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Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes

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Q^weyq^way. Bison and the Salish and Pend d'Oreille People

Lemlmtš - thank you - for the great honor of being here today and for the opportunity of sharing a few words with this distinguished group doing such vital work on behalf of *q^weyq^way* -- the bison.

Needless to say, I speak to you not as an expert, but simply as a student -- a student of the real experts, the elders. I will try to pass on a few of the things they have taught about bison, and the people's relationship with them.

Q^weyq^way - bison - buffalo -- stood at the very heart of the traditional way of life of the Salish and Pend d'Oreille people. Materially, they were one of the key sources of

sustenance. And while the elders prefer that the spiritual relationship not be described in great detail, suffice it to say that it was, and is, a relationship of the deepest and most powerful kind. Perhaps each one of us felt a little of that this morning as *Yamncut* sang the ancient Salish buffalo song.

The relationship with buffalo was part of the relationship with all the animals, the plants, and the land itself. This was the way of life set forth in the tribes' creation stories, the stories of Coyote and the transformation of the world. We can't relate those stories today — they're told only in winter — but we can say, very generally, that in the stories Coyote shows the people the right way to live — a way of respect for other people, and a way of respect for the animals and plants, the land and water, upon which we depend. In preparing the world for the human beings who were yet to come, he showed how to hunt the animals properly, and how to fish. He showed which plants to gather for food and medicine, and how to use them. He showed how we should honor and respect whatever surrenders its life so that people might live.

The Coyote stories also help us understand that Indian people have been living by those ways in this region for a very long time. Many of the stories describe a strange and now

vanished world, before Coyote was sent here. They tell of a land gripped in cold and ice, and then the retreat of the bitter cold weather, and finally the establishment of the four seasons. They describe the disappearance of large animals like giant beaver and giant buffalo and their replacement by the smaller creatures that we know today. They tell of great dams blocking the rivers and water flooding the valleys.

In fact, the creation stories of not only the Pend d'Oreille, but also of other tribes in the region, sound very much like the stories that scientists now tell about the last ice age. Many of the monster-animals bear a close resemblance to what scientists call the Pleistocene megafauna. The descriptions of cold and ice, of dammed rivers, and of great floods, echo geologists' accounts of Glacial Lake Missoula — which finally drained about 13,000 years ago.

It is not only creation stories and their uncanny parallels with the geologic record that testify to the astonishing tenure of tribal people in western Montana. Archaeologists have also documented the vast span of human history here. Some sites within Salish-Pend d'Oreille aboriginal territories date back about 10,000 years, some five thousand years before the construction of the oldest of the great pyramids of Egypt. Many

archaeologists recognize this is an incomplete record, and believe that it is almost certain that people occupied the area at an even earlier time.

This perspective, reflected in this timeline, helps us better understand the vast time-depth of the relationship between tribal people and this place, and buffalo — and how recent and traumatic, in the context of tribal history, the changes of the last two centuries have been. (Timeline shows how recent, in this context, even the arrival Columbus was, 500 years ago....if this scale were boiled into a single 24 hour day, beginning at midnight and ending at midnight, the destruction of wild bison would happen at about 11:45 pm.)

In those earliest times, the people lived as one great Salish nation. As the great Pend d'Oreille historian Pete Beaverhead related, at some point thousands of years ago, the population grew until there were too many mouths to feed from the food that could be harvested in one place. In response, the great Salish nation dispersed. Various groups or clans migrated in different directions. Over time, they developed into the distinct dialects of the Salish language family, including the Salish, Pend d'Oreille, Kalispel, Coeur d'Alene, Spokane, Colville, Okanogan, Shuswap, Thompson River, Lillooet, and numerous Coast Salish tribes, reaching from Montana westward to the Pacific coast.

When linguists study the extent of dialect differentiation in the Salish language family, they estimate that the initial dispersal of the tribe occurred perhaps four thousand years ago. The accounts of Pete Beaverhead and other elders tell us that this huge dispersion was a westward movement, "downstream," meaning that what is now Montana was the original homeland of the Salish nation.

Until the introduction of horses, and the near simultaneous arrival of guns and non-native diseases, the territories of the Salish and Pend d'Oreille were far bigger than is commonly thought. According to not only the recorded oral histories of elders, but also a great deal of ethnographic information gathered in the early 20th century, among many other sources, the Salish and Pend d'Oreille homeland straddled the Continental Divide, including not only the sprawling Flathead, Clark Fork, and Pend Oreille drainage systems west of the divide, but also considerable ground east of the mountains. It has been said that the earliest headquarters of the Salish was the Three Forks area, where the Missouri River is formed by the confluence of the Jefferson, Madison, and Gallatin Rivers, and that their territories extended to the upper Musselshell and upper Yellowstone drainages.

