

Buffaloed: The Myth and Reality of Bison in America

by *Larry Schweikart*

Almost every schoolchild is taught that prior to the arrival of whites, Plains Indians lived in perfect harmony with nature as the ultimate socialist ecologists. According to the common tale, Indians had little private property—and certainly were not burdened by capitalism—and they hunted and killed only what they needed to live. Then Europeans arrived, and using the techniques of industrialized hunting, nearly exterminated the North American bison, also known as the buffalo. In the late 1800s, white hunters, such as William Frederick “Buffalo Bill” Cody, slaughtered the animals to meet market demand until the bison were nearly gone. Then, at just the right moment, government stepped in to save the buffalo by sealing them off at Yellowstone National Park.

It’s a convenient and easily told story, but it has left students, well, buffaloed. It has certainly caused the story of the buffalo to be misunderstood. Several new scholarly studies have emerged, though, and they universally provide a much more complex picture of the Great Plains in the late 1800s. Among other revisions, the works address the nature of Indian hunting, white motivations for killing the bison, and nonhuman factors affecting herd sizes. Most of all, though, they show that the ultimate savior of the buffalo was not the government, but

the free market. Here, I will briefly review the findings insofar as they throw new light on the economics of the Indians both before and after the arrival of whites. I will look then at their assessment of the hunting efficiency of both Indians and whites. Finally, we will examine how private market forces, not government action, revived the buffalo herds.

Myth of the Ecological Indian

It is doubtful any of the authors intended their research to have political overtones per se. Dan Flores, a professor of history at Texas Tech University before moving to the University of Montana at Missoula; Shepard Krech III, an anthropology professor at Brown University; and Andrew C. Isenberg, a professor of history at Princeton, all have produced challenging new studies about Indians, whites, and the Plains environment. Most of all, they all have offered significant revisions of the views that Americans have held regarding the destruction of the buffalo.¹

The first myth they explode is that of the “natural” Indian who lived in harmony with nature—unlike the greedy Europeans who conquered the continent. Instead, the authors unveil evidence of communal economies that engaged in large-scale burning to “clear” forests and also to kill game. “Controlled” burns by the Indians often got out of control, and without modern fire-

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fighting equipment, flashed through forests, destroying everything in their path. Deer, beaver, and birds of all sorts were already on a trajectory to extinction in some areas, because over and above the hunting done by Indians, natural predators and disasters thinned herds. Isenberg wonders whether the North American bison herd was already falling below replacement levels *before* white hunters arrived.

Capitalism comes in for a huge share of the blame. Both Krech and Isenberg attribute changes in Native American farming/gathering lifestyles to increased trade with Europeans. Indians (reluctantly, in Isenberg's view) became hunters, which transformed their entire society, making them more dependent on nature than ever before. Tribes had to follow herds and become even more wasteful, as the buffalo meat was their main source of food and the hides (and beaver pelts) their only product for trade.

Notions that "pre-capitalist" Indians lived in harmony with nature—especially the buffalo—are thoroughly exploded in the new works by these anthropologists and historians. Indians used the tools at their disposal, mostly fire and cunning, to hunt buffalo. "Box burning," a common tactic, involved setting simultaneous fires on all four sides of a herd. The French word "Brulé," or "burnt," referred to the Sicangu ("burnt thigh") Sioux division whose survivors of hunting fires were burned on the legs. Charles McKenzie, traveling the plains in 1804, observed entire herds charred from Indian fires. Another favored hunting tactic, the "buffalo jump," involved luring a herd after an Indian dressed in a buffalo skin. At a full run, the brave led the herd to a cliff, where he leapt to a small ledge while the buffalo careened over the edge to their deaths. Either of these methods led to horrible waste and inefficient use of resources.

No Property Rights

The ultimate problem, however, was lack of property rights. One trader observed that the moving habits of the Plains Indians "prevent the accumulation of much baggage. . . .

