Tribal and Privately Owned Bison in Montana

Tribal Involvement in Bison

Bison are and have been an essential and highly valued element of the rituals and traditions of many Native American cultures. Historically these tribes depended on bison for numerous materials and as a main food source. "The total array made the buffalo a tribal department store, a builder's emporium, furniture mart, drugstore, and supermarket rolled into one—a splendidly stocked commissary for the needs of life" (McHugh, 1972, pp. 109). Krech III (1999) notes that for many tribes, "from a purely material standpoint, it would have been virtually impossible to be out of sight, touch, or smell of a product fabricated from bison at any time of day or night" (pp. 128).

Historically bison were also an essential element of the spiritual and religious customs of numerous native tribes of Montana and surrounding regions. Verbicky-Todd (1984) notes that the following tribes had a strong dependence on bison: Assiniboine, Arapaho, Blackfeet, Cheyenne, Comanche, Crow, Gros Ventre, Kiowa, Kiowa-Arapaho, Plains Cree, Sarcee, and Teton Dakota. Though bison still hold cultural significance for many tribes, there is now the recognition that bison have a strong commercial value and pragmatic use as a food source, as the establishment of tribal herds would enable "control over food production and land, food security, tribal sovereignty, and decreasing reliance on outside sources for food" (Gates et al., 2010, pp. 11).

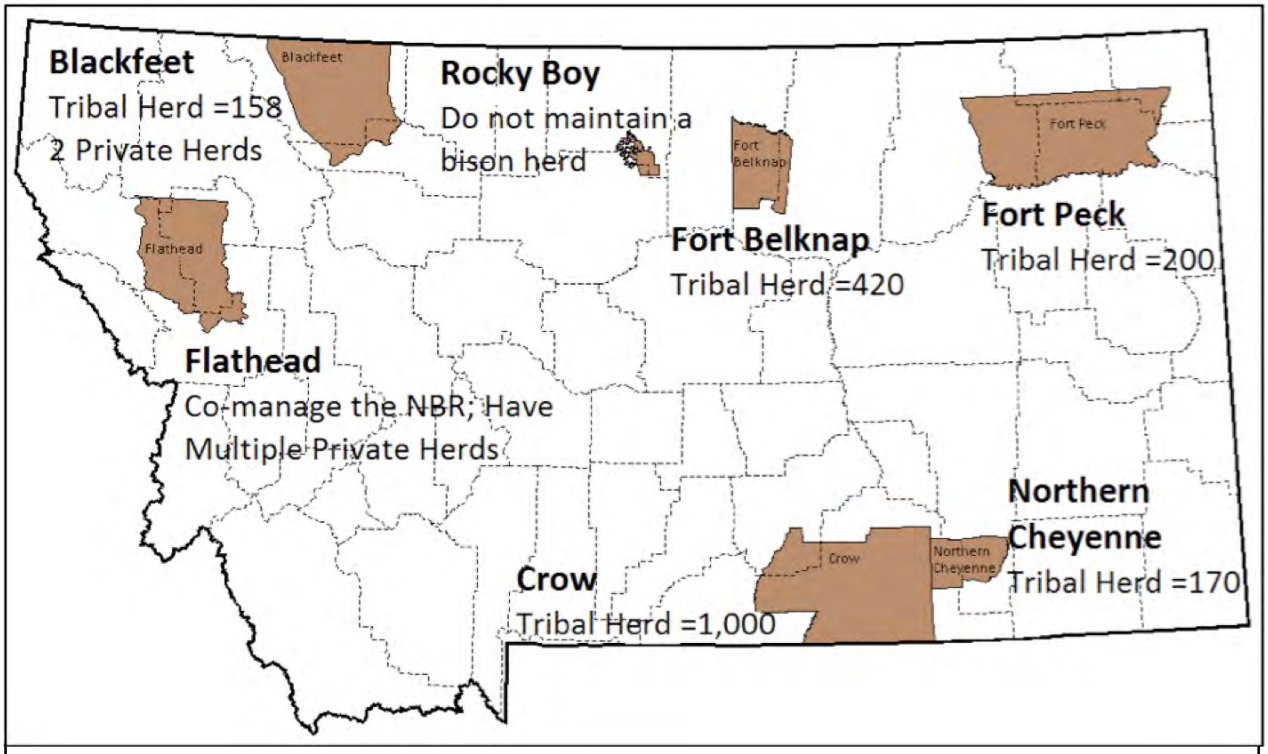
Decorated bison skull. PHOTO CREDIT: FWP