The Pend d'Oreille traditionally lived in a number of bands based throughout what is now western Montana, northern Idaho, and eastern Washington. The band of Pend d'Oreille

of this specific area, based around Flathead Lake and the Mission Valley, was traditionally called *Stʰqtkʷmsčín̓t*, meaning "People Living along the Shore of the Broad Water," after *Čtʰqétkʷ*, "Broad Water," the Pend d'Oreille name for Flathead Lake.

In addition, a Salishan people called the *Tuńax̌n*, connected to the Pend d'Oreille, lived along Rocky Mountain Front, centered in the Sun and Dearborn River areas. By the late 18th century, due primarily to repeated attacks by enemy tribes armed with guns, the *Tuńax̌n* were essentially eliminated as a distinct people, with their survivors scattering in various directions, most among the Pend d'Oreille, Salish, and Kootenai. At the same time, the plains bands of Salish were forced to relocate and concentrate their winter camps in the western portions of their aboriginal territories, particularly the Bitterroot Valley.

All of this is important for understanding the tribes' relationship with buffalo. We commonly think that the Salish, Pend d'Oreille, Kootenai, and other western tribes "went to buffalo," twice per year and in later years even more often, but we often forget that was only possible because of the relatively recent introduction of horses, and only necessary because of the similarly recent relocation of their winter camps to the west.

Before that time, many if not most Salish and Pend d'Oreille people lived, for at least much of the year, east of the Continental Divide. The elders have made it clear that the tenacious, determined effort of the Salish and Pend d'Oreille to hunt buffalo amid the many hardships of the 19th century was not only because that was something very old in their cultural ways, but also because these were their old territories, which they refused to surrender.

The buffalo hunts, in any case, were part of a hunting, gathering, and fishing way of life shared by all peoples of the Northern Rockies, Columbia Plateau, and High Plains. All moved across the land with the seasons to harvest these resources at the times, and in the places, where they were abundant and ready. They were able to do so because of a profound geographical and ecological understanding of their homelands, and because of technologies finely tuned to harvesting and storing that shifting bounty with little effort and great reliability (like this Kootenai fish trap, a design also used by the Pend d'Oreille and Salish, shown here in one of the earliest known photographs of tribal life in the region). They maintained an active hand in managing their diverse and complex food base, nurturing the productivity of plant and animals foods through the careful and highly skilled use of fire.

Each of these tribes lived together in close-knit groups, carrying out many activities collectively. There was nothing approximating money in these tribal economies, which were centered around gift-giving traditions -- and differed in fundamental ways from the culture of market exchange that was so central to Euro-American society. The conventions of gift-giving, in fact, governed a complex system of inter-tribal exchange of tribal surpluses or specialties across the vast region. As Germaine White has put it, at the center of this tribal world lay a deeply ingrained ethic of reciprocity between people, and between people and the land.

Indeed, most members of the various tribes shared a common idea of what was sufficient to meet their needs; they saw little reason, and in fact shared disincentives, for trying to fish, gather, or hunt -- or otherwise produce -- a great excess of anything. Strictures against the overharvesting of resources, and a sense of obligation to ensuring a bountiful world for future generations, were woven deeply into the cultural fabric of all these tribes.

In the beginning, as Felicite "Jim" Sapiye McDonald has related, "It was the animals who decided there would be human beings." Some of them agreed to be food for us. The physical and spiritual help given to people by animals, plants, birds, and fish meant that people, in return, had to be careful to always treat them with respect. "If you kill an animal for nothing," Michael Louis Durglo, Sr. said, "the animals will turn against you." Many elders emphasize that when hunters would bring in game, the people tried at all times to make full use of the animal — in part because the tribe could not afford to waste food, but also because this honored the animal, the one who gave its life so that the people might live. The ethic of not wasting anything also held true for plants, for berries — as Pete Beaverhead said, "for anything else they gathered or killed." And as we shall see in a moment, that certainly held true for bison.

