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WildEARTH



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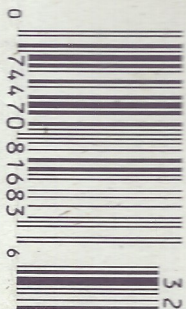
DOUG PEACOCK BLASTS BISON KILLERS

Hugh Iltis Challenges Biologists

Dave Foreman Challenges Abiologists

Threatened Eastern Old Growth

Fire in Parks



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Field Report

Yellowstone Bison Slaughter

by Doug Peacock

I have been unable to live without wild things from my earliest memories as a boy growing up in northern Michigan. During my twenties, this requirement for turtles, swamps, and geese took a surly turn and I discovered that without big dangerous animals ranging freely over huge hunks of wild habitat, my prior life paled and I despaired. More recently, the addiction twisted again and I found it difficult to get out of bed without the anticipation of the daily fix of physical and psychic proximity to some big native animal. It was no longer good enough just to know they were out there. Others, probably more mature and better adapted, seem to do just fine with whatever Nature they find around their backyards. I don't think anyone is wrong in determining their own minimum wild needs and tend to think of mine as merely a personal problem, born of violence in and to the planet, an accident of history to one who remains a second rate human if deprived of regular contact with the wild ones. I see this pattern less as a singular trait of quirky characters than as a personality defect, which occasionally approaches true perversion (because there are dark sides) in its need for wild and sometimes dangerous critters.

How the cumulative effects of this individual compulsion impact wild ecosystems is a subject for another time best written by somebody else. To chart your occasional spiritual success by conserving wildness is not the only measure of gratification in the late 20th century; yet for me, many of these small victories have come when I remembered the fragrance of walking through a place, the stare of a particular wild animal, my own fear in its presence. The supposition here might be that it is necessary to know something in order to save it.

I offer this personal observation because this winter I ran into something I couldn't save, a conservation problem I could not solve, indeed none of us could. It concerned Bison in Yellowstone National Park. Despite the efforts of hundreds of individuals—good people—many preservation groups and conservation organizations, we failed to save a single wild Bison during the brutal winter of 1996-97.

The nation's only wild free-ranging Bison herd was decimated by agencies and bureaucrats, cheered on by regional politicians, and we couldn't find a way to stop them. Of the park's estimated 3500 Bison, over 1100 were shipped to slaughter by the National Park Service or blown away by shooters of the Montana Departments of Livestock or Fish, Game, and Parks. Another estimated 1400 were winter-killed by early April. The dying continues today and it is possible we will be left with so few Bison that the viability of the population is in question. The starving Bison's only crime was looking north across the park's border down the valley where I lived.

From my home some 45 miles north of the park, down the Yellowstone River in the valley they call Paradise, I watched as one of the worst slaughters of North American wildlife in recent history unfolded.

Yellowstone's Bison had been important in my own life. I had camped with them in the backcountry of Yellowstone Park for three or four months each year for over fifteen years during the two decades after Vietnam when I lived with Grizzly Bears. Sometimes I didn't see Grizzlies for weeks but the Bison were there every day, offering me the wild gift of their companionship, kicking, romping, rolling in the dirt and shaking off clouds of dust, bellowing and grunting as the summer proceeded.

These creatures were remnants of the greatest herds of game animals ever to roam the face of the Earth—greater than the wildebeests of the Serengetti or the Caribou of the Yukon—the American Bison of the High Plains. Numbering perhaps seventy million at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the American Bison was slaughtered into near extinction by 1900.

This was no hunt but butchery. In less than a hundred years, we European Americans reduced the quintessential animal of the continent by 99.999%. Both the magnitude of this milling, vibrant animal spectacle and the rapidity with which the herds were slaughtered are unprecedented in human history; I'm saying no other people, maybe no other species on Earth, ever had the impact on the planet's biomass that we had on the Bison in the late 19th century.

Seventy million were reduced to a few dozen wild Bison that survived by finding refuge in Yellowstone National Park. In 1902, twenty-three Bison eluded Yellowstone Park's efforts to capture them. Another 700 or so lived in captivity at the turn of the century. Those were all that was left of them.

Since that cold spring in 1902, the Buffalo has made a small recovery and, indeed, the origins of the American conservation movement are connected with its return. The Lacey Act of 1894, a precursor to the Endangered Species Act, made it illegal to kill Bison. In 1905, President Roosevelt helped found the American Bison Society. Protective measures were implemented, and in 1909 the National Bison Range was established in Montana. Today, more than 150,000 Bison live in private herds, on Indian reservations, and in a few parks. But only in Yellowstone have these animals always been free to roam, especially once the park committed to a policy of natural regulation in 1966, allowing Nature to take her course. Descendants of the only free-ranging Bison in the country increased their numbers to about 3500 by 1996.

