

New national survey says public reveres bison

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Americans are woefully out of touch with the fact that the American bison, or buffalo, is in trouble as a wild, iconic species, but they do love them as an important symbol of their country—and as an entrée on the dinner table.

These sentiments were found in a public survey released today by the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) at a national conference on restoring bison populations in the North America.

The survey is part of an effort spearheaded by the American Bison Society, which is a program of WCS. Its goal is to achieve ecological restoration in the next 100 years by putting a fire under government agencies, conservation groups, ranchers, and others to do all they can to restore the bison's ecological role as an important species to North America.

The national survey asked 2,000 Americans more than 50 questions about bison to gage public awareness about this iconic species, as conservationists grapple with how to best restore populations to the American West and elsewhere. The survey results were compiled by WCS researchers John Fraser, Kent Redford, Jessica Sickler, and Eva Fearn.

The survey showed that:

-- Less than ten percent understood how many bison remain in the United States

- More than 74 percent believe that bison are extremely important living symbol of the American West
- More than half view the bison as emblematic as a symbol of America as whole

While an estimated 500,000 bison remain in the United States, the vast majority of those live on private ranches, with only about 9,000 plains bison considered free-ranging in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. An additional 7,000 free-ranging wood bison live in Canada. Bison once numbered in the tens of millions and ranged from Alaska to Mexico but were wiped out by commercial hunting and habitat loss largely as a result of U.S. westward expansion.

"The results of this survey clearly show that the American public wants more to be done to restore the bison," said Dr. Kent Redford of the Wildlife Conservation Society. "We know it will take decades of strategic planning and a wide group of stakeholders will need to take appropriate action."

Ecological restoration will likely take a century, says WCS, and will only be realized through collaboration with a broad range of public, private and indigenous partners. Ecological restoration of North American bison would occur when large herds of plains and wood bison can move freely across extensive landscapes within all major habitats of their historic ranges. It would also include bison interacting with the fullest possible set of other native species, as well as inspiring, sustaining and connecting human cultures.

WCS is calling on the federal government to better coordinate management of bison across federal agencies, take down barriers to the production and selling of ecologically raised bison meat, and work with Canada and Mexico on bison management.

Progress is already being made. For example, last month, Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne announced an initiative that will work with state, tribal and agricultural interests to strengthen bison conservation efforts to help bison recover and thrive.

The WCS survey also revealed that 40 percent of its participants said that they have tried bison and 83 percent felt was good or better-tasting than beef.

Added Redford: "The survey also showed that one road to bison conservation may be a pragmatic, market-based approach, namely to grow sustainable markets for wild, free-ranging bison meat."

The three-day conference entitled "Building blocks for bison ecological restoration", was co-sponsored by the Wildlife Conservation Society, American Prairie Foundation, Linden Trust for Conservation, The Nature Conservancy, Safari Club International, and World Wildlife Fund.

The conference was attended by more than 100 participants, including representatives from federal and state agencies, private ranchers, and indigenous groups and covered all aspects of bison ecological restoration.

Source: Wildlife Conservation Society

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