Increased concern over the high rate of diabetes on reservations has led to a movement toward returning to a more traditional bison-based diet. The value of bison meat as an addition to the diet of many Native American cultures is reflected in the Blackfeet use of the term *natapi waksin,* which means "real food," referring to bison meat, and *kistapi waskin,* which means "nothing food," for all other food (Zontek, 2007). Father Pierre-Jean De Smet noted that "(bison) cow-meat is the favorite dish of all the hunters, and as long as they can find it, they never kill any other animals (De Smet, 1905, pp. 231).

In order to facilitate and coordinate the return of bison to tribal reservations, the InterTribal Bison Cooperative, which is now the InterTribal Buffalo Council (ITBC) was formed in 1990 (ITBC, 2011). The goal of the ITBC is "reestablishing buffalo herds on Indians lands in a manner that promotes cultural enhancement, spiritual revitalization, ecological restoration, and economic development" (ITBC, 2011). As of 2011 the ITBC has a membership of 57 tribes and maintains a collective herd of over 15,000 bison (ITBC, 2011).

The manner in which the individual herds are managed varies. Some tribes maintain their bison with limited management, while others have more strictly managed herds.

Tribal herds are maintained on six of the seven Native American reservations in Montana. The herds range in size and in degree of management. In 2010 there were approximately 2,348 tribal herd bison, including the 400 bison on the National Bison Range, which is co-managed by the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation and the USFWS. The majority of the tribes have expressed interest in expanding their herds if feasible, and many offer limited bison hunting opportunities. Some of the tribes are also in the process of exploring the potential to create separate cultural herds, which would be managed for different purposes and values than production herds.



Map 4: Locations of Native American Reservations and Approximate Number of Bison. Created by FWP (2010).

The largest of the tribal herds is on the Crow Reservation. The tribal herd is made up of approximately 1,000 bison and is managed within natural barriers on approximately 30,000 acres, with additional access to 120,000 acres in the mountains. There are plans to expand the herd, as a result of an increase in available acreage. Hunting tags are occasionally issued to the general public as a population management tool. There are no additional private herds remaining on the reservation (T. Jefferson, Crow Reservation, personal communication).

Adjacent to the Crow Reservation is the Northern Cheyenne Reservation. The Northern Cheyenne tribe maintains a tribal herd comprised of approximately 170 head of bison, with plans to expand in the future. Though there is a pasture for the bison, it is small, and the herd tends to be free-roaming on the reservation. Special tags are occasionally issued to tribal members for hunting. There are no additional private herds on the reservation (A. Clubfoot, Northern Cheyenne Natural Resource Department, personal communication).

The Assiniboine and Sioux (Nakota, Lakota, and Dakota) tribes of the Fort Peck Reservation manage a tribal herd that consists of approximately 137 bison (post hunting season), which are contained on approximately 9,000 acres (R. Magnan, Fort Peck Fish and Game Director, personal communication). There is a hunting program that is open to tribal and non-tribal members; approximately 50 tags were issued for the 2010 hunt. The tribe has expressed the desire to establish an additional cultural herd of around 150 bison on 4,000 additional acres. The Fort Peck tribes are working with Defenders of Wildlife to obtain some of the YNP bison that are in the quarantine program (J. Proctor, Defenders of Wildlife, personal communication). There are two additional private herds on the reservation. The first has approximately 100 head, and the second has around 50 head of bison.

R. Magnan examining the bison pasture fencing. COURTESY DEFENDERS OF WILDLIFE

The Gros Ventre and Assiniboine tribes of the Fort Belknap Reservation manage a herd approaching 420 mature bison in an enclosure that is approximately 22,000 acres. The tribes would be interested in expanding their herd if additional acreage was available. There are some limited hunting opportunities available to tribal members and the general public, mainly to cull older bulls. For the 2010-11 season five tags were issued at a price of $2,000 for a four- to six-year-old bull, and approximately five tags were issued at a cost of $3,000 for a seven-year-old-plus trophy bull (Fort Belknap Fish and Wildlife, personal communication). There are no additional herds on the Fort Belknap Reservation. The Fort Belknap tribes have requested some of the YNP bison that are in the quarantine program, and are working with Defenders of Wildlife to have these bison transferred to the reservation (Gates et al., 2010; J. Proctor, personal communication).

