campaign, 2020c). Yellowstone is particularly controversial because its bison herd has been infected with the disease brucellosis, which causes problems in cattle including calf abortion and non-viable calves. If the disease spreads to cattle, slaughters and trade restrictions will create devastating financial losses across the state livestock industry (White et. al. 2011, p. 1323).⁴ In an effort to keep Montana brucellosis-free, Yellowstone bison that migrate outside the park have been hazed and killed every year for decades--creating controversy and inspiring local wariness of bison restoration (White et. al., 2011; Geremia et. al., 2021, p. 13). Without brucellosis, federal herds in Canada have a less divisive role. Elk Island, for example, is a leading provider of bison to actors around the world. They have given herds to the Blackfeet Nation in Montana, the American Prairie Reserve, Banff National Park, and many others (Government of Canada, 2020a).

Overall, government actors are defined by their ability to set the playing field for bison restoration and to establish some of the most wild bison herds in both the US and Canada. Out of all bison restoration actors, government actors are the most likely to cooperate with Native American/Indigenous Actors. The Stoney Nakoda have held ceremonies and done research surrounding the bison reintroduced at Banff, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service currently

⁴ The risk of such spread occurring from Yellowstone bison is low (see White et. al. 2011)

co-manages the National Bison Range alongside the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Nations (Derworiz, 2017; Dulewich, 2020; U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2019). In addition, NGOs like Yellowstone Forever and the Greater Yellowstone Coalition help with fundraising and public outreach surrounding Yellowstone bison, and Bison Belong supports bison at Banff (Yellowstone Forever, 2021; Greater Yellowstone Coalition, n.d.; The Eleanor Luxton Historical Foundation, n.d.). Because government action is often necessary for significant bison restoration, and because park herds are uniquely wild, government actors play a key role in bison restoration as a whole.

Findings - NGOs

NGOs are the most varied category of bison restoration actors. Some are international, others minutely local. Some have wide, overarching goals, while others rarely mention bison at all. Those who do mention a goal, however, tend to agree that wild bison should be restored, with over 60% in favor. An above-average number of NGOs seek to specifically protect existing bison--for example, the Yellowstone herd--instead of restoring bison as a whole. An above-average amount also focus on genetic conservation. NGOs rarely manage bison, instead focusing on action to sway the government and the general public. These approaches are far less uniform than those of government bodies or Native American/Indigenous actors; half of the NGO actors participate in outreach, 45% in lobbying, 18% in funding, and 14% in legal action. Nevertheless, their participation in all those areas is significantly greater than that of non-NGO actors.

One of the most wide-reaching bison NGOs is the ICUN SCC Bison Specialist Group. This group works to help develop strategies and action surrounding bison conservation and restoration (Plumb et. al., 2019). They helped form the DOI Bison Conservation Initiative, supported research on bison population levels and viability, worked to develop regional

conservation strategies, and presented to key national actors (Plumb et. al., 2019). The organization's international role allows it to coordinate efforts and action across countries and facilitate collaboration on bison-related issues (Plumb et. al., 2020). Consequently, the IUCN focuses on bison as a whole instead of specific populations and restoration issues, contributing expertise instead of directly restoring bison (Plumb et. al., 2020).

When it comes to direct action, national organizations like the National Wildlife Federation are some of the most involved NGOs. The NWF has an extensive plains bison restoration program, with clearly defined goals and partnerships (National Wildlife Federation, n.d.a). They run outreach meetings with members of local communities, they have campaigned across Montana and the US, and they have worked with tribal members to increase engagement surrounding bison (National Wildlife Federation, n.d.a). They were the first NGO to sign a memorandum of understanding with the InterTribal Buffalo Council (National Wildlife Federation, n.d.b). They have helped restore bison on tribal lands, and are working to return bison to the Charles M Russell National Wildlife Refuge in Montana (National Wildlife Federation, n.d.c). Quite a few NGOs are taking similar actions, partnering with local groups and spearheading collaborative initiatives, including the Wildlife Conservation Society, World Wildlife Fund, and the Sierra Club (Loomis, 2014; World Wildlife Fund, 2021; Wildlife Conservation Society, n.d.). NGOs like Earthjustice or the Animal Defense Fund work through lawsuits, using the courts to improve restoration prospects (Earthjustice, 2019; Animal Legal Defense Fund, 2018). Their approaches are diverse, but they often cooperate to work toward similar goals or offer support to existing bison initiatives.

