




THE BUFFALO WAR

Independent Television Service
501 York Street
San Francisco, CA 94110

ABOUT ITVS

THE BUFFALO WAR was produced and directed by Matthew Testa for the Independent Television Service (ITVS). ITVS was created by Congress to “increase the diversity of programs available to public television, and to serve underserved audiences, in particular minorities and children.”

 Funding provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American people.

For more information about ITVS or to obtain additional copies of this guide, contact us 415-356-8383; fax 415-356-8391; itvs@itvs.org. Material from this guide is available on the ITVS website, www.itvs.org/buffalowar.

To purchase a copy; contact Bullfrog Films, 800-543-3764 or www.bullfrogfilms.com

ABOUT THE COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS PROJECT

Created in 1996, ITVS’s Community Connections Project (CCP) makes independent public television programming relevant and vital to local communities. This collaborative outreach model connects ITVS productions to the concerns of their audiences, encouraging the use of media as a powerful tool for creating dialogue and promoting change. To accomplish our goals, the CCP works with local field organizers in cities across the country. These field organizers foster partnerships between national and community-based organizations, public television stations, faith-based organizations, community leaders and independent producers, facilitating preview screenings and public forums, distributing outreach materials and devising and implementing creative strategies for ITVS productions to be vehicles for community development and change.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writers: Richard Anderson, Matthew Testa, Ruth Yellowhawk **Guide Reviewers:** Lynn Allen, Idaho Public Television • Karen Cooper, MT Dept. of Livestock • Harley Eagle, Indigenous Issues Forums • Rosalie Little Thunder, Buffalo Nation • Hope Sieck, Greater Yellowstone Coalition **Editors:** Amy Durgan, ITVS • Paul Engman • Jim Sommers, ITVS **Photos:** Scotty Guinn **Design:** Brad Bunkers

THE BUFFALO WAR

Buffalo have come to symbolize so much that is valuable to indigenous and American peoples. Their likeness appears on several state flags in the United States as well as on the antique Buffalo nickel, and they have a special and protected place in a few of our nation’s most well-known parks.

Many native nations see the buffalo as a relative. In fact, most natives of the Plains trace their origins to the buffalo. The Buffalo Nation—the name Native Americans use for the bison population—has endured experiences that mirror those of many Native nations, including destruction and enforced boundaries, even as they are admired for surviving near extinction.

Still others see buffalo as an economic threat to their livelihoods. Cattle ranchers are especially concerned, viewing bison as competitors for valuable grazing lands and fearing that the wild animals will spread the disease brucellosis to their herds.





ABOUT THIS GUIDE

In THE BUFFALO WAR, diverse parties voice concerns that call for further discussion and reflection. This guide provides additional information about the conflict to be used by students, families, teachers, community organizations and public television viewers in discussing the issues and understanding the film.

The questions posed in this guide are offered to reveal our most deeply held beliefs and values, to uncover our own concerns beneath surface observations, to engage the internal and external conflicts we feel regarding the issues and to offer us the necessary reflective time and space to consider what actions are appropriate in addressing this clash of perspectives.

In addition, other sources of information are listed in the Resources section. Please feel free to photocopy and distribute this guide.

FILMMAKER'S STATEMENT

Matthew Testa

When I first learned about the controversy over Yellowstone's bison herd, I was working as a newspaper reporter in Wyoming near Yellowstone's southern gateway. I had witnessed many battles fought in the West over public lands, wilderness and wildlife, but this one affected people in ways I had not expected.

This is more than a story about a livestock disease, animal management or a range war, as the bison conflict has stirred people from vastly different backgrounds, offering a fascinating cross section of life in the Rocky Mountains today. It's a story with historical tragedies embedded deeply in our national consciousness, evoking a sad past, but offering a chance for redemption. At the center of the battle is the buffalo, an animal that, in its silence, manages to tell us a great deal about how we see the world.

I wanted to make a film that explored all the dimensions of the bison conflict, one that elucidated the scientific and political facts of the issue but didn't shy from the emotional aspects of the story. I also wanted to represent the public that seemed to be overlooked in a controversy dominated by industry and government agencies. All of these groups, along with the buffalo, have a great deal at stake in this story.

This is also a film about activism and expression, meant to inspire reactions and dialogue. My hope is that this documentary will move audiences to voice their opinions on this perplexing conflict. With more discussion, awareness and thought, maybe the buffalo war can be settled.