The Blackfeet tribe manages a tribal herd that is currently made up of 120 mature bison and 38 calves. The bison are managed on 1,400 acres in the summer and then moved

to a smaller winter enclosure where there is supplemental feed. The tribe hopes to expand the herd in the future, and does not sell hunting tags (M. Magee, Blackfeet Land Department, personal communication). There are two private herds on the reservation. The first is made up of about 10 bison, and the second maintains around 50 bison.

The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation co-manage the herd on the National Bison Range. There was a separate tribal herd in the past and there is the possibility that one may be reestablished in the future. There are three known larger private herds on the reservation, which vary between 200 to 300 head of bison. In addition, many individuals on the reservation will occasionally have a few domestic bison (A. Fuqua, Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, personal communication).

Private Herds

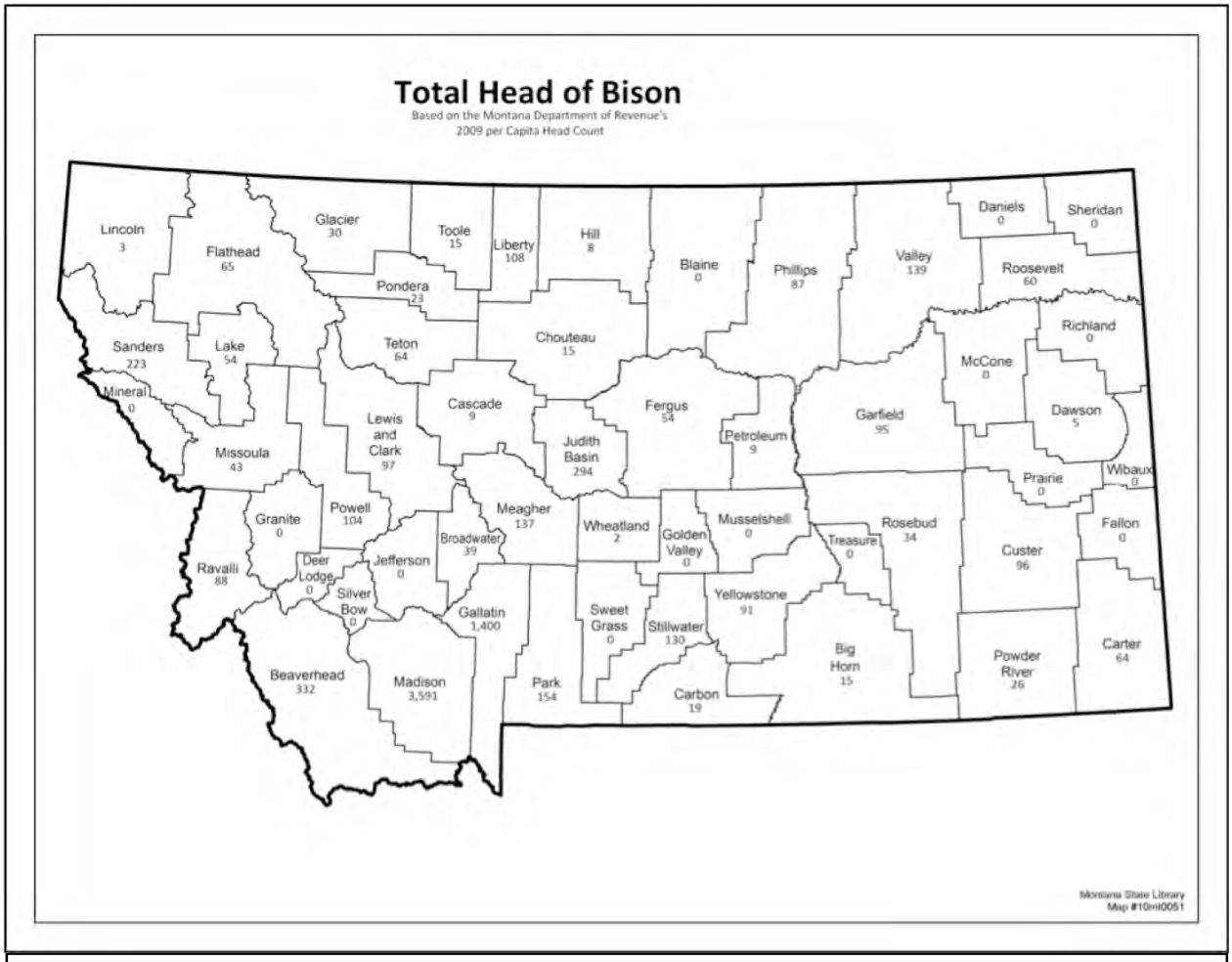
The number of bison in North America increased substantially in the mid-1980s as the commercial bison industry began to flourish (Freese et al., 2007; Gates et al., 2010). Bison meat became popular for its health benefits, and the industry began to market meat, hides, horns, skulls, and buffalo wool, which can be made into yarn that is similar to cashmere (Danz, 1997). Today domestic herds account for more than 93 percent of the bison in North America, and bison can be kept as livestock throughout the United States (Gates et al., 2010).

