

# Bringing bison back to North American landscapes

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The next 10 to 20 years could be extremely significant for restoring wild populations of American bison to their original range, including the Canadian Rockies; but for this to happen, more land must be made available for herds to roam free, government policies must be updated and the public must change its attitude towards bison, according to a new international study on the species co-authored by University of Calgary experts.

The publication released today by the International Union for Conservation of Nature, *American Bison: Status Survey and Conservation Guidelines 2010*, reports on the current status of American bison in the wild and in conservation herds, and makes recommendations on how to ensure that the species is conserved for the future.

"Although the effort to restore bison to the plains of North America is considered to be one of the most ambitious and complex undertakings in species conservation in North America, it will only succeed if legislation is introduced at a local and national level, with significant funding and a shift in attitude towards the animal," says Simon Stuart, Chair, IUCN Species Survival Commission.

This publication will provide important guidance for the Canadian Rockies Bison Initiative, a local effort that proposes to restore bison in the eastern slope watersheds of the Banff National Park. "The guidelines will have great application to local projects such as the CRBI, looking at ecological restoration of wild bison in the mountain areas west of

Calgary," says U of C Faculty of Environmental Design Professor and co-editor of the study Cormack Gates, who is also co-chair of the IUCN/SSC Bison Specialist Group.

Cliff White, research director for the Canadian Rockies Bison Initiative and an adjunct professor in EVDS says that the IUCN report provides "state-of-the-art" guidelines to use science and traditional knowledge to plan the return of wild bison to an important homeland in the Rocky Mountain landscape. White anticipates greater support towards the local initiative and is currently working with several governmental and non-governmental organizations such as Parks Canada and the Eleanor Luxton Historical Foundation that have an interest in restoring bison.

Harvey Locke, spokesperson for the Eleanor Luxton Foundation, said the foundation is pleased with the comprehensive review of the status and ecology of the buffalo provided in the IUCN report. "We are very dedicated as an institution to the integrity of the history, culture and ecology of the Banff Bow Valley and will make every effort to support the reintroduction of bison there as a wild species," Locke says.

Five hundred years ago, tens of millions of American bison roamed free on the plains of North America, from Alaska to northern Mexico. Now the American bison - which includes both plains and wood bison - is listed as Near Threatened on IUCN's Red List of Threatened Species™. As of 2008, there were approximately 400,000 bison in commercial herds in North America, some 93 percent of the continental population. But little progress has been made in recent decades to increase the number of animals in conservation herds, which are managed carefully for their genetic diversity and ecological roles. In 2008, there were 61 plains bison conservation herds in North America containing about 20,500 animals, and 11 conservation herds of wood bison, containing nearly 11,000 animals.

"While substantial progress in saving bison from extinction was made in the 20th Century, much work remains to restore conservation herds throughout their vast geographical range," Gates says. "The key is recognition that the bison is a wildlife species and to be conserved as wildlife, it needs land and supportive government policies."

The survival of bison populations is affected by many factors, including limited habitat and severe winters. Yet the greatest challenge is to overcome the common perception that the bison, which has had a profound influence on the human history of North America, socially, culturally and ecologically, no longer belongs on the landscape.

"The decimation of the American Bison in the late 1800s inspired the first recovery of bison and an entire conservation movement that protected wildlife and wild places across North America," says Keith Aune, Senior Conservation Scientist, Wildlife Conservation Society. "The IUCN Status Survey and Conservation Guidelines provide a new framework for inspiring a second recovery of bison and restoring functional grassland ecosystems."

Bison have the best chance of full recovery as wildlife by being allowed to roam freely across hundreds of thousands or even millions of hectares. Making this possible poses one of the biggest challenges for restoring bison herds as both public and private landowners will need to give their support.

"The bison is the largest land mammal in North America, and yet it is perhaps the most neglected icon," says Steve Forrest, WWF Northern Great Plains Manager for Conservation Science.

"These guidelines provide a roadmap for bringing the bison back to its rightful place as a keystone of the great plains."

Provided by University of Calgary

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