BISON, NATIVE AMERICANS, AND YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK

Bison is the scientific name for the largest land mammal living in North America. In the United States, "bison" and "buffalo" are often used interchangeably, although "buffalo" technically refers to species in Africa and Asia.

Weighing between 900 and 2,400 pounds, bison appear ungainly, but they are surprisingly fleet, capable of speeds in excess of 30 miles per hour. Their broad shoulders allow them to literally plow through deep snow, and their shaggy heads are made for pushing snow aside to reach the vegetation below.

Scientists believe that bison came to North America via a land bridge from Asia. The bison adapted to the Eastern woodlands and Great Plains, receiving nourishment from the rich grasslands.

Native American tribes settled these same grasslands because of the plenteous bison. Native peoples came to rely on the bison for food, clothing, and shelter—raw materials for tools and spirituality.

Starting around 1830, Anglo-European settlers from the East began to kill the bison in vast numbers, mostly for hides and tongues and later to subdue tribes who relied on the animals. By the early 1900s only a few hundred were left, most in captivity. By that time, many of the Native people who had once lived with and off the animals had been put on reservations.

In 1902, several hundred bison lived in ranches and zoos across the United States while only 23 wild bison were living in Yellowstone National Park. This small herd was supplemented by government and conservation groups with bison from semidomesticated herds and allowed to grow.

Until 1967, bison numbers were controlled by the park and their population limited to 397. After that year, the National Park Service adopted a new policy of minimal management and no killing or disease control was done. The population increased, peaking in the 1990s at more than 4,000. Today, the Yellowstone herd stands at over 3,000 animals. It is thought by many to be the United States' last free roaming bison herd. There are between 150,000 and 200,000 bison throughout all of North America, although the vast majority of them are raised on ranches for commercial purposes.

While bison are well-suited for Yellowstone's harsh climate, the winters from 1995 to 1997 were particularly severe in the high country, forcing bison to leave the park in search of easier forage. They found milder conditions and convenient grazing on several U.S. Forest Service allotments that were to be used by area cattle ranching families in the summer. In 1995, the Yellowstone bison herd was designated by the Montana state legislature as a species in need of disease management. The Montana Department of Livestock (DOL) was designated by the state legislature to be the lead agency for the bison/brucellosis disease management outside of Yellowstone. It was the DOL's responsibility to work with other state and federal agencies either to force the bison leaving Yellowstone National Park back within park boundaries or to capture and test those bison that could not be moved back into the park for brucellosis. The DOL's role in bison management has been problematic for environmental groups who believe that wildlife officials, not a livestock agency, should be managing bison.

WHAT IS THE BUFFALO WAR?

For more than a century, bison have been a symbol of the American West. One of the mandates of both the U.S. Forest Service and U.S. Park Service is to manage public land for wildlife such as bison.

Since 1985, state and federal agencies have eliminated more than 3,000 bison outside Yellowstone National Park on publicly owned and managed land. Montana officials say they do not want to kill the bison, but need to protect the state's livestock industry from brucellosis, a disease perhaps 50 percent of the Yellowstone bison herd carries. Activists and environmentalists say the state's methods are too severe, jeopardizing the viability of the last wild bison herds.

In THE BUFFALO WAR, filmmaker Matthew Testa examines the positions of the Montana officials, one cattle ranching family that feels threatened by the bison, and several groups and individuals who are trying to end the slaughter. In particular, Testa focuses on a group of Lakota Sioux, who in February 1999 undertook a 507-mile walk from Rapid City, South Dakota to Yellowstone National Park in Montana in a devotional act offered as a sacrifice to the spirit of the animals with whom the Lakota feel an inseparable bond.



BRUCELLOSIS

Ranchers are nervous about mingling between cattle and bison because of brucellosis, which can decrease milk production, decrease animal weight, cause spontaneous abortion of the animal's first fetus and cause infertility. For nearly 60 years and at a cost of billions of dollars, the livestock industry across the United States has waged a war to eliminate brucellosis from its herds. In 1952, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) estimated that annual losses due to this disease were more than \$400 million. To prevent an epidemic of the disease, federal and state agriculture officials have eliminated infected herds.

Brucellosis can also infect human beings, causing persistent, intermittent flu-like symptoms known as undulant fever. Transmission occurs through direct contact between a person's open cuts and birthing fluids or animal tissue. Veterinarians, butchers, and farmers have been those most commonly affected, though the incidence of brucellosis in humans is extremely rare.

