

Bison Stories Part I: Bringing Home The Buffalo



I don't know if you've heard the exciting news on the street, Ken Burns is about to release a new documentary series called the American buffalo. You know, Ken Burns, the award winning history filmmaker who created documentaries, like Dustbowl and Country Music and the Civil War, and gobs more. In his new one, he'll take a look at the near extinction of the bison in the 19th century and the people who set out to save it. Much of his new bison series is actually filmed in Wyoming and around the American West. So I reached out to Ken and asked him for an interview. And guess what? He said, yes! So I'm going to share that interview with you in a few weeks. But in anticipation of that, and of his bison series that comes out on PBS on October 16 and 17, the Modern West is going to share a roundup of all of our bison episodes. Longtime listeners will know that these are some of our most impactful stories.

We'll start right off with a bang. An episode from the podcast's very first season. It's called Bringing Home the Buffalo. It's produced by a phenomenal reporter who's gone on to win awards, and do marvelous things: Savannah Maher.

MELODIE: It's kind of hard to imagine it now with cities spreading across the high plains, but there was a time on this continent when you couldn't have helped but connect to bison through your senses. They numbered by the millions, one of the largest migrating herds ever to roam the Earth: the sight, smell, sound of them everywhere. Then in the late 1800s, the U.S. Army was at war with the tribes across the Great Plains. These enormous herds supplied the tribes with everything they needed to keep fighting: food, shelter warmth. And so as part of their campaign to suppress the tribes, the government undertook an extermination effort against the species. You might have seen some of the old photos of bison skulls stacked as high as a three-story house. And the tactic worked. Soon after the Great Plains tribes began to succumb to starvation, despair and disease. All that's left of those enormous herds now are the bison inside Yellowstone National Park. Bison that you see on ranches have been crossbred with cattle. But in the last few years, tribes across the West have been trying to bring back the wild pure bison. Reporter Savannah Mar attended the release of some bison recently on the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming. By the way, you might notice I'm calling them bison. That's because I'm not Native American. Savannah refers to them by their cultural name, buffalo.

The sun is setting over a 300-acre pasture near the center of the Wind River Reservation. On an ordinary day, This place blends right in with the cattle ranches that surround it. But on this day in late June, it's buzzing with tribal members, newspaper reporters, AND TV cameras. One journalist has an aerial drone taking a video from overhead and we're all waiting for this semi truck hauling five buffalo to roll through the gates. The buffalo have been on the road for ten hours all the way from the Fort Peck reservation in northeast Montana so they're itching to get off. The TV reporters and photographers are anxious to get their shots in while there's still a bit of daylight. But Jason Baldas is taking his time making sure that the

drum is ready to sing its welcome song, that a ceremonial person has prayed for the new buffalo, and that tribal members have a decent view. He's in no rush. After all, for Jason, this moment has been years in the making.

"You're gonna come out the side, okay. Just go," Jason says. Jason is a big deal in the world of buffalo restoration. He's advocated for the animals' return to tribal lands all across the Great Plains in the Mountain West. But bringing them back here to his home on the Wind River Reservation is a mission that's especially close to his heart. On a quieter day at the buffalo pasture, he introduces me to the herd. "So you can see that bull over there in the distance, he's a little nervous looking at us over here. But we could probably walk over to this edge and see the rest of them down in the draw," he says.

I count more than 20 fuzzy black dots in the distance and three tiny red ones, calves that were just born. While we watch them graze, Jason tells me that his people, the Eastern Shoshone, have always been buffalo people, even in the 131 years when not a single one lived on Wind River. So when ten of the animals arrived here in 2016, something just clicked.

"When that first Buffalo hit the ground right here," he says, "that was when it really hit home, you know. Makes you cry, you know. Most Native people know how important innately buffalo was. But even then we didn't have a connection to it. Because we didn't have it around. Couldn't smell it, couldn't taste it, couldn't pray with it. So now that that is here, it's like bringing your family home."

Since then, the Eastern Shoshone herd has tripled in size. A fourth calf was born right after my visit, the addition of five bulls from Fort Peck will bring the herd up to 33 animals. And that's just about as many as this 300 acres of bunchgrass can support. But when it comes to buffalo restoration, Jason is a dreamer. He wants to see this herd number in the hundreds, maybe someday in the thousands of buffalo, and he wants them to live like wild animals.

"If we as Native people and Native cultures and customs have the utmost appreciation for this animal, then the best way to manage them is wildlife. There's not very many places where that's possible. Some tribes don't have that option. But here at Wind River, we have the habitat available. It's the politics that holds it up," Jason says.