That way of life — the way of life that Coyote had shown the people in the beginning — was centered around a yearly cycle of life tied closely to the seasons, to the ebb and flow of the rivers and streams, to the rising and falling numbers of plants and animals. It begins in the spring, with the ceremony and feast to welcome the bitterroot, the first major food of the year, and to give prayers for all the other roots and berries, and other foods and medicines, that follow the bitterroot over the rest of the year. After bitterroot

comes camas, a bulb dug and then pit-baked with other plants in a careful, precise process that, when done properly, transforms it into a sweet and energy-packed carbohydrate food. Huckleberries, serviceberries, chokecherries, among many other fruits, follow through the summer months and early fall. And throughout the year, the abundant fish of the tribes' territories provided a crucial, stabilizing source of fresh protein that helped make the traditional way of life so reliable and comfortable.

But when it was possible to get meat, that was the preferred and most important food in the tribes' diet. And buffalo was the most important of all.

The elders tell that when the wild roses bloomed in late spring or early summer, they knew that the buffalo calves were fat, and it was time to move east to hunt. In the 19th century, the Salish and Pend d'Oreille would often be joined on their hunts by Kalispels, Kootenais, Nez Percés, Spokanes, Coeur d'Alenes, and other tribes from the west. The Salish and Pend d'Oreille developed a wide-ranging, complex trail system throughout their vast territories, and several routes connected the lands west of the mountains with the buffalo grounds to the east. Often the people traveled up the Clark Fork and Little Blackfoot rivers to Čłmłšé (the Helena area), and from there continued east to the

Musselshell country. Sometimes the Salish traveled east from the Hamilton area over the more rugged Skalkaho Pass (*Sq̣xq̣xó* - Many Trails). At other times, they went over through the Big Hole Valley, and from there to Three Forks and beyond, or to the Yellowstone. The Pend d'Oreille would usually travel by more northerly routes -- via the passes at the head of the Blackfoot River, or over Badger Pass, or Marias Pass -- moving to the plains of the upper Missouri.

The buffalo they went after occurred in immense numbers. The Salish name for them, *q̣ʷeyq̣ʷay*, means 'many black,' or something to that effect — linguists call this a reduplicative word, in this case reduplicating the root word for 'black,' *iq̣ʷay*, because of the way the herds blackened the prairies. Until buffalo became scarcer, the people usually returned home during summer or early fall. In later times, some parties would stay through the winter on the plains.

Elders have told in detail of the many ways bison were hunted. In the time before horses, the people utilized their intimate knowledge of the buffalo and the land itself to herd them over cliffs, the “buffalo jumps” such as those near Bozeman and Great Falls.

In later times, buffalo were hunted from horseback using highly efficient and effective weapons, including lances, bows and arrows, and then guns.

When the hunters went out, they would be followed by the best skinners in the tribe, and when the meat would be brought back to camp, the women would have the dry meat racks ready. They would work day and night for several days until all of the buffalo were taken care of. When the parfleches were full, the women would inform the chiefs that they should stop hunting to avoid wasting anything, and the chiefs would then announce that they would be moving back to the west the next day. In fact, it is difficult to find a single account by the elders of buffalo hunting where the lack of waste is not discussed. There are names in the Salish language for all of the cuts of meat and for all the inside parts. The meat would be dried, pounded, and then packed into parfleches, often mixed with mint leaves to deter bug infestations. Even the hooves were boiled for food. The people knew certain ways to prepare and bake the intestines and the organs. The brains would be prepared and stored, and could keep for as long as five years. The neck hide of the bulls would be formed over stumps and then used for buckets, or sometimes it would be made into strong ropes by cutting it into long strips and then pounding it with stone hammers. The hair of the bulls would be braided for horse halters or bridles. The

bones would be chopped and pounded, and bone marrow would be extracted and stored in hollowed out elderberry branches, and later used for lubricating oil. The horns would be used for drinking cups or, in later times, for storage of gun powder. The robes were always taken care of and were highly prized for clothing and bedding. The scraped hides, after expert tanning, would be sewn together with great skill by the women to make lodges or tipis, which were known for their ability to keep cool in summer and retain warmth in winter. The ribs of the buffalo made excellent hide scrapers, and the sinew was valued for its strength as thread. Of course, the dried buffalo chips -- those over two years old -- would be gathered by the children and used for making fire in the camps on the treeless prairies.

But the depth of the tribes' connection to buffalo goes far beyond these past uses in the old way of life. It extends directly to the present and future of buffalo, because of the crucial role played by the tribes in saving buffalo from extinction.