This historic connection was what first attracted me to Yellowstone's wild Bison and held my attention for three decades. They were the great-great-grandchildren of the last and only wild ones. This kinship lent me abiding pleasure, a gift. I owed these animals and I had a personal stake in their survival. During the killer winter of 96-97, I visited these animals every week, bearing witness to this unprecedented twentieth century wildlife disaster.

It went something like this: Winter slammed down on Yellowstone Park early, ending wildlife grazing. In late December, snow pack measured twice the normal depth. Worse for the Bison and Elk who winter here, a rare freezing rain had blasted the high plateau with an impenetrable ice layer just before New Year. Grazing was impossible. The animals had to get out, migrate down off the plateau to lower habitats or starve. This habitat was mostly on public land outside the park, National Forest land. The Elk were welcome here, but not the Bison. The Bison would be killed for trying to cross the park boundary. Stay or leave, the Bison were dead.

The danger compounding the death inflicted by winter was a new government policy known as the Interim Bison Plan. Agreed to last summer by the US Departments of Agriculture and Interior and the state of Montana, Yellowstone National Park officials reluctantly implemented the new agreement in December 1996. Bi-

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son were no longer free to roam. Under the Interim Plan, all Bison that appeared to be headed across the northern park boundary were to be rounded up, captured and shipped to slaughterhouses. On the west border of Yellowstone, the wild Bison that couldn't be corralled (90% of them) were simply shot by sharpshooters of Montana's Department of Livestock.

The ostensible reason for this slaughter is a disease called brucellosis, a contagious bacterium present in both domestic animals and wildlife. The European disease was probably brought over by domestic animals, though humans can also contract it. Cattle infected with brucellosis often miscarry their first calf. Montana livestock interests are concerned about losing the state's brucellosis-free status—a threat made by the federal Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), a threat the Montana Department of Livestock (DOL) took very seriously. Never mind that there has never been a documented case of Bison infecting cattle with brucellosis in the wild.

The killing began in earnest in late December. Nearly every day, three or four dozen Bison were shipped to slaughter from inside the park's northern boundary. Those left in the park's interior were reduced to browsing on pine needles and bark—starvation food. On the west border, the Montana DOL shot another 200 during this brief period. Yellowstone's superintendent and the governor of Montana argued publicly about "whose Bison problem" it was. By the third week of January, the number of Bison killed by humans exceeded the previous late twentieth century record of 569 (for the winter of 1988-89). The superintendent had earlier stated with great accuracy: "If we managed AIDS the way brucellosis is being managed here, you'd be shot when you left your house."

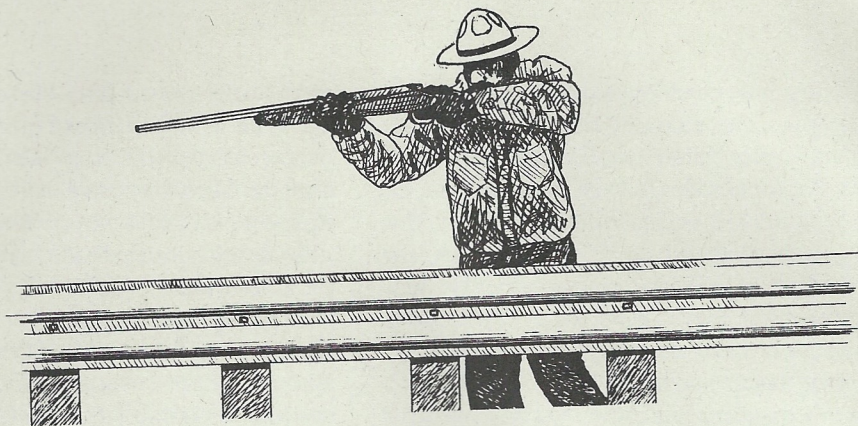
On February 1, APHIS announced it would back off and allow some Bison on public land without stripping Montana of its disease-free status. But the state wouldn't hear it and the killing continued. Lying just north of Yellowstone Park, and arguably the Bison's worst neighbor, the Church Universal and Triumphant once again whined about gutpiles of Bison left on their private property adjacent to Yellowstone Park, even though these Buffalo had been shot by the DOL in response to the New Age cult's request. When the number of Bison dead ap-

proached 800 in late January, the NPS announced a moratorium on killing. Just two weeks later, YNP's superintendent said the program of shooting and shipping to slaughter would resume with a few modifications. The park spokesperson reported that Yellowstone had no choice but to return to its policy of killing Bison. "We're between a rock and a hard place," she said. By the end of February, 1000 of Yellowstone's estimated 3500 Bison had been shot by government sharpshooters or shipped to the slaughterhouse. An aerial survey conducted on February 21 counted 1720 Bison left, meaning another 800 had starved to death with winter barely half over.