Those politics Jason's talking about, he's not the first person to run up against them. Because unlike most reservations in this country, Wind River is shared by two tribes. And unlike the tribes on most shared reservations, the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho don't govern the reservation jointly. So there are two separate sovereign governments both trying to assert their control. That complicates a lot of matters around here. But here's what it has to do with buffalo: to move the growing herd to a bigger piece of land on the reservation. That's the smallest of baby steps towards Jason's dream of free-ranging buffalo on Wind River. The Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho tribes would have to work together. That's because the Eastern Shoshone tribe doesn't have a bigger piece of land that's suitable for buffalo to live on. They would have to start looking at joint tribal land on the reservation, and the two tribes would need to manage the herd jointly. And to understand just how loaded that proposition is, I had to take a trip north.

On the west rim of the Wind River Canyon in the Owl Creek Mountains just outside of Thermopolis, the Northern Arapaho tribe runs about 4,000 head of cattle. Ransom Logan tells me that this ranch, the Arapaho Ranch, is a deep source of pride for Arapaho people, and he should know. He's the ranch's manager. As we drive this windy gravel road up, I start to notice that Ransom has a catchphrase.

“You should be allowed your opinion for dang sure.”

“Dang sure ain't just gonna jump into that one.”

“That's dang sure.”

“It'll dang sure give you that.”

He tells me that he uses this phrase to stop himself from cursing when he's really serious about something. And when the subject of buffalo restoration comes up, “that's gonna be a hard one to debate with ranchers because they didn't shrink and want their livelihood infected by buffalo. And having to quarantine and then essentially kill their whole cow herd that they've worked a lifetime to get to, you know,” Ransom says.

This debate has been raging in the West ever since cattle ranches started to crop up on the land where wild buffalo used to roam and tribes like the Arapaho would hunt them. Ransom tells me he's not actually against buffalo restoration. He just thinks it should be done with ranchers' livelihoods in mind. But he admits that he as an Arapaho man doesn't feel a whole lot of connection to buffalo.

"I'm out of touch as far as that goes," Ransom says. "Because we can say this is where we came from. But we can't say that this is how we live. I mean, I don't know. Because I've never lived off of buffalo."

When we reached the top, we step out of Ransom's pickup truck to watch a group of grazing heifers. He tells me that all 300,000 acres of the Arapaho Ranch are on reservation land. We're a long way from the most populated parts of Wind River though. When he talks about his childhood as an Arapaho, Ransom gestures to the other side of the Owl Creek mountains.

"Growing up as a kid over there too, I remember my brothers and cousins, every summer all we did every day was ride horses. That's all we did." Gathering together a few dollars, hopping on a horse and riding to the convenience store. He says that was something that made him feel Arapaho. "We would ride there just to go get a soda. If we had an 18 year old, buy us a pack of cigarettes or whatever. Yeah, those were good times back then. But there's dang sure been some families there that have been involved with livestock and horses."

And another thing that's made him feel Arapaho is being a cowboy and coming to work here on the Arapaho Ranch.

There's been a lot of guys come through here and a lot of families on the reservation. It's supported for a lot of years. I mean, there's been a pile of people come through here that were here for a lot of years. And they put a lot of time and effort and their life into it and have a sense of pride for the place and love the place more or less."

But even tribal members who have never worked here, some have never been here are proud of the Arapaho Ranch, and they should be. For 80 years, it's been a pretty consistent source of jobs and revenue for the tribe. Besides, it's a beautiful place that every member of the Northern Arapaho tribe gets to call

their own. So Ransom says, it shouldn't come as a surprise that a lot of Northern Arapaho people aren't exactly excited about buffalo coming back to Wind River.

“And I could see why they'd want to bring it back, as far as the culture and understanding where our tribe came from, and how we lived. And you know, I could see it from that point. But you know, at the same time, we've worked pretty hard at getting this place to where it's at, and maintaining what it is, so I don't know where I'm at on that, I guess. So I mean, it dang sure ought to be thought through pretty well.”

If you're from a Native community, or if you've spent a lot of time on one, you know that there can be a lot of talk about what's traditional with a capital T. That's often the basis for whether someone's behavior is praised or scolded. Praying with tobacco is traditional; smoking cigarettes is not. When Native kids are learning how to be good people, they're often asked to think about the way their ancestors lived. And then there are the small T traditions that make a place like Wind River special, like bragging about how good the high school basketball team is, or spending a summer day on horseback riding to the convenience store with your cousins to buy some junk food. If I've learned anything while getting to know the Wind River Reservation, it's that there's more than one way to honor where you came from. Third generation rancher Clorinda Calling Thunder was one of the first people to show me that.

