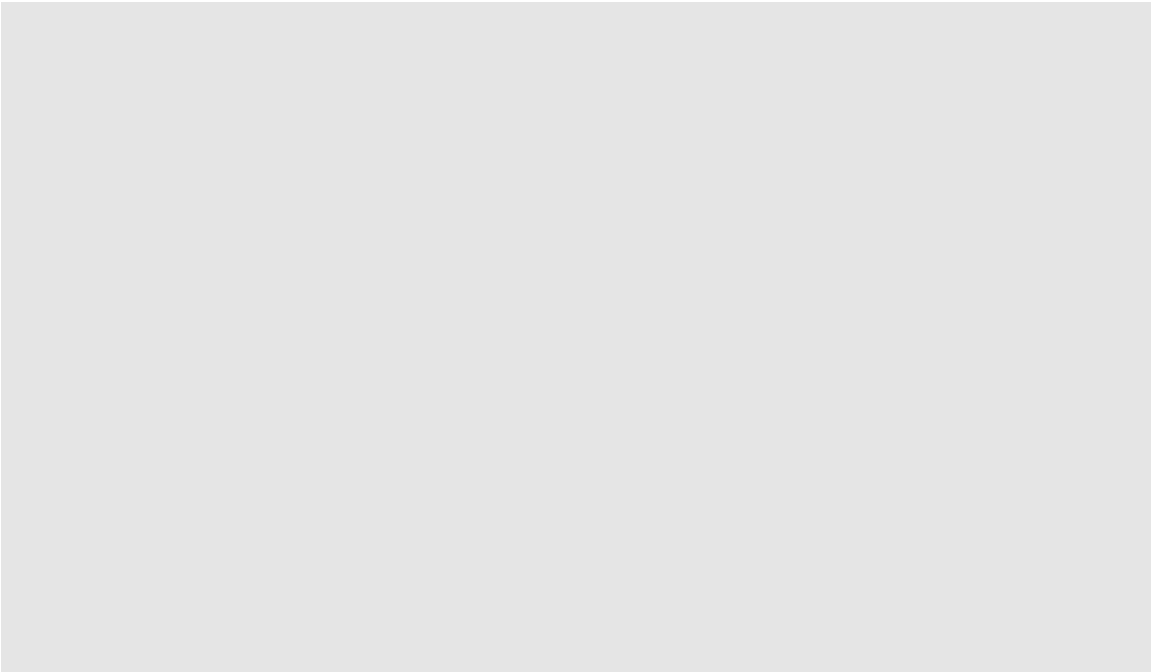




CONCLUSION

# The Forgotten Park





ON THE EVE OF THE PARK'S CLOSURE IN 1939, the *Ottawa Evening Journal* reported:

The range at Wainwright Park, it is explained by those who should know, has deteriorated greatly in recent years. The soil is light, and through over-grazing the natural pasturage has been replaced to a considerable extent by non-edible plants, and the natural feed of the herds has had to be supplemented. Thus the enterprise ceased to be a conservation project under natural conditions but an exhibition herd partly maintained out of public funds."<sup>1</sup>

Although the journalist implied that the effort at one time occurred under natural conditions, evidence shows that from the onset there was nothing natural about the Buffalo National Park effort to save the bison. The growth of the herd had disastrous consequences. The deterioration of the range exhausted the natural forage that the bison required. However, the increasing prevalence of tuberculosis among the bison and other animals left the Parks Branch little choice but to take drastic measures and close the park.

The Park's closure caught those working at the park by surprise. Superintendent A. G. Smith did not receive word until October of that year that all the animals were to be slaughtered, and he notified the wardens and other park employees shortly after.<sup>2</sup> The last roundup of the bison, an event that has become legendary in local history, took place in 1939 and the moose, elk, and deer were disposed of in early 1940.<sup>3</sup> While there was some talk of reinstating the area as a national park following the war<sup>4</sup> financial considerations decided the issue. The Dominion government was no longer interested in maintaining the park and said the expense could not be justified when the preservation of the bison had been "amply accomplished" with healthy bison

in Elk Island National Park as well as bison in Riding Mountain and Wood Buffalo National Parks.<sup>5</sup> An arrangement was made between the federal and provincial governments to relinquish Buffalo National Park to the Department of National Defence in exchange for 24 sections of land in the Cooking Lake Forest Reserve to be added to Elk Island National Park to expand the bison effort there.<sup>6</sup> Buffalo National Park was officially abolished by an act of Parliament in 1947.<sup>7</sup> The cattalo experiment, which had been allowed to remain in the area, was moved in 1950 to the Dominion Range Experiment Station in Manyberries, Alberta.<sup>8</sup>