During March, Montana's DOL continued to blow away nearly all Bison crossing the western park border. Montana's chief veterinarian had made the DOL position clear: "The one thing I'm going to tell you is exposure (of wild Bison) to livestock is not a negotiating point." Of course, there were no cattle in the area and wouldn't be until June 15. The killing persisted even after APHIS, in a letter signed by heads of the Park and Forest Services, wrote Montana's governor saying tolerance for Bison would not endanger the state's brucellosis-free status. DOL shooters killed 83 more Bison after that communication, all but one on public land, including 41 bulls, which present the least threat of transmitting the disease. About the only way the bulls could contaminate a beef cow, the state veterinarian had stated, was if a Bison bull tried to breed the cow and injured her in the process. Since no cattle were in the area, precluding this most unlikely of unnatural acts, the 41 bulls died just to show, once again, that the Montana DOL could kill them anyway if they damned well pleased, with or without APHIS's blessing. The most recent aerial survey counted less than 1100 Bison.

Spring equinox arrived and the public began to tire of this muddy controversy with no apparent human heroes. As late as March 17, 1997, the press was still reporting that the issue was simply poor diseased Bison who sadly had to be killed. "Yellowstone's Bison Biting the Dust as Brucellosis Spreads," read a front-page article in the *Salt Lake Tribune*. Elsewhere, the slaughter of Yellowstone's Bison was being widely reported as a state's rights issue, portraying mismanaged federal ani-





imals invading the blameless state of Montana. By late March, a chinook blew in, the weather warmed and, although Bison continued to winter-kill within the interior of Yellowstone Park, the regional press forgot about the Bison massacre and dropped its coverage. By the end of March, we had lost more than 2500 of the estimated 3500 Yellowstone Bison. Winter up there wasn't over. Down here, in paradise, an abrupt and heavy silence lay over the land: the protests and outrage evaporated and the popular media abandoned the issue altogether.

It is now April. Winter lingers on the high plateau. The high peaks of Yellowstone Park's Absoroka Mountains, which run behind my house, are encased again in fresh hoarfrost, a terrifying white beauty with the wind chill at 12 degrees below zero. The dying continues. Combined with the natural mortality of the harsh winter, this government policy has led to the most deadly year the American Bison have faced since being slaughtered into near extinction in the late nineteenth century.

A couple observations may be appropriate here; the issues engulfing the slaughter were lost in the murk and smokescreen of brucellosis. The rights of native wildlife on public and other lands were scarcely discussed. The media culmination of the Bison issue was a town meeting on March 23 in Gardiner, MT, which was attended by three US senators and MT's governor for the sole benefit and edification of the US Secretary of Agriculture. Wildlife personnel were not present. Yellowstone's superintendent was permitted a two minute reply. The driving management forces throughout this butchery of wild animals were the Department of Agriculture's APHIS and MT's DOL—agricultural agents managing wildlife as domestic chattel, a holy war in the endless taming of the earth whose victory would be the replacement of wild America with a zoo.

Conservation groups were ineffective, though not necessarily inactive. The Fund for Animals wrote papers and threatened to file law suits; in late January the Fund took out an ad in *USA Today* calling for a tourist boycott of Montana. The Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund did file against the NPS but lost the case on appeal. Groups that do good jobs on land use seemed less directed: The Greater Yellowstone Coalition republished a color insert in their newsletter that called for allowing Bison to roam on National Forest land; and the Jackson

Hole Alliance received a \$3000 grant from Patagonia to do a Bison PSA, but they couldn't get it together in time for this winter. Cold Mountains, Cold Rivers provided invaluable and ghastly video of the slaughter which was widely viewed, especially by Native Americans. The local Bison Action Group, a tiny bunch of impoverished activists from Bozeman and Missoula, got the most press by their collective protests and for trying to douse Montana's governor with rancid Bison guts at the Gardiner meeting.

