

## *Introduction*

It is a melancholy contemplation for one who has travelled as I have, through these realms, and seen this noble animal in all its pride and glory, to contemplate it so rapidly wasting from the world, drawing the irresistible conclusion too, which one must do, that its species is soon to be extinguished...

And what a splendid contemplation too, when one (who has travelled these realms, and can duly appreciate them) imagines them as they *might* in the future be seen (by some great protecting policy of government) preserved in their pristine beauty and wildness, in a *magnificent park*...What a beautiful and thrilling specimen for America to preserve and hold up to the view of her refined citizens and the world, in future ages! A *nation's Park*, containing man and beast, in all the wild and freshness of their nature's beauty!<sup>1</sup>

The artist George Catlin wrote these stirring words in 1832 while close to present-day South Dakota. He detested the wasteful exploitation of the plains bison and cried out for a place where they and the Aboriginal peoples who relied on them could be preserved.<sup>2</sup>

Catlin's plea, however, fell on deaf ears. Instead, the 19th century witnessed the near destruction of the plains bison, popularly known as "buffalo," whose numbers on the North American Plains had once reached thirty million.<sup>3</sup> The Canadian government came closest to realizing Catlin's dream. In 1906, Sir Wilfrid Laurier's Liberal administration negotiated to purchase what was considered the largest and last free-ranging plains bison herd on the continent from Montana rancher Michel Pablo. In 1908, the government established Buffalo Park Reserve, later called Buffalo National Park, near Wainwright, Alberta to save and increase the near-extinct species.

Most historians who have studied Buffalo National Park have viewed the purchase of the Pablo bison herd and its management as a great wildlife preservation effort. However, they have made this classification and based their conclusions on a very short period of the park's history—the purchase years (1907–1912).<sup>4</sup> On closer investigation, however, and when the entire park history is considered, a very different story emerges. The turn of the century meaning of the term “preservation” can be equated with what would now be defined as “conservation,” or the “planned and efficient use of natural resources to ensure their permanence.”<sup>5</sup> The two terms were often used interchangeably. Even in light of this, Buffalo National Park cannot be considered a wildlife preservation effort.<sup>6</sup> Rather, Buffalo National Park was an artefact defined and shaped by the cultural, political, and economic climate of early 20th century Canada. These forces influenced the establishment and directed the management of this park, and ultimately played the biggest role in its demise.

At one time, the range of the plains bison extended over one-third of the North American continent. The bison were found from the Atlantic coast to the Great Plains, the environment in which they flourished. Their range extended southward to the delta of the Mississippi, westward across Texas to northeastern Mexico and across the Rocky Mountains into New Mexico, Utah, and Idaho. In Canada, a few bison were found in British Columbia; most ranged in the plains west of the Canadian Shield to the Rocky Mountains.<sup>7</sup> While Hornaday stated the northern range of the bison extended to the shores of Great Slave Lake, he may have been referring to the wood bison, another subspecies of bison that differs slightly in structure and pelage and is larger than its plains counterpart.<sup>8</sup>

By the mid-1880s, however, the plains bison was on the brink of extinction. Several factors diminished the bison population even before the systematic slaughter began around 1820. Settlement in the east had pushed nearly all of the population west of the Mississippi River. Advances in the native culture, such as the introduction of the horse, had allowed hunters to be more selective. Cows were chosen because their meat was more palatable and their hides thinner and lighter. By the 1800s, the population of bison on the south plains was noticeably reduced.<sup>9</sup>

Competition in the fur trade also accelerated the pressure on the population. The first organized hunt on a grand scale took place in 1820 out of Red River. While at one time herds ranged near the Red River settlement, the bison were driven back as the Métis started an annual summer hunt to

*Park Riders traverse exposed sand dunes in Buffalo National Park.*



harvest hides and to provide meat and pemmican for employees of the Hudson's Bay Company. The American Fur Company dominated the fur trade in the western plains and the eastern robe market. The invention of steam-powered riverboats allowed the American Fur Company to reach the Upper Missouri and steamships allowed a greater quantity of bison robes to be shipped cheaply. By 1840, 100,000 bison robes were harvested per year.<sup>10</sup>