The vast majority of NGO actors in bison restoration, however, are local groups. On average these actors take less action and are less successful than the national or international

groups--they may tangentially brush by bison restoration instead of focusing initiatives around the issue. Even local actors who are fully dedicated to bison alone rarely have the resources for the far-reaching action taken by NGOs like the NWF. One example is Bison Belong, an Albertan NGO that branched off the Eleanor Luxton Historical Foundation to campaign for bison restoration in Banff National Park (The Eleanor Luxton Historical Foundation, n.d.). Now that bison have been restored to Banff, Bison Belong has continued to provide information about bison and bison restoration, although at a slower rate (The Eleanor Luxton Historical Foundation, n.d.; Bison Belong, n.d.). Its local role may allow it more access to people on the ground, but it lacks the resources for the sweeping actions an organization like MWF could take. The same can be said for a myriad of organizations in Montana, including Montana Audubon, the Montana Artemis Alliance, and the Montana Environment Information Center. This is not to say that all local groups have a minimal impact--plenty do have a significant influence. The Buffalo Field Campaign has played a central role in advocating against killing Yellowstone bison, and the American Prairie Reserve is working to reintroduce thousands of bison to the Montana prairies (Buffalo Field Campaign, 2020a; American Prairie Reserve, 2021).

While NGO involvement, impact, and approaches vary wildly, as a whole they are a foundational aspect of bison restoration. They act as touchstones for the public, spearheading public outreach and ensuring bison restoration has support on the ground. They also take up wider issues in bison restoration, organizing in groups like the American Bison Society to collaborate across North America and partner with governments and tribes (American Bison Society, 2019). Their tendency toward lobbying, outreach, and legal action, alongside their often local approach, helps to bring bison restoration to the general public and introduce bison outside

of national parks and reservations/reserves. Their role may be complex, but NGOs have made some of the most significant contributions to bison restoration.

Findings - Others

NGOs, Native American/Indigenous groups, and Government bodies are the three main categories I gathered information on during my research. However, some actors fall outside these categories. Without acknowledging commercial bison actors and “anti-bison” actors, it would be difficult to paint a complete picture of the bison restoration landscape.

Commercial bison ranchers and private bison managers may have saved the species bison from extinction, and today, scholars hope their herds may be able to aid wild bison restoration (Martin et. al., 2021). The Canadian Bison Association is one of the central commercial bison actors in Canada. For bison consumers, they enumerate the merits of bison meat; for producers, they describe the most efficient ways to ranch them (Canadian Bison Association, 2021a; Canadian Bison Association, 2021b). The Canadian Bison Association and its American counterpart, the National Bison Association, exemplify the unusual position of bison producers in bison restoration. The Canadian Bison Association, for example, emphasizes again and again on their website that they will never allow bison to be considered wildlife in Alberta; it is one of their clearest goals (Canadian Bison Association, 2019). A designation as wildlife would cause protections that could devastate the industry.

But in some ways, commercial bison actors do work toward restoration. For example, the National Bison Association worked alongside the InterTribal Buffalo Council and the Wildlife Conservation Society to establish November 7 as National Bison Day in the US (National Bison Association, 2016). They proudly display Bison Day materials online, celebrating bison as livestock (National Bison Association, 2016). At the same time, more conservation-focused

actors use the day to raise awareness for bison restoration, celebrating bison as wildlife (Wildlife Conservation Society, 2013; Wright, 2018). Where interests align--where a goal like promoting bison as a whole is shared--conservationists may collaborate with bison ranchers, but there is no guarantee that ranching bison makes these actors amenable to wild bison.

Finally, the prevalence of “anti-bison” sentiment in Montana has caused actors that protest restoration to emerge (Davenport, 2018). Actors like the Phillips County Livestock Association, Montana Farm Bureau Federation, and Citizens For Balanced Use place themselves squarely against bison restoration, objecting because of wariness caused by historical initiatives like the “Buffalo Commons,” fears of disease, and/or concerns about reintroduction’s impact on their land and community (Davenport, 2018, pp. 199-204, 215). They may not be against the idea of bison on the prairie as a whole; the United Property Owners of Montana (UPOM), for example, sees no issue with herds in national parks or reservations (United Property Owners of Montana, 2019). They cannot, however, accept the idea of widely roaming, un-owned, herds (United Property Owners of Montana, 2019).

Their efforts have had a significant impact: In April 2021, Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks settled a lawsuit with UPOM, agreeing to halt all state bison restoration efforts for a period of 10 years (Smith, 2021). Soon after, two bills were passed in the Montana state legislature that will make bison restoration more difficult still: one re-defines “wild bison” to mean any bison that has not been taxed, and that is not descended from bison that have been taxed (House Bill 318). This definition drastically narrows the pool of bison that could be used for truly wild reintroduction. The second bill requires all state bison restoration transfers to be voted on by nearby county leadership (House Bill 302). Time will tell how the actors that have been analyzed here will respond to this predicament. Leaders of both the National Wildlife Federation and the

Defenders of Wildlife in the Rocky Mountains have expressed plans to push for bison restoration through other avenues (Eggert, 2021).

This rejection of bison in Montana has no parallel in Alberta. Similar sentiments have been expressed; the Alberta Beef Producers, for example, opposed bison restoration at Banff (Duckworth, 2016). However, the actors in Alberta have been less persistent and influential. Picketts (2017, pp. 28-38, 68-73) has hypothesized that this difference in response to bison restoration between the US and Canada may be explained by overarching cultural and historical differences in attitudes toward bison and wildlife restoration, as well as an increased level of community involvement in some Canadian bison restoration projects.