Brucellosis was first identified in domestic cattle in the United States in 1910. In 1917, it was first identified in Yellowstone bison.

The USDA, responding to livestock and public health concerns, began an effort to control and eradicate brucellosis in 1934 by developing vaccines and depopulating entire herds when several animals tested positive for the bacterium. Currently, all but Florida and South Dakota are brucellosis-free, and these last two states are poised to eradicate the disease.

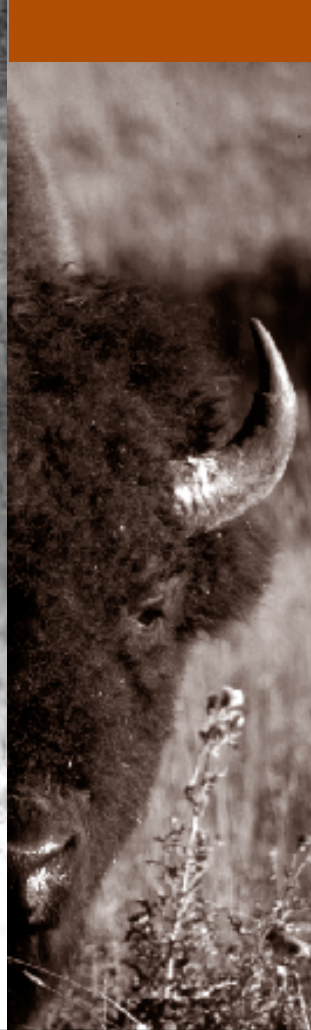
After more than 30 years and \$30 million, and the sacrifice of many cattle, Montana achieved brucellosis-free status in 1985. That same year, state and federal agencies began eliminating some Yellowstone bison that migrated out of park boundaries. Since the winter of 1991-92, Native Americans from reservations such as northern Cheyenne, Crow, and Fort Peck have sometimes assisted in harvesting and using the bison carcasses. Other bison carcasses have been distributed to nonprofit charitable organizations and food banks.

A SCIENTIFIC DISPUTE

Yellowstone's bison herd carries an uncontrolled pocket of the disease. However, detractors of the slaughter believe there are flaws in the bison management. First, bison migrate out of the park to graze in the winter and spring, whereas cattle are not placed on the allotments until June, after most bison have gone back over the park border. However, there is disagreement about how long the *Brucella* bacteria can survive in the environment. As a precaution, cattle and bison are kept from interacting for at least 45 days. Second, transmission occurs mainly through direct contact with birthing matter, but state and federal officials have included hundreds of male bison in their slaughter, contending that males still present a risk. Third, methods of testing for brucellosis are hardly foolproof. Among those bison who field-tested positive for brucellosis and were killed between 1996 and 1999, 80 percent later tested negative for the disease in more reliable lab tests. In addition, thousands of elk in the region also carry the disease, but are not managed similarly. Lastly, there has been no documented case of brucellosis transmission in the wild between cattle and bison. Known transmission has only occurred in the lab.

Today, some tribes and Native groups are trying to reintroduce bison onto their reservations. They are also working to take in unwanted bison from Yellowstone instead of having these animals sent to slaughter. So far, these requests have been denied by government officials.

Since the making of the documentary: December 20, 2000—*Interagency Bison Management Plan* drafted and agreed upon by the Montana Department of Livestock, Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, U.S. Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, and U.S.D.A. Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS). It calls for steering bison back into Yellowstone National Park as a first priority. When steering is no longer effective, capture and testing is mandated. Bison testing negative are released on public land; those testing positive are sent to a slaughter facility, and the head, meat, and hides are donated to a tribal organization or other charity organization. According to the various steps in the plan, a specific number of bison will be allowed outside Yellowstone.



BEEF CATTLE RANCHERS

Cattle ranching/agriculture is a two billion dollar per year industry in Montana. With 2.6 million head of cattle and about 20,000 dairy cows, Montana ranks sixth in beef production in the United States. In the area immediately around Yellowstone National Park, ranchers tend to about 2,000 head of cattle, 45 percent of which graze on lands held in the public trust by the federal government, which include Forest Service lands and those under the care of the Bureau of Land Management. These are also lands where Yellowstone bison may also graze in the winter and spring.