She greets me with a big smile at a ranch in Ethete. I also meet her son who's working on a truck in the driveway and her grandkids who are outside playing with a puppy. Clorinda tells me that this ranch is a family operation.

“That's it's just been our life. And my dad used to say, if you take care of your cattle, they'll take care of you. And that's true because when you sell in the fall, you get the profits from the calf,” she says.

In a lot of ways, the Calling Thunders are your classic Wyoming ranching family. But with one pretty major caveat. They don't really care for beef.

“Some people, they do set aside a steer or something. We don't. Because we rely on deer, elk, wild game, and buffalo. We're hunters of the buffalo.”

Clorinda says that diet is healthier. It's also closer to the way their ancestors ate. After all, she tells me, the Northern Arapaho are buffalo people too. And another thing that sets Clorinda apart from your typical Wyoming rancher, she doesn't believe that buffalo pose any threat to cattle.

“We went on a buffalo hunt in March to Gardner, Montana. And when we were coming in, those fields there and the fields were full of cattle and elk. And I told my husband, I said, look at all these elk. I said, if a buffalo got in there, I said, everybody would be up in arms.”

It's true that there's never been a documented case of the disease brucellosis being spread from buffalo to cattle. Buffalo restoration proponents say that's because buffalo don't pass it along. A lot of ranchers say it goes to show that keeping bison contained and far away from cattle is working. Either way. Clorinda says that ten years ago when the Northern Arapaho tribe was weighing whether to bring buffalo back to their land, brucellosis was on people's minds. The resolution went to a vote in the tribes General Counsel. That means every tribal citizen had a say and things got political.

“And one of our tribal members got up and said, ‘Oh, no, we can't mix our cattle with the bison’. And so the people just believed it and so it was voted down,” she says.

Today, Clarinda serves on the Northern Arapaho Business Council. During this conversation back in June. She tells me that a lot of Arapaho people are starting to think differently about buffalo.

“Do you think that the tribe would ever consider comanaging a herd with the Shoshone use?” I ask Lynnette St. Clair, the Indian Education Coordinator for the Fort Washakie school district.

“I don't know. Because, to me, it's a tradition for both tribes. But to me, it would be okay with me, but some people wouldn't be. Because my grandkids are Shoshone and Arapaho. And I don't see nothing wrong with it. But there's some people that do.”

When people like Jason Baldes and Clorinda Calling Thunder talk about buffalo, they talk a lot about children, what it means to be able to feed your children buffalo meat to help the next generation foster a closer relationship to the animal. So on the day of the buffalo release, I stopped by the Fort Washakie schools where almost all of the students are Eastern Shoshone, Northern Arapaho, or both. And when

they walk through the front doors every morning, the first thing they see is a big fuzzy buffalo head mounted in the atrium. Lynette says that's one of many reminders her students get that buffalo are their family.

“And again, it's because of the buffalo that we're able to extend that family connection to our community,” she says.

Over the years, Lynette has been instrumental in getting people excited about bringing buffalo home to Wind River. One of the ways she does that is with an annual week-long event in the school district.

“We had one of our tribal elders – and I believe it was Joanna Tillman – who was the one that provided the translation. It means the Five Days of Buffalo.”

During the Five Buffalo Days, kids learn what their ancestors knew about the science of buffalo, their movement patterns and their role in a healthy ecosystem. The kids learn stories about buffalo, how to tell those stories in their own language. And when the school day ends, there are community events.

“One year, they had a buffalo blues concert, where we had a young Indian guy from – I don't even remember where he is from, but he sounded a lot like Steve Perry from Journey. We had him come in and perform. We've done parades in the community where we've brought everybody out from the tribal offices, and they'd bring out their chairs and they would watch and we've done all different types of things to bring the community in,” Lynette says.

And with the Eastern Shoshone tribes' herd continuing to grow, Lynette has plans to make the Five Buffalo Days even more hands-on.

“The other thing that we have done in the past, and we're looking at doing now, in the near future is harvesting a buffalo. And when we've done that, in the past, we've had elder woman come in and then show the young women how to cut the buffalo meat and how to dry it and how to prepare it and take care of it. And then we've had the young man learn how to skin the buffalo, how to keep it out,” she says.

During the Five Buffalo Days, Lynette says her students walk a little bit taller, like they know themselves better, like after hearing about how hard their parents and grandparents fought to bring buffalo back here. They understand their power and responsibility as tribal citizens.