Findings - Connections

There are intriguing patterns in the connections between bison actors, both in cooperation between different actors and in different locations. Actors tend to strongly favor actors from the same country; those in Montana favor partners in Montana, and those in Alberta favor partners in Alberta. This is true across local and non-local actors; non-local actors in Montana, for example, are more likely to work with local Montana actors than with non-local Alberta actors. That being said, all actors tend to favor local actors when it comes to cooperative efforts. This can likely be attributed to the high prevalence of local groups; a single national NGO or governing body will likely find themselves partnering with a number of them, while each local body partners with a minimal number of national groups.

When it comes to types of actors, connections are less clear-cut. NGOs strongly favor other NGOs as partners. In contrast, government actors are the least likely to mention partnerships with each other, instead favoring Native American/Indigenous actors. Similarly, Native American/Indigenous actors are more likely to mention cooperation with government

actors than with NGOs or each other. However, these distinctions are far less drastic than those by location. On average, every actor collaborates with at least one NGO, one Government actor, and one Native American/Indigenous actor--regardless of the category they fall into. In other words, the different types of actors are interwoven by cooperative efforts.

Recent actions surrounding Yellowstone are a perfect demonstration of how this variety of actors can come together to support bison reintroduction. NGOs like the Buffalo Field Campaign, Defenders of Wildlife, and Greater Yellowstone Coalition have lobbied for the end to the routine hunting and capture of Yellowstone bison and worked toward the creation of expanded areas where bison can roam outside the park, reached out to the local community to improve attitudes toward bison, and raised funds for efforts to change Yellowstone's approach (Buffalo Field Campaign, 2020b; Defenders of Wildlife, n.d.; Reed, 2019). Government bodies, including Yellowstone Park management, the National Park Service, and the Department of Interior as a whole, responded to and worked with these NGOs to adapt their bison policies to minimize bison deaths while ensuring concerns about disease were addressed (*Interagency*, n.d.; Geremia et. al., 2020). Alongside expanded boundaries for bison to roam, their solution relied on Native American actors; Fort Peck, which accepted Yellowstone Bison for multi-year quarantine periods, and the InterTribal Buffalo Council, which helped distribute bison that proved to be disease-free for tribal herds (InterTribal Buffalo Council, 2020). This is only a small sample of the many actors that worked together to ensure Yellowstone bison are protected and distributed.

In Canada, the recent reintroduction at Banff included a similar variety of actors: NGOs like Bison Belong lobbied for bison restoration and working to sway public opinion toward bison; Parks Canada decided to introduce the herd and transferred bison between Elk Island National Park and Banff; members of the Stoney Nakoda nation advised park management, held

ceremonies, and conducted research surrounding the newly introduced bison (The Eleanor Luxton Historical Foundation, n.d.; Government of Canada, 2020a; Dulewich, 2020). Thus, in both Montana and Alberta, some of the most significant recent bison restoration initiatives are born of a wide variety of actors joining forces, each taking actions in line with their own approaches but working toward common goals.

These events, along with the many other cooperative efforts mentioned in this report, demonstrate the interconnected nature of bison restoration actors. Different actors may have different methods, and even different motivations, but the most significant bison restoration has been achieved through the combination and cooperation of these actors. The differences between them become a strength of bison restoration as a whole.

Conclusion

Moving forward, the bison restoration system should work to increase international cooperation and increase local involvement. There are surprisingly few international actors in bison restoration--with the only actors focusing on cross-border efforts being the Buffalo Treaty, ICUN, and American Bison Society. In general, a low number of Montana actors were mentioned as partnering with Alberta actors, and vice versa--surprising when the two areas are so close and quite similar. Collaboration between Parks Canada and US government bodies could allow for bison to be drawn from a larger, more genetically varied, population. NGOs that are extremely active across the US in support of bison restoration rarely mention collaborative efforts in Canada; establishing such efforts could further bison reintroduction as a whole.

When it comes to individual initiatives, local groups seem to be set aside for more national organizations. However, the opposition to these initiatives often forms at local levels (Davenport 2018, p. 200). Increasing local NGO involvement could help address these

issues--local NGOs may be best equipped to support community-based management plans like those suggested by Ranglack and du Toit (2015). Currently, however, few national organizations have mentioned supporting such efforts. Increasing connections between national and local actors, and with local NGOs playing a greater role in public outreach, could be a promising step forward.

NGOs, Native American/Indigenous, and government, locally, nationally, and internationally have come together to protect bison throughout the past decade. At their best, these actors have specialized in the areas where they are the most strong: Native American/Indigenous actors directly managing herds, government actors facilitating transfers and decision-making, and NGOs reaching out to the general public to increase knowledge and support. Even when overall goals do not align, a single initiative can bring diverse actors together.

In comparable situations, where multiple groups of actors with differing approaches and goals all are involved in addressing species restoration or an environmental problem, a stakeholder analysis focusing on the approaches and goals each group takes could be useful, allowing plans to be made that play off each groups specialty and work toward shared goals. As bison restoration has shown, collaborative action is far from impossible, and differences can become the key to effective change.

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