Domestic bison herd. COURTESY BOTANICAL PAPERWORKS INC

The National Bison Association was formed to promote the bison industry (Danz, 1997). The National Bison Association (2010) states that as of 2007 there were 4,499 private bison ranches and farms in the United States, and 70,000 bison were slaughtered under federal and state inspection in 2009. Gates et al. (2010) estimates that within the United States and Canada there are 400,000 privately owned bison on approximately 6,400 farms.

While the efforts of early bison ranchers may have been to conserve the plains bison, modern bison ranching is now driven primarily by commercial interests. The management of bison as livestock has led to the domestication of private herds. As Isenberg (2000) notes, domestication is not confinement or habituation to humans, but is instead "selective breeding: humans deciding which individuals will produce the next generation, and choosing them to produce a next generation that will better serve human goals" (pp. 198). In order to create more manageable and profitable bison herds, private ranchers selectively breed for desired traits. During domestication the traits that were

favored in the wild and increased the bison's survival there are slowly bred out of the herd, especially if the natural traits increased the difficulty of handling and decreased the production value (Geist, 1996). Ranchers selectively breed for traits that include docility, growth performance, conformation, and reduced agility (Isenberg, 2000; Gates et al., 2010). The artificial selection of preferred traits alters the natural genetic variation of the herd. The large number of domesticated bison, which are found throughout the United States, may reduce the public's perception of the need for bison conservation (Freese et al., 2007). Yet domesticated bison have been altered morphologically, physiologically, and behaviorally.