On Valentine's Day, 1997, seven conservation groups finally presented their long-term plan for handling Bison migrating out of Yellowstone National Park. The plan, presented in a letter to the governor of Montana and President Clinton, calls for the park to stop grooming the snowmobile trails that have facilitated the exodus of Bison. Outside the park, the letter suggests, the US Forest Service should allow Bison to graze public lands and APHIS should guarantee its coveted brucellosis-free status if the Bison are in a quarantine facility or on state lands. Other suggestions include a state Bison hunt and the acquisition of easements or leases from private landowners allowing Bison to use and migrate through their lands. The letter was signed by representatives from the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, Defenders of Wildlife, Natural Resources Defense Council, Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund, Intertribal Bison Cooperative, and Jackson Hole Alliance. Presumably because of the recommendation for a hunt, Fund for Animals did not sign on.

These sound recommendations came too late to make any difference. The Yellowstone Bison population had already "crashed."

For myself, I stayed put much of the winter just north of Yellowstone, making mostly ineffective phone calls to people I thought might help: many Native Americans, especially the Intertribal Bison people; I went so far as to call Russell Means, who was busy being a movie star but who said he'd make some calls. I accomplished nothing beyond my weekly travels into Yellowstone Park to visit my shaggy brothers and bear witness to their plight.

What are the implications of the Yellowstone Bison crisis for us conservationists? Each group or organization might look at their own goals and agenda and see how they did. How many animals were saved by Earth First!, the Fund for Animals, or

Defenders of Wildlife; how much ecosystem management or natural regulation was advanced by the efforts of the Jackson Hole Alliance or the Greater Yellowstone Coalition; how much support was garnered for corridor linkage by groups like the Alliance for the Wild Rockies or The Wildlands Project. That sort of thing. By every standard I can think of, we took—by what it's known as up here in Bison country—an asskicking.

We lost on every level. Eleven hundred native wild Bison were blown away for crossing an artificial boundary, in defense of an unproven threat to privately-owned domestic livestock who weren't even present on public land grazing allotments. The easy talk about restoring Grizzlies to California and Nebraska, of linking wolves from Maine to Mexico, sounds in this context like empty eco-babble. It was a major defeat handed to us by mid-level bureaucrats and local politicians leering for media attention.

Among the voices missing in loudly protesting the slaughter—the ones I noticed—were hunting groups, sportsmen, guides, those whose outrage would have been thunderous if Elk, instead of Bison, were being killed. Also noticeably silent here were the collective spokespersons of The Wildlands Project, though Dave Foreman was immensely supportive in his public lectures. A quote in the national press or a letter of protest would have been useful. Nothing much came in beyond the protests of the activists, Native Americans, and the Intertribal Bison Cooperative, Joe Gutkoski of the American Buffalo Foundation, and finally a letter to the editor of the *Livingston* paper, from George Wuerthner, a bit late, but, as usual for George, right on the money.

And accountability? Read the papers and magazines. Listen to what the bureaucrats and politicians say. Where was the Clinton-Gore White House on all this? They sound clueless on issues of American wildlife and wilderness. Why couldn't they rein in the rogue agency APHIS and why was the Agriculture Department handling wildlife issues anyway? Who advises the president? The Secretary of Interior's silence was deafening. The director of GYC reported that Secretary Babbitt had got his butt kicked once on grazing reform and, being from a ranching family, didn't want another livestock defeat. The NPS regional park spokesman talked about the need for Yellowstone to be a "good neighbor"; part of being a good neighbor, he said, was being sensitive to the APHIS threat to strip Montana of its brucellosis-free status (therefore, having won on the wolf reintroduction and the New World Mine, it was time to lose on the third issue, Bison).

At the Yellowstone Park level, the chief scientist correctly characterized the controversy as "a struggle between the park and agribusiness and we're losing badly. They did not like us winning the wolf issue and they are determined not to lose this one."

Park managers were counting heavily on public opinion to bail them out of a bad deal. They hated what they were doing but did it anyway. I think YNP officials figured no more than a hundred or so Bison might wander north out of the park

and actually end up at the slaughterhouse. The media coverage of the corralling, trucking, and butchering and subsequent public outcry would force intervention from above and thus slam the lid on the operation. A more enlightened Bison management plan could then be formulated by next winter. YNP officials miscalculated badly, and nobody could have predicted the killer winter.