The transformation of the tribal world and the decimation of tribal resources — including buffalo — occurred over many stages through the 19th century. A critical moment in the history of the tribes and this period is the Hellgate Treaty of 1855, in which the tribes

ceded to the United States title to the majority of their lands west of the Continental Divide within what is now the state of Montana, a reserved from cession certain lands, including the 1.3 million acre Flathead Reservation, for their own "exclusive use and benefit," as the treaty states. They also reserved other rights, including the right to hunt, fish, gather, and pasture animals on the ceded lands. But the Hellgate Treaty nevertheless marked a turning point — the first major assertion of direct non-Indian control over what had been, until then, Salish and Pend d'Oreille territory.

Again, the specific causes of the decimation of the great herds of buffalo were numerous; in 1874, President Ulysses S. Grant "pocket vetoed" a Federal bill to protect the dwindling bison herds, and in 1875, General Philip Sheridan pleaded to a joint session of Congress to slaughter the herds, to deprive the Indians of their source of food. But the single greatest reason was market hunting — and that was made possible on the very largest scale by the railroads, which in many ways tipped the balance of power in Montana, and directly resulted in the marginalization of tribal ways of life here. It was no coincidence that 1883 also marked the virtual extinction of wild bison. Among the first mass exports on Montana's rails were buffalo bones, shipped to eastern plants where they would be rendered into fertilizer and charcoal.

The elders say that in the second to last year of the traditional Pend d'Oreille buffalo hunts, the hunters were able to kill only 27 buffalo. The following year, they killed only seven. The buffalo that had once blanketed the plains, and fed and clothed the people for thousands of years, were gone by the early 1880's. However, as elder historian Mose Chouteh related in one of the more remarkable accounts in the recorded oral histories, some years earlier, a Pend d'Oreille man named *Atatice?* (Peregrine Falcon Robe), who had a special relationship with buffalo, had proposed to the chiefs that the people herd some of the orphaned calves back west of the mountains to begin a herd on the Flathead Reservation. The people could see that the numbers of buffalo were already declining, and inter-tribal conflicts over the dwindling resource were intensifying. But *Atatice?* was suggesting a fundamental change in the people's way of life, and the relationship with the buffalo. After three days in council, the leaders remained divided, so *Atatice?*, out of respect for the tribal way of making major decisions by consensus, withdrew his proposal.

In the late 1870's, however, the chiefs, seeing that the conditions were continuing to worsen, allowed *Atatice?*'s son, *Latatí* (Little Peregrine Falcon Robe), to carry out the

idea. About six calves survived the journey west. *Latatí* raised them near the Flathead River at the home of his mother, *Sapin Mali*. They grew to about 13 in number. Some years later, *Latatí*'s stepfather, *Samwel*, sold the herd to Michel Pablo and Charles Allard. Pablo and Allard ranged the buffalo in the grasslands along the Flathead River, where the herd quickly grew to hundreds of animals.

In 1896, Allard died, and in 1901 some of his portion of the herd was sold to the Conrad family of Kalispell. Other portions of the Allard herd were sold to Howard Eaton, a friend of Charles Russell. Eaton later sold his animals to Yellowstone Park. Thus the origin of the Yellowstone Park herd were in part the buffalo originally saved by *Latatí*.

After 1896, most of the herd continued to roam on the collective tribal lands along the Flathead River. But then, in 1904, Congress passed the Flathead Allotment Act over the bitter protests of tribal leaders, who wrote and traveled to Washington DC repeatedly in a vain effort to stop a law that would directly break the Hellgate Treaty. The act forced tribal members to take individual parcels of land and then opened most remaining lands within the reservation to non-Indian homesteaders, despite the treaty's guarantee that in exchange for the tribes' cession of most of their lands, the reservation would be set aside for their "exclusive" use and benefit. (This is why in 1971 — 61 years after the

reservation was opened — the US Court of Claims bluntly declared the Flathead Allotment Act to have been a "breach" of the 1855 treaty.)

Between 1905 and 1910, and even for years after that, tribal leaders sent countless letters to the President, the Secretary of the Interior, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, and other officials. They convened meetings to elect delegates, and then sent them to Washington, often at their own expense. In writing and in person, they delivered the same message: this is a direct violation of the Treaty of Hellgate, and we are all opposed to it. Stop the allotments and cancel the opening of the reservation. One letter sent by tribal leaders included a petition listing 130 prominent tribal men who "object to opening this Reservation." But government officials would not change their decision. The Office of Indian Affairs dismissed their concerns, saying that the change was "for your best interest....by adopting the white man's way of life, [you] will be better off and happier." Many of them refused to meet with the delegates in Washington or invented reasons for not regarding them as legitimate representatives.