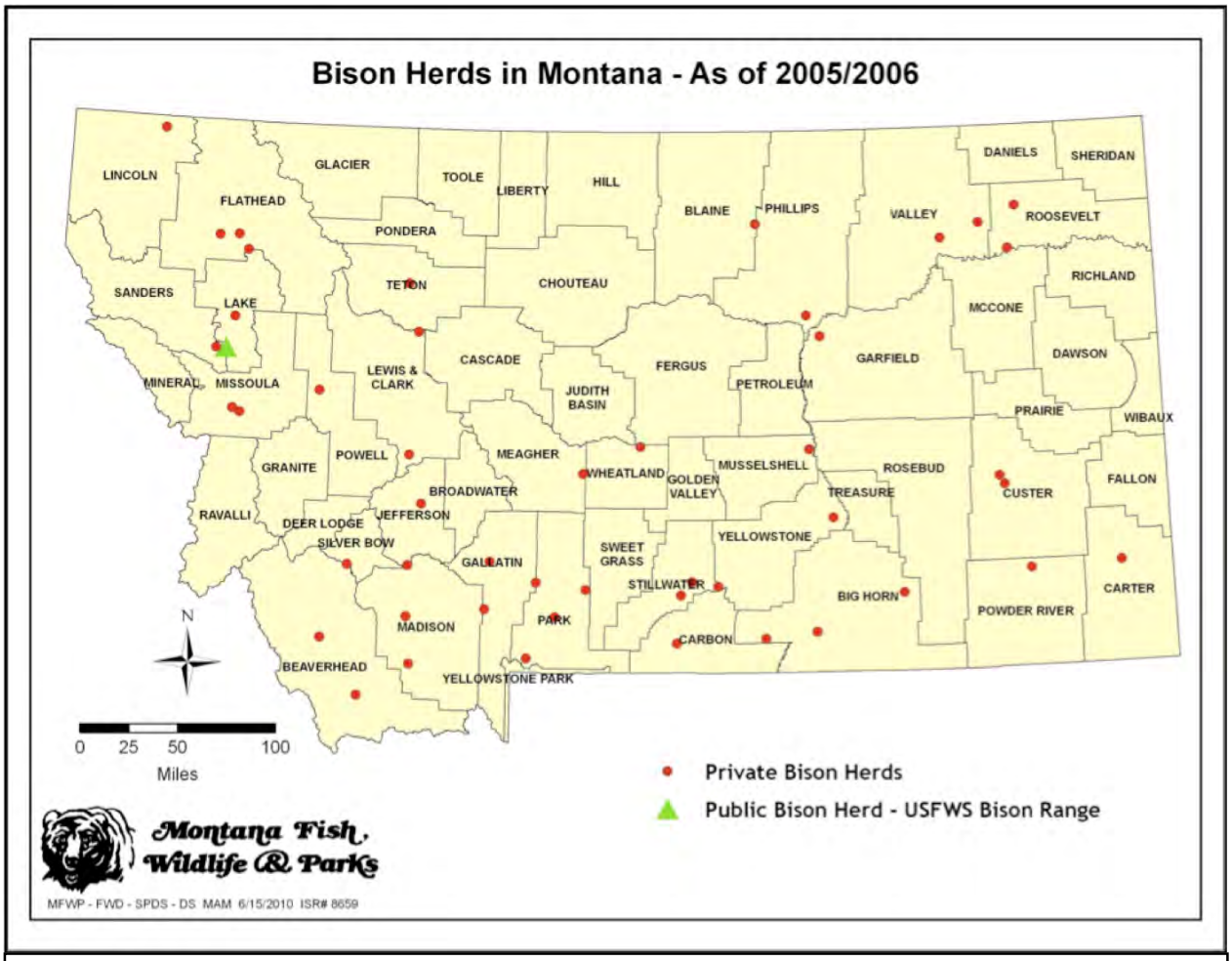


Map 5: Total Head of Domestic Bison. Created by FWP (2010) based on the Department of Revenue's final data from September 2009 per capita head count by county

Private herds, in which bison are managed as livestock, account for almost all of the bison in Montana. The majority of the domestic bison are raised for market. The 2007 U.S. Department of Agriculture's agriculture census determined that the state of Montana had 133 bison farms with 14,565 bison (National Agricultural Statistics Service, 2007). This is a decrease from 2002, when there were 190 bison farms in Montana containing 19,515 bison (National Agricultural Statistics Service, 2007). Per MCA 15-24-921, the State of Montana is

authorized to collect per capita fees to cover the expenses of enforcing livestock laws. These fees apply to all livestock including domestic bison that are over nine months of age (MCA 15-24-9210). The per capita fee for bison is $4.17 per head, compared to $1.75 for cattle and $0.37 for sheep and goats (MDOL, 2010f). Per capita fees are "self-reporting," which means that livestock producers are responsible for reporting the number of livestock they own to the Department of Revenue. According to the September 2009 Department of Revenue per capita head count, there were 7,822 reported bison over the age of nine months in Montana, which generated $34,174 in per capita fees for Montana (MDOL, 2009).

The Montana Bison Association, which is an organization of bison producers and enthusiasts, listed approximately 60 members in 2010 (Montana Bison Association, 2010). As stated previously, private bison herds occur on the Fort Peck, Blackfeet, and Flathead Reservations. The American Prairie Foundation maintains a private conservation herd of around 200 bison in eastern Montana, and has expressed an interest in increasing the size of its herd (American Prairie Foundation, 2010).



Map 6: Location of Known Plains Bison Herds, as of 2005/2006. Map re-created by FWP (2010) based on data provided by Sanderson et al. (2008)