The agency responsible for most of the Bison killing was the Montana Department of Livestock. Once control of wild Bison was turned over to agricultural agencies, their fate was sealed. Most intractable has been the core of the operation run by DOL, with little or no supervision, answering to none, headed up by director Larry Peterson and the state veterinarian, Clarence Sirochi. Local activists have called Sirochi "the Eichmann of Yellowstone."

Even more corrupt than the DOL, who were after all only doing their job with striking efficiency, were Montana's governor and congressmen, who got on the bandwagon only after sensing the Feds were bleeding and they could safely make political hay out of blaming the Park Service. Though not all equally of course, they did collectively aid and abet a false presentation of the brucellosis issue and a phony substitution of legitimate ranching interests by bureaucratic power brokers within the Livestock Department. All these agencies and officials, incidentally, claimed to be "caught in the middle," a most cowardly contradiction of ethical configurations.

Late this winter, livestock associations from the states of Oregon and, especially, Colorado took cheap shots at Bison through dishonest representation of a brucellosis threat. All of these people, as well as the above politicians and agencies, got off scot free. What could be done, then, to put some heat on these cold executioners and professional spit-dribblers? Perhaps a mainstream conservation group could take on the task of sorting out wildlife interests from the legitimate interests of livestock growers (neither state livestock associations nor departments of agriculture necessarily speak for regional ranchers here). The right of Bison to lead a wild bovid life on America's wildlands must be a given. Ideally, the model would be the dolphin-safe label on the tuna can. People who eat beef should have a choice beyond "organic" raised meat. This will not be easy because current packaging and labeling does not permit identification of from where or whom or how such food arrives nor if it's Bison friendly. Many cattle-raisers from the Yellowstone to the Malpais would endorse such accountability. Livestock raisers who deal responsibly with the issues of native habitats and wildlife should be rewarded, not lumped with welfare ranchers.

Finally, I don't think this is a time to merely talk conservation and ecology. I feel close enough to the legacy of Ed Abbey to believe this is not what he had in mind when he said, "Sentiment without action is the ruin of the soul." A wilderness strategy for the twenty-first century cannot be successful without fighting like hell all through the twentieth. What is called for is closer to the metaphorical equivalent of a lynch-

ing. I don't believe in lynching, but I believe in retribution appropriate to the deed. It may not be practical or positive, but there are times to lay down your imaging software and pick up a baseball bat. Or perhaps pick up the moral arms of your own choices, including, but not limited to, prayers, letters, and tomahawks in defense of native wild rights.

The ease with which the second slaughter of 1100 wild American Bison went down took all of us by surprise. How could this happen again? I believe the American Bison has never entered our consciousness as a sentient creature, but somehow lies in our history as a black hole of denial, obstacles to Manifest Destiny that we expediently slaughtered as part of the final solution to the Indian Problem, not unlike colonial cultures treated subordinate races. How else could we kill them so easily? The Yellowstone slaughter went far beyond any notion of "wildlife management" in both scale and brutality. All through this winter, officials made a point of delineating between individual Bison and the "population." Yellowstone's superintendent said that even the Secretary of Interior got it: "It's the population, stupid." The park's senior Bison biologist called the winterkill a "critical ecological need" because the Yellowstone Bison population had become "inflated." Even conservation biologists, if I read them right, subscribe to such detachment, which so facilitates extermination of undesired nonhumans or "sub"-humans. Ask Pol Pot. The ribs and pelvis of the starving Bison shot four times at the Sheridan, Wyo-

oming slaughterhouse looked like emancipation day at Auschwitz. Do My Lai and Yellowstone share this convenience? I've been both places and I think so. The lightning efficiency with which we butchered our 70 million Bison boggles the mind and lingers yet, I believe, near the heart of our flawed relationship with the American wilderness and its wild inhabitants.

We never really knew these animals. ■

Doug Peacock, inspiration for Ed Abbey's famous hero Hayduke, is a writer and naturalist and close friend of Grizzly Bears (though charged 25 times, each time he has reached an amicable truce with his would-be ursine devourers). Doug's first book, Grizzly Years, describes his quest for big bears following his return from the Vietnam War. His next book, dealing partly with the Abbey years, is due out this year.

Readers interested in learning more about Bison history, natural and human-inflicted, should read Ernest Callenbach's book *Bring Back the Buffalo* (Island Press, 1995) and *Bison: Distant Thunder* by Douglas Gruenau with a preface by Doug Peacock (Takarajima Books, 1995).

To assist in efforts to protect the Bison, contact Stan Wilson, Bison Action Group, POB 7326, Bozeman, MT 59771; 406-586-9141.