The overhunting of the bison accelerated in the 1870s and early 1880s due to the demands of eastern markets and an increasingly industrial society. The completion of the Union Pacific Railway in 1869 across the mid-United States from Omaha, Nebraska to Promontory Summit, Utah, divided the plains bison into two great herds, the northern herd and the southern herd, and accelerated the destruction of the bison by two decades. Pressure on the southern herd accelerated with introduction of the Sharps Big 50, a more powerful rifle that allowed hunters to fire more accurately, and the development, by 1870, of a method to make industrial belts from bison hides. Steam locomotives transported bison hides to the eastern markets more efficiently. After the hunt of 1875, the great southern herd ceased to exist. Only scattered bands of bison survived.

On the northern plains, environmental conditions, especially drought, and competition for rangeland with domestic cattle also contributed to the demise of the bison in the latter half of the 1800s. Both native and European hide hunters put pressure on the northern herd, and hunting accelerated once the southern herd had collapsed. By 1879 only a few bison were left in Canada. The last significant hunt occurred in 1882–1883, after which the plains bison was almost extinct. By the 1890s, there were no wild plains bison left on the Canadian Prairies and only small pockets of animals remained on the American Plains.<sup>11</sup>

Five individual efforts have been credited with saving the plains bison from extinction. James McKay and Charles Alloway of Manitoba, Charles Goodnight of Texas, Samuel Walking Coyote of Montana, Frederick Dupree of South Dakota, and Charles “Buffalo” Jones of Kansas all captured bison calves when it became clear that the species, without some intervention, would disappear from the Great Plains. The lineage of most bison alive today can be traced to these herds. Montana native Samuel Walking Coyote captured calves, as outlined in a well-reported legend, as a gift to appease the priests at St. Ignatius over the problems of his second, illicit, marriage.<sup>12</sup> Walking Coyote sold his bison herd to ranchers Charles Allard and Michel Pablo in 1883, when his herd had increased to twelve animals.<sup>13</sup> The herd

continued to increase on its new range in the Flathead Valley of Montana and by 1896, the year Allard died, it numbered approximately 300 animals. Allard's half of the herd was dispersed among his wife and children and sold to various buyers.<sup>14</sup> Pablo continued to graze his bison until the United States government applied the *Dawes Act* in the Flathead Valley, in 1904. This act allowed tribe members to select a homestead of 160 acres and opened the remainder of the valley for settlement, which forced Pablo to find a new range for his bison.<sup>15</sup> In 1907, the Dominion Government purchased Pablo's plains bison herd, and soon afterward created Buffalo National Park.

Alan MacEachern writes that the history of national parks needs to be viewed through a cultural looking glass. Everything about a national park, from the choice of a location to the park's subsequent management is based on a variety of "aesthetic, economic, and political reasons."<sup>16</sup> As I hope this case study will prove, all decisions—from the purchase of the bison herd, the establishment and location of the park, to the policies that dictated the management of the bison—were defined and shaped by the cultural atmosphere of the early 20th century and contributed to the downfall of Buffalo National Park.

A number of cumulative factors contributed to Buffalo National Park's failure as a bison-saving effort. The park area, chosen because it was considered useless as agricultural land, ultimately could not sustain an overgrown bison herd. The misguided motives of those in the Dominion government who negotiated the purchase overshadowed any preservationist considerations for the bison. Sentiment for the nearly extinct species and a wish to show up the Americans by purchasing the herd propelled these individuals rather than an interest in actually saving the species. Those administering the effort, first in the Department of the Interior and soon after, the Parks Branch, knew little about managing wildlife when the park was established and this had a negative impact on the effort. In the first decade, little thought was given to the consequences of the burgeoning herd until it was too late. By the 1920s, the park was experiencing an overpopulation problem that led to the degradation of the range and the spread of disease, of which tuberculosis was the most serious. Environmental factors, such as drought in the 1920s and the Great Depression of the 1930s, also took their toll on the effort.