“They have to protect what is theirs, and our community, in our reservation. Every day, those rights are being chipped away. And if our kids don't go and they don't learn who they are, and about protecting that sovereign right that we have, then we will lose more and more of our reservation,” Lynnette says. “And that is the thing that I think that underscores just being able to have our own herds is, exerting our sovereign authority.”

“And what does all of that add up to for young people who are watching this?” I ask her. “Who are seeing their tribal government, as you say, exert sovereign authority and say, ‘This is what's best for our community, and we're gonna do it.’”

“Well, you know, hopefully what it means to them is that they have a big responsibility as well as tribal members, they have the responsibility of continuing that legacy of their ancestors.”

Back at the buffalo enclosure, looking out over the Eastern Shoshone tribes' herd, Jason Baldes says that's what keeps him motivated in this battle that sometimes feels impossible to win. And he wants all children on the Wind River Reservation to learn those lessons from the buffalo about taking good care of your family, about fighting for your sovereign rights, not just kids who go to Fort Washakie schools, not just the Shoshone kids.

“The work continues to ensure that buffalo people are in some way connected with buffalo. And both of the tribes here are buffalo people,” he says.

That's the spirit behind this gift of five young bulls from the Fort Peck/Assiniboine and Sioux tribes to the Eastern Shoshone tribe. The truck hauling the bison comes to a stop. The Big Wind drum group honors them with a song as the doors on the sides of the trailer are opened. Members of both tribes gather to watch the animals thunder free onto the pasture, one by one.

After months of planning and coordinating the first ever tribe to tribe transfer of buffalo is complete.

“So how do you feel?”

“Better now that they're on the ground and I know these are Shoshone buffalo. These are your buffalo and you know, hopefully, with the right steps forward, we can expand the range so that our buffalo benefit everybody,” Jason says.

So that's where this story was supposed to end. And then on the evening of October 15, just after I left, what would have been my final edit for this story. I got a voicemail.

Hello, this is Crystal C’Bearing from the Northern Arapaho Tribal Historic Preservation Office and we are inviting you to come to the bison release tomorrow, October 16 at 10 am and the location is 1496 Blue Sky highway. So you're welcome to come and watch the bison that week.”

So I'll admit that this sent me into a little bit of a panic, but that nervous energy turned pretty quickly into excitement. Not every reporter gets to cover two historic buffalo releases in their first six months on the job.

When I arrived the next morning, I realized this wasn't just a surprise for me. Many Northern Arapaho tribal members told me they didn't hear about it until the night before either. But that didn't stop more than 100 of them from showing up to welcome the buffalo. And the atmosphere at this release was different. There were no TV cameras, no aerial drones buzzing around overhead. There are elders sitting in a neat row of folding chairs with blankets in their laps as busloads of schoolchildren run around seeking out their spots to watch. And after a prayer and a flag song, the ten buffalo are released.

Teachers round up the elementary school students who sing a celebration song.

And it's all joyful, so celebratory that I almost forget the biggest question I have about this whole situation. After decades of controversy, how did ten buffalo just show up here, no announcement, no public meetings, no general council vote? Devin Old Man, former director of the Northern Arapaho Historic Preservation Office, told me that after a long and politically messy process, he and his team just sort of did it.

“But a lot of phone calls and a lot of disagreements and a lot of arguments with people who are in control, and finally got them to take a look at our people in our land and understand what we need,” Devin says.

“They applied for a small herd from the federally run National Bison Range in Montana and put the approval letter on the Business Council's desk. Finally then we went through the motions. We got everything done. We got all the laborers out here to build a fence. We got everything going on now. We are where we are.”

This enclosure is in Kinnear on rangeland only ten miles from the Eastern Shoshone tribes' herd. And Devin said he has been working with Jason Baldes scheming about how the two herds might become one someday. But securing these buffalo was Devin's last act as director of the Northern Arapaho Historic Preservation Office. He says the work was getting too political. So he resigned. From now on, he'll advocate for the herd and for that partnership with the Eastern Shoshone, as a community member, “When I'm 80 or 90, and when we have a huge herd, if I get to live that long, if I'm blessed, but we could live that long, and I have great grandchildren or great, great grandchildren, I'm going to be able to come out to this herd and say, you know, myself and Jason Baldes were the ones that helped get this started. And I'll be able to see that reciprocity for the future. And that's really what I was thinking about when we started this. I want my grandkids to be able to eat bison to have them back in their lives.”

It's midday now. The crowd is starting to thin out, the children have boarded their buses and headed back to school. With the noise and the onlookers gone, the ten buffalo roam closer to the perimeter of their enclosure where Devin and his family have been watching them. Devin kneels to the ground, holds his two daughters close and sings to the buffalo, welcoming them home.