The official position, written in an article entitled “Canada’s Buffalo Herds” by the publicity division of the Parks Branch, stated that overgrazing, due to the increase of the herd, had resulted in unanticipated problems. “Naturally, the Government does not wish to engage in large-scale farming operations to supplement food supplies of animals which should be self-supporting. To do so would be to change the whole character of the enterprise.”<sup>9</sup> Those who inquired about the closure were informed that the decision was made with a sense of duty to the interest of taxpayers. “No admission fee is charged at Buffalo Park, Wainwright, and yet the record of attendance does not show widespread interest, consequently it would be difficult to maintain that the park is a valuable factor from a tourist standpoint.”<sup>10</sup>

However, this official position masked two greater reasons for the park’s closure. With the Second World War looming, a better use had been found for the area than a wildlife reserve. The Department of National Defence, looking for an expanse of land for manoeuvring and training troops and artillery use,<sup>11</sup> had expressed an interest in obtaining the area. Indeed, the government saw the Department of National Defence’s interest in the area as fortuitous. It allowed them to maintain credibility, as they did not want the diseased state of the herd to be publicized. As the director of the Department of Mines and Resources remarked, “The outstanding feature of the whole matter from our standpoint is that the present is the first opportunity we have had to wind up affairs at Wainwright without admitting publicly that the herd was in bad condition.”<sup>12</sup>

Some, like J. R. Dymond, the chair of the Ecological Society of America, however, criticized the Parks Branch for not disclosing the true reasons for the park’s closure. His criticism is perhaps indicative of how much the understanding of the idea conservation had evolved since Buffalo National Park had opened and how damning the news of the failed effort to save the bison would be if the truth were revealed to the public. He stated:

I consider the most unfortunate feature of this affair is not the destruction of the buffalo herd which can be built up again but the demonstration to the public that a national park can be wiped out without giving the public any convincing evidence for the necessity for the action...the destruction of Buffalo Park is, so far as the public's information is concerned in direct contradiction of most of the principles which they have been told underlie the establishment of parks. Perhaps the public has been oversold on National Parks but the fact remains that most conservationists have been stunned by the announcement about Buffalo Park and I am afraid it will do a great deal of harm to the national park idea in Canada.<sup>13</sup>

The story of Buffalo National Park is not about the saving of a near extinct species, but that the effort had gone so terribly wrong it was forced to close after only three decades. A century after Buffalo National Park was established, the bison at Wainwright are all but forgotten. However, it appears that shortly after the bison were purchased, this park was also forgotten by the very group who had established it. The Dominion government, which at the turn of the century was eager to acquire the bison herd and approved an additional \$100,000 to purchase them, seemed to believe that the herd would need little management. As was proved early on, the park could not be self-sufficient and there was no plan in place or money designated to ensure the bison salvage effort could operate effectively. The annual maintenance of the park was \$45,000 to \$50,000.<sup>14</sup> By the time of the park's closure, the total revenue obtained by the park was approximately one third of the expenditures that the effort had incurred.<sup>15</sup>

Buffalo National Park was both a product and a victim of the cultural forces of the early 20th century. Ideas and trends of this era and the political and economic climate of the nation influenced and shaped the bison-saving effort at Wainwright but also contributed to its downfall. Romantic sentiment for the near-extinct plains bison and a spirit of competition drove the Dominion government to purchase the Pablo bison herd. These motives, however, overshadowed the effort to preserve the species. The development of Buffalo National Park was modelled after the mountain parks, but this touristic template was not transferable to a prairie park. While Buffalo National Park was successful at breeding bison and game, the necessity of confining the animals to the park quickly proved too much for the land base to support.

Little was known of wildlife management when Buffalo National Park was established, so administrators were treading in unfamiliar territory. Lack of federal funding to operate the park after it was established, however, contributed greatly to the downfall of the park. Administrators in the Parks Branch, a minor branch of the federal government, were not given the resources or authority to manage the bison-saving effort effectively. While the calamities that troubled the park can, in part, be blamed on this ignorance of wildlife management, the disinterest of the Dominion government served to make the problems much worse. If the government had intervened when it first learned of the seriousness of the situation at Wainwright, perhaps the crises could have been avoided. With little support and no revenue, the Parks Branch had to find ways to solve the park's problems and make the effort pay for itself. Very quickly, the commercial value of the herd superseded the concern of ensuring the future of the species.

Despite the economic strain they were under, the administration in the Parks Branch also showed poor judgement in their management decisions. The most poignant example is the decision to ship a diseased bison herd north to Wood Buffalo National Park, which was done against the protest of leading experts and even some individuals within the Parks Branch. Management decisions to curtail the exploding population of the bison herd were not driven by a preservation ethic, or even any consistent principle, but instead were stop-gap measures to deal with the mounting problems at the park. The decision to close Buffalo National Park in 1939 seems in hindsight to be one of the wisest decisions made in the name of conservation.