While these cultural influences contributed to the problems that Buffalo National Park experienced almost immediately after its formation, the economic strain that resulted from the lack of federal funding resulted in poor management decisions which escalated the problems into crises. While the

Dominion government had backed the purchase and the establishment of the park financially and wholeheartedly, it did not show the same dedication to supporting the park's operations. The Parks Branch, the small branch of the Department of the Interior that administrated the park, was not given the financial resources to operate it effectively. As the crises at the park escalated, the Parks Branch was obligated to find temporary measures to delay the mounting problems. Inevitably, the focus of their management became profiting from the bison just to sustain the park itself. However, the Parks Branch was not successful even at realizing much profit. Without significant funding, the conditions of the park could not be improved. Ultimately, the government that established the park did not have the resolve to follow through with the effort.

## Notes

1. Roderick Nash, ed., *The American Environment: Readings in the History of Conservation* (Massachusetts 1968), 8–9. Emphasis in original.
2. Nash, *American Environment*, 7–9.
3. Dale Lott believes that the North American Plains could have supported only thirty million bison prior to the over hunting of the species in the latter half of the 19th century. See Dale Lott, *American Bison: A Natural History* (Berkeley 2002), 69–76, 170.
4. Coder, Foster, and Ogilvie all present Buffalo National Park as a preservationist effort. Coder’s and Foster’s studies look only at the purchase years and do not treat Buffalo National Park’s changing policies and the results. However, even Sheilagh Ogilvie, who has examined the role of Buffalo National Park in protecting and increasing the bison herds in the national parks system, and who acknowledged the problems the management faced, has defined the effort as preservationist. George David Coder, “The National Movement to Preserve the American Buffalo in the United States and Canada Between 1880 and 1920,” PhD diss., (Ohio State University, 1975); Janet Foster, *Working for Wildlife: The Beginning of Preservation in Canada*, 2nd ed. (Toronto 1998); and Sheilagh C. Ogilvie, *The Park Buffalo* (Calgary 1979).
5. Alan MacEachern, “The Conservation Movement,” in *Canada, Confederation to Present* [CD-ROM]. Bob Hesketh and Chris Hackett eds. (Edmonton 2001).
6. MacEachern, “Conservation Movement,” endnote 2. Gordon Hewitt’s book, *The Conservation of the Wildlife of Canada*, is a good example of how the terms preservation and conservation were used synonymously. See, for example, C. Gordon Hewitt, *The Conservation of the Wildlife of Canada* (New York 1921), 7.
7. William Temple Hornaday, *The Extermination of the American Bison* (Washington 2002), 376–377, 384.
8. Hornaday, *Extermination*, 376–377, 384. “Natural Wonders & Cultural Treasures,” *Elk Island National Park of Canada* <[http://www2.parkscanada.gc.ca/pn-np/ab/elkisland/natcul/natcul1biii\\_E.asp](http://www2.parkscanada.gc.ca/pn-np/ab/elkisland/natcul/natcul1biii_E.asp)> (30 March 2008).
9. Hornaday, *Extermination*, 487; Lott, *American Bison*, 171–72.
10. Lott, *American Bison*, 105, 173–74; Hornaday, *Extermination*, 487–88; Andrew C. Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison* (Cambridge 2000), 93–94.
11. Hornaday, *Extermination*, 505–07; Lott, *American Bison*, 175, 179; Isenberg, *Destruction*, 141–43; Ogilvie, *Park Buffalo*, 7–8.

12. Coder, "National Movement," 15–23. For a detailed account of the oral traditions concerning the events surrounding the Walking Coyote bison calves, see Bon I. Whealdon et al., *I Will Be Meat for My Salish* (Pablo 2001), chapters 4–5.
13. Coder, "National Movement," 22. However, other accounts claim the year to be 1884. See Whealdon et al., *I Will Be Meat for My Salish*, 82.
14. Charles Allard's wife sold her portion of the estate to Charles E. Conrad of Kalispell, Montana. Howard Eaton also purchased some bison from Allard's estate. A portion of these were later bought by Donald A. Smith, Lord Strathcona, and presented to the Dominion government. Whealdon et al., *I Will Be Meat for My Salish*, 87.
15. Lott, *American Bison*, 188; "Flathead Reservation Timeline," *Flathead Reservation Historical Society*, Montana Heritage Project, 2004 <<http://www.flatheadreservation.org/timeline/timeline.html>> (14 June 2004).
16. Alan MacEachern, *Natural Selections: National Parks in Atlantic Canada* (Montreal 2001), 4.