In many ways, the Munns family featured in *THE BUFFALO WAR* is a typical ranching family. For more than 60 years, the Munns have raised cattle on their ranch near West Yellowstone. They pay the U.S. Forest Service a small per-animal fee each summer to graze their cattle on and around Horse Butte, which is under the jurisdiction of the Forest Service. The Munns have persisted despite the rising costs of ranching, declining beef prices, younger generations moving away and pressures to sell to real estate developers. Surrounding their ranch on Hebgen Lake are hundreds of vacation homes, making them some of the last ranchers in their community.



ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISTS

A number of groups and individuals have actively opposed the killing of the Yellowstone bison, including the Fund for Animals, the National Wildlife Federation, the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, and the Buffalo Field Campaign, the last of which has been on the front line of the slaughter protests since 1997.

Activists Mike Mease and Rosalie Little Thunder (Lakota) formed Buffalo Nations, which coordinated a campaign of public education and civil disobedience to draw attention to the slaughter. Mease and Little Thunder later agreed to split the group because of their different approaches to activism. Mease renamed his organization the Buffalo Field Campaign. Little Thunder continues to advocate through the organization Buffalo Nations.



THE SUNDANCE

While following the Lakota Sioux on their 507-mile walk to Yellowstone, filmmaker Matthew Testa was asked to turn off his camera during sacred ceremonies, including the emotional climax of the march—Gary Silk's Sundance inside the northern entrance to Yellowstone National Park. While Testa respected wishes of the Lakota and did not film the dance, he re-created the moment in a respectful way that was sanctioned by his Native American hosts. Testa states "The ceremony conveyed so much about the tribal dedication to bison, I thought it was important to reenact for the film. At the same time, I knew this was sensitive territory and tried hard to respect the concerns of Native Americans."

The traditional Sundance, a sacred ritual that has been practiced for hundreds of years, goes on for four days and includes fasting, dancing and singing. This act of sacrifice is dedicated to The Creator and is done for the good of the nation. An effigy of the buffalo is central to the ritual, which is also performed for the well-being of the animal. Today, the Sundance is practiced by many Native Americans as a way of demonstrating spiritual devotion and sacrifice, and as a purifying ritual.

DISCUSSION POINTS

After viewing THE BUFFALO WAR, use these questions as a way to open up a classroom, on-air, community-based, or kitchen table discussion. Some basic agreements should be made at the onset to guide a respectful conversation. Staying on topic and deep listening are required. Work hard to consider and even “try on” other points of view, and encourage everyone to participate. Have one respected and experienced person lead the discussion and another record it.

Describe the themes raised by the film.

Describe what you think the diverse parties (Native Americans, ranchers, activists, government officials, park rangers, etc.) are most concerned with in terms of the buffalo threat or the threat to the buffalo. What are some ways to address those fears appropriately? Who should be responsible for the actions? Explore the ways to resolve these differences.

What do you think has been gained by each group’s activities? What has been lost?

What would you suggest as next steps for each group given where they left off in the film? Why?

If you were able to speak in the voice of the buffalo, what might your concerns be? How would you suggest they be addressed?

Where do buffalo belong? What if there were no bison?

What would you be willing to walk for or protect?

The Lakota Sioux and the Buffalo Field Campaign who appear in the film have different ways of protesting. How would you describe the differences in their activism? What do you think of each of their methods? What do you consider to be an effective way to bring about change?

What should federal lands be used for? Who should have a say in how these public lands are used?

As towns and cities grow, land is developed from wilderness or agriculture to homes and businesses. Where is a place in your community that has changed in this way? What animals live there? Do you think it’s important to preserve agriculture in the face of development?

If a primary industry in your state were being jeopardized, how would that affect your state, your neighbors, and people who work in that industry?

How important is it to you to have wild animals in the world? When is an animal truly wild?

QUESTIONS FOR TRIBAL COMMUNITIES

These questions may prove useful for Native peoples to consider when thinking about or actively raising buffalo.

Describe what it means to you to see buffalo on tribal land.

How do you say “buffalo” in your tribal language? What does that word mean?

How would you define your tribe’s relationship to the buffalo? How would you characterize the surrounding buffalo?

What are your feelings about the filmmaker’s depiction of the Sundance in the film?

What elements of non-Native culture are important to keep in mind as you approach the idea of raising buffalo?

Describe the concerns people might have about raising buffalo. What would have to be in place in your community to restore buffalo successfully?

What do the strides made in creating buffalo herds mean for tribes whose creation is linked with other animals? How does this link to restoring other tribal traditions?

What do you know