Does the story of Buffalo National Park have any relevance today? Parks Canada officials have had no success purging the Wood Buffalo National Park hybrid wood/plains bison herd of tuberculosis—a problem that is the direct result of the decision to ship the Wainwright plains bison north. Biologist William A. Fuller has suggested that the compromised herd be slaughtered and a new herd built up using the disease-free wood bison from the Mackenzie Bison Sanctuary.<sup>16</sup> He notes that in 1990, the Report of the Environmental Panel on Northern Diseased Bison called for a complete slaughter of all the bison in Wood Buffalo National Park.<sup>17</sup> In 2006, the Canadian government was still considering a plan to cull the bison herd and repopulate the area with wood buffalo from Elk Island National Park.<sup>18</sup> To date there has been no movement on this proposal. In Wood Buffalo National Park, the history of Buffalo National Park lives on.

As recently as March 2008, the problems of disease and lack of range has posed problems for the management of the bison herd in Yellowstone National Park in the US states of Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho. Public protests over the lack of federal funding to increase the territory for the bison and culling of the herd, as well as concerns that the bison could spread brucellosis to the cattle populations outside the park, sound strangely like déjà vu.<sup>19</sup> Lessons need to be learned from the problems and failures experienced by Buffalo National Park to prevent similar consequences in our wildlife preservation efforts today.

Notes

1. *Ottawa Evening Journal*, 5 Dec. 1939 “The Wainwright Buffalo,” LAC, Parks Canada Files, Buffalo National Park [BNP], RG 84, Vol. 50, File BU2, pt. 1.
2. LAC, F. H. H. Williamson to Superintendent, 18 Oct. 1939, Parks Canada Files, BNP, RG 84, Vol. 58, File BU299, pt. 15; Ray Sharp, interview.
3. Lothian, *A History of Canada's National Parks*, 37.
4. LAC, R. A. Gibson to Colonel H. DesRosiers, 20 Oct. 1941, Parks Canada Files, BNP, RG 84, Vol. 982, File BU2[548608], pt. 4.
5. LAC, Notes for File Bu. 2, Reference to Buffalo Park in Hansard and summary of discussions at Session 1940, 29 Aug. 1940, Parks Canada Files, BNP, RG 84, Vol. 982, File BU2[548608], pt. 4.
6. LAC, “Re: Buffalo National Park,” n.d., W. J. F. Pratt to J. P. Tripp, 6 Apr. 1947, and Buffalo National Park, 15 Apr. 1947, Parks Canada Files, BNP, RG 84, Vol. 982, File BU2[548608], pt. 4.
7. *National Parks Amendment Act*, S.C. 1947, c. 66, s. 6.
8. LAC, F. K. Kristjansson, “An Evaluation of the Potentialities of the ‘Cattalo’ Project with Special Reference to Reproduction Problems,” 19 Feb. 1952, Department of Agriculture Files, Cattalo, RG 17, Vol. 3456, File 30-9-1(1).
9. LAC, R. A. Gibson to the Deputy Minister and Mr. Williamson, 22 Dec. 1939 and *Canada's Buffalo Herds*, Parks Canada Files, BNP, RG 84, Vol. 982, File BU2[548608], pt. 3.
10. LAC, F. H. H. Williamson to R. W. Tufts, 28 Dec. 1939 and “Sample” form letter. Parks Canada Files, BNP, RG 84, Vol. 982, File BU2[548608], pt. 3.
11. LAC, “Re: Buffalo National Park,” n.d., and Notes for File BU. 2, References to Buffalo Park in Hansard and summary of discussions at Session 1940, Parks Canada Files, BNP, RG 84, Vol. 982, File BU2[548608], pt. 4.
12. LAC, Director of the Department of Mines and Resources to the Deputy Minister, 28 Sept. 1939, Parks Canada Files, BNP, RG 84, Vol. 982, File BU2 [548608], pt. 2.
13. LAC, J. R. Dymond to F. H. H. Williamson, 23 Nov. 1939, Parks Canada Files, BNP, RG 84, Vol. 982, File BU2[548608], pt. 3.
14. Notes for File BU. 2, References to Buffalo Park in Hansard and summary of discussions at Session 1940.
15. LAC, Controller to Mr. Gibson, 7 Dec. 1943, Parks Canada Files, BNP, RG 84, Vol. 982, File BU2[548608], pt. 4.

16. While it was believed that the transfer of the plains bison herd had wiped out the wood bison species, a miraculous discovery was made in 1958. Dr. N. S. Novakowski stumbled across what he believed to be a pure wood bison herd in a secluded corner along the northern border of Wood Buffalo National Park. After eliminating those that reacted to tuberculosis and brucellosis tests, the herd was split. Eighteen were moved to Ft. Providence north of the Mackenzie River, and the remaining animals were sent to Elk Island National Park. Fuller states that while the validity of the claims that the animals were pure wood bison has been debated since, he believes that these bison are “the closest we will ever see to the original Wood Bison.” Fuller, “Canada and the ‘Buffalo,’” 157.
17. Fuller, “Canada and the ‘Buffalo,’” 158.
18. *Calgary Herald*, 20 Mar. 2006, Ed Struzik, “Diseased Bison Face Massive Cull.”
19. *New York Times*, 23 Mar. 2008, Jim Robbins, “Anger Over Culling of Yellowstone’s Bison.”