Thus personal property cannot be acquired to any amount."² Lacking the ability to store a surplus, the Indians acquired none. While their communal heritage encouraged them to band together in hard times, the lack of surplus meat or robes meant that they only shared scarcity. A powerful myth emerged—one repeated in many textbooks—that the Indians "used every part of the buffalo," implying that the Plains Indians used *all* the buffalo they killed. That was not the case. Estimates made in the 1850s suggest that Indians harvested about 450,000 animals a year, and some think the figure was far higher than that. After stripping the best meat and some useful parts, the Indians left the remainder to rot. The stench permeated the prairie for miles, and many a pioneer came across acres of bones from buffalo killed by the Indians before they moved on.

Isenberg, for one, doubts whether Indian slaughter alone would have made the buffalo extinct, but when combined with natural factors—wolf predation, fire, and drought—the Indians' annual harvest probably exceeded the ability of the herds to maintain themselves. More important, as Isenberg points out, "Even had they recognized a decline, the inherent instability of the nomadic societies made it difficult always to enforce the mandates against waste."³ Equally important, many Indian religions held that nature provided an inexhaustible supply, and thus it was impossible to "overhunt." Put another way, without private property rights, the bison were already doomed before the white man arrived.

Westward expansion of whites and trade between whites and Indians produced two significant changes, one more destructive than the other. The first—already mentioned—was that Indians shifted from a farming to a nomadic, hunting lifestyle. More important, as American settlers pushed west, both the Indians and the buffalo constituted an impediment to further expansion. A thriving buffalo-hide trade already existed with Indian hunters, but by the 1860s, a new wave of white hunters, using modern firearms and industrial processing methods vastly expanded the slaugh-

ter of the bison. This had three purposes: (1) it fed railroad workers and some western markets; (2) it continued to provide robes and hides to tanneries; and (3) it provided a way to get rid of the Indian by eliminating his food supply.

In the 1890s, the leather industry in the United States had increased to an \$8.6 million business, and many of the hides came from buffalo. Buffalo bones, used for fertilizer and pigments, filled 5,000 boxcars annually. Tales of the deadly effectiveness of the Plains hunters, such as Buffalo Bill, are renowned. Working from a “stand,” in which lead buffalo are shot at long range so as not to panic the herd, a good hunter could kill 10–50 animals and skin them in a single morning’s work. The hides revealed the final tally, wherein a single warehouse would hold 60,000–80,000 hides, and the number of hides shipped on the Union Pacific alone exceeded 1.3 million between 1872 and 1874. “You can hear guns popping all over the country,” said one Texan.

Washington fostered policies that worked counter to each other. One bill made it unlawful for non-Indians to kill buffalo, in an effort to restore buffalo hunting to the Indians. Other federal policies, though, already viewed elimination of the bison as a key element in removing the food source for the Plains Indians, much the way Sherman sacked Georgia. Ranchers were already claiming that cattle made more efficient use of the plains than did buffalo. Where the Indians thought the supply of buffalo was endless, whites recognized it was finite and intended to eliminate it as a means to eliminate the Indians.

The Market Saves the Buffalo

There is no question that market forces nearly marked the bison for extinction sooner than had buffalo been left to the Indians alone. As early as 1832, artist George Catlin warned that the bison was being eradicated. Forty years later, Yellowstone National Park provided the only public refuge for bison outside city zoos and held a large remnant herd. However, Isenberg’s

conclusion upsets the entire apple cart of prior assumptions when he writes, “This remnant herd and other scattered survivors might eventually have perished as well had it not been for the efforts of a handful of Americans and Canadians. These advocates of preservation *were primarily Western ranchers who speculated that ownership of the few remaining bison could be profitable* and elite Easterners possessed of a nostalgic urge to recreate . . . the frontier” (emphasis added).⁴

Credit goes to the private sector, through formation of the American Bison Society in 1905, virtually all of whose members were from New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, or New England. A few sought to preserve the buffalo. Some sought to develop cattle/bison hybrids called “beefalo,” but others, including banker J. P. Morgan, focused on establishing open-range reserves where “the buffalo roam.” He funded a 20,000-acre tract in Colorado and stocked it with buffalo.