In May 1910, the first lands were opened to homesteaders, then more in succeeding months. Non-Indians soon outnumbered tribal people within the reservation and

assumed a dominating social and economic position. Between 1910 and 1929, 409,710 acres were transferred to homesteaders. Whites were further attracted to reservation lands by passage of the Flathead Irrigation Act in 1908, which called for the construction of a massive canal and reservoir system to serve over 150,000 acres of dry lands on the reservation. Congress funded the "Flathead Indian Irrigation Project" with the express intention of primarily helping Indians in making the transition to a farming way of life. But from the start, the project primarily benefitted non-Indian farmers, even though much of the system was built using tribal funds and proceeds from the sale of Indian land. Many allotments ended up being taken by the government when tribal members couldn't afford to pay their irrigation charges, even though they were promised they would never have to pay for the water. Yet more lands were transferred from Indian to non-Indian ownership after President William Taft signed a bill authorizing Indians to take their allotments out of trust, making more land available to whites. Between 1910 and 1935, 131,239 acres of allotments were patented, with most eventually sold to non-Indians. Still other allotments were taken over by licensed Indian traders such as Beckwith's in St. Ignatius, who demanded the land as payment for outstanding debts to the stores. In all, over half a million acres — the vast majority of the most productive and valuable land of the Flathead Reservation — were lost from tribal ownership.

The Flathead Allotment Act also had the effect of radically reducing the pasture lands available to tribal herds, including Pablo's bison, thus forcing Pablo to round up and sell the herd. Unable to find an American buyer, Pablo sold the buffalo to the Canadian government, and by 1908 some 695 bison had been rounded up and shipped by special train cars to Alberta. Some were too wild for the cowboys to catch, and when white poachers began to shoot them, Pablo told tribal members to hunt them for food.

At the very same time, the American Bison Society was forming in New York, with its honorary president none other than Theodore Roosevelt — who as president had signed the Flathead Allotment Act into law in 1904. In 1909, the ABS and other interested parties convinced Congress in effect to seize over 16,000 acres of the Flathead Reservation in order to form a National Bison Range. A price for the land was dictated to the Tribes, who were given no power over the matter. Mose Chouteh said that at a meeting convened by government officials in St. Ignatius, tribal leaders said they did not want to give up that land — some of their prime hunting grounds. But the officials told them they had no choice in the matter. The money from the sale was deposited in the

US Treasury and was then expended by the government in part to defray the cost of opening the reservation to white settlement.

In yet another bitter irony, buffalo from the Conrad herd, which derived largely from the Pablo-Allard herd, were then purchased to seed the herd at the newly established NBR.

The allotment act, and this low ebb of tribal governmental power, finally ended in 1934 with passage of the Indian Reorganization Act, the Indian part of FDR's New Deal. The CSKT were the first tribe in the nation to re-incorporate and adopt a new constitution under the IRA's terms, with the signing ceremony shown here — Chief Martin Charlo, Chief Kustata, and Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes. But the IRA was a mixed bag — while it gave the tribes a new and stronger voice in asserting their rights and re-developing their sovereignty, in other ways it accelerated the loss of tribal culture — for example, it phased out governmental recognition of traditional chiefs, perhaps explaining why they don't look too happy in the photo.

Still, since the 1930s, the tribes have gradually rebuilt their governing capacity, and also reacquired lands lost to allotment, as shown in this recent map. And in the 1970s, the

CSKT in effect addressed the culturally destructive aspects of the IRA by establishing the Salish-Pend d'Oreille and Kootenai Culture Committees — tribal departments charged with the preservation, protection, and perpetuation of the cultures and languages. The establishment of these tribal departments also gave elders an institutional advisory voice, through which they have helped guide the governing Tribal Council and the overall direction of the tribes.

Today, these efforts of many tribal members and many tribal programs to revitalize the traditional culture, the language, the relationship with the land, are manifesting in many ways, including the development of one of the most sophisticated and capable Natural Resource Departments of any local government in the U.S.

In the 1990s, as many of you know, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes first put forward a modest proposal to assume management of the National Bison Range under provisions of the American Indian Self-Determination Act. Under terms of the tribal proposal, no visitors would be kept out. Even most of the existing staff of the Bison Range, almost all of whom were non-Indian, would be retained if they chose to stay. In a historical context, this is really only a modern manifestation of the very old tribal

commitment to take care of bison, who have taken care of the people from the beginning of time.

I hope that this brief tour of tribal history helps you understand that effort, and the passion the tribes bring to it, in a deeper way. Thank you for the honor of addressing you this morning.