

Where the buffalo roam: Herd treads again on tribal land

November 3 2016, by Ben Neary



Buffalo await release from a corral south of Pilot Butte, Wyo., in the Wind River Indian Reservation, Wyo., on Thursday, Nov. 3, 2016. The Eastern Shoshone Tribe released 10 buffalo, marking the first time in more than a century that the animals have roamed the area. (AP Photo/Ben Neary)

The men stood by the edge of the corral to mark the release of the first

buffalo to run on the Wind River Indian Reservation in decades.

The sound of their drums mixed with their voices lifted in song and the 10 buffalo shifted nervously before finally they bolted and ran out onto the grassy plain.

The buffalos' first free steps on the reservation on Thursday marked a homecoming that's been decades in the making for members of the Eastern Shoshone Tribe.

Leslie Shakespeare, a member of the Eastern Shoshone Business Council, the tribe's governing body, watched the buffalo move through the tall, parched yellow grass. "It's very surreal, just seeing them released and seeing them run across the field here," he said. "Seeing everybody's emotions—a lot of people are real emotional."

It's been more than a century since buffalo wandered here, tribal members say. The federal government oversaw the extermination of enormous herds of buffalo in the late 1800s.

Jason Baldes, coordinator of the buffalo restoration effort for the Eastern Shoshone, said in a recent interview that the federal government encouraged the wanton slaughter of the buffalo after the cavalry's defeat in 1876 at the Battle of Little Bighorn.



Jason Baldes, coordinator of the buffalo restoration effort for the Eastern Shoshone Tribe, addresses a crowd south of Pilot Butte, Wyo., on the Wind River Indian Reservation Thursday, Nov. 3, 2016. The Eastern Shoshone Tribe released 10 buffalo, marking the first time in more than a century that the animals have roamed the area. (AP Photo/Ben Neary)

"So what happened to the buffalo similarly happened to native people," Baldes said. "And then we are now on isolated pockets of our former territories. Indians were relegated to reservations, and buffalo you know essentially are in isolated, small populations in their former territories and essentially are not even considered a wildlife species. Only in places like national parks are they valued for their role ecologically."

The 10 buffalo released Thursday are from a genetically pure strain the

federal government maintains on a refuge in Iowa. The National Wildlife Federation and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have worked with the Eastern Shoshone on the restoration project.

Collin O'Mara, president of the Wildlife Federation, addressed the crowd at Thursdays' release. He said an estimated 60 million buffalo roamed the West in the early 1800s only to drop to fewer than 100 at the turn of the last century.

"Partially it was for food, partially it was for meat but mainly it was for control of the land, to force tribes like the Shoshone to abandon their large ranges and be pushed onto reservations," O'Mara said. "It is an injustice that for far too long has gone insufficiently acknowledged. I think what's exciting today is that there's a rebirth, a beginning."

Matt Hogan, assistant regional director of the Fish and Wildlife Service, said there have been times through the years when the federal government has stood on the wrong side of the buffalo issue. "And it's truly humbling but oh so proud to now stand on the right side of this issue and help restore bison to this landscape," he said.



Buffalo explore their new terrain after their release from a corral south of Pilot Butte, on the Wind River Indian Reservation, Wyo., on Thursday, Nov. 3, 2016. The Eastern Shoshone Tribe released 10 buffalo, marking the first time in more than a century that the animals have roamed the area. (AP Photo/Ben Neary)

The Eastern Shoshone share the Wind River Indian Reservation with the Northern Arapaho Tribe. The two have separate governments, but own the reservation lands jointly.

Ronald Oldman, a member of the Northern Arapaho Tribal Council, said his tribe had considered restoring buffalo to reservation lands a few years ago but decided against it.

"I'm happy for the Shoshones to get their bison back here," Oldman said in an interview this week. Asked whether his tribe plans to pursue the

release of buffalo, he said, "It's up to the people."

Baldes said he hopes to see the buffalo released on Thursday ultimately lead to a herd of at least 1,000 animals. He said establishing such a herd on the reservation will allow children there to experience how their ancestors traditionally used the animals and share in understanding their spiritual importance.

"If we as human beings—human beings meaning Shoshone or Arapaho or non-native or the cattle industry—if we as human beings can get over our differences and see the importance of managing these creatures on a large landscape, then we can do it," Baldes said.

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