It was the Wild West Show, popularized by none other than Buffalo Bill, that took private support for the buffalo to the next level. His shows featured “buffalo hunts” with Indians and whites “hunting” a herd released into the arena. Touring the United States and Europe from the early 1880s until 1913, Cody introduced the buffalo to millions of people who had never seen one. More than a few contributed to the American Bison Society or in other ways worked to preserve the buffalo.

Meanwhile, western ranchers such as Charles Goodnight, who captured buffalo calves in 1878, determined that there might be great value in private bison herds. As a result, “many of the bison that eventually populated *government* preserves descended from the herd of two Montana ranchers” (emphasis added).⁵ Profit, as Isenberg notes, was the primary motivation for these and other keepers of the bison, just as it was for hide hunters a decade earlier. One rancher advertised, “We Supply Buffalo for Zoos, Parks, Circuses, and Barbecues.”

Private herds had value, and thus were well guarded. But the public parks were

“open hunting” for poachers, despite repeated efforts to raise fines for killing bison at Yellowstone. The public parks continually had difficulty keeping hunters out. The private reserves thrived on hunting.

But the beauty of the private market is that it also permits people to engage in charity, and it is from humanitarian motives that a second preservationist group appeared, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA). Unlike modern reformers, the nineteenth-century humanitarians did not immediately plead for help from government. Quite the contrary, the SPCA tried to inform the public, explaining both the destruction of bison and the need to maintain and replenish the herds. The Society took great pleasure when a son of Theodore Roosevelt, Kermit, published his refusal to kill any buffalo at a time when the buffalo were nearly extinct.

Together, the American Bison Society and the SPCA—one to maintain a symbol of masculinity and frontier ruggedness, the other out of a desire to “feminize” Americans toward its humane view—nevertheless worked together to allow market forces to operate. The American Bison Society purchased buffalo directly, but referred customers to the ranchers. One Michigan game reserve was established by purchasing the private herd of Joshua Hill. Virtually all of the Yellowstone herd rejuvenated in 1902 under the new game warden, “Buffalo” Jones, came from two private herds.

As a government employee, Jones, credited with helping to restore the herds, did so to a large extent by using the private sector. He realized that his “product,” besides scenery, was the buffalo herd. He located his bison corrals near the Mammoth Hot Springs, which was the park’s busiest entrance, allowing a private souvenir shop to be set up. After he resigned, the new man-

agement still kept herds near the Hot Springs.

Other private enterprises saw the value of promoting the buffalo. The Northern Pacific Railroad and hoteliers especially perceived that bison equaled profits. The Northern Pacific promoted Yellowstone heavily, emphasizing that only its line took visitors to the park, and by the twentieth century, sport hunters created such a demand for buffalo that it became a small industry in itself. In the 1960s, public parks finally acceded to hunting, allowing private hunters to pay \$200 each to shoot a buffalo.

The American Bison Society disappeared in the mid-1920s, but it had accomplished its mission, largely without government interference. Yellowstone aside, the private sector had saved the buffalo. By the 1990s, more than 90 percent of the bison in North America were in private hands, rather than publicly owned. As Isenberg notes, they were “preserved not for their iconic significance in the interest of biological diversity but simply raised to be slaughtered for their meat.”⁶

Without question, market forces had contributed to the near-extinction of the bison, along with the political objective of destroying the Indians by eliminating their food source. But that is well known. What is almost never mentioned is that it was market forces—ranchers, hunters, tourism developers, railroaders, and philanthropists—that ultimately saved the buffalo as well. □

1. Dan Flores, “Bison Ecology and Bison Diplomacy: The Southern Plains from 1800–1850,” in Helen Wheatley, ed., *Agriculture, Resource Exploitation, and Environmental Change* (Brookfield, Vt.: Variorum, 1997), pp. 47–68; Shepard Krech III, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York: Norton, 1999); Andrew C. Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison* (New York: Cambridge, 2000). Here I will, for sake of convenience, rely mostly on Isenberg, who has the study most focused on bison and yet is broader than Flores’s research.

2. Quoted in Isenberg, p. 79.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 84.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 164.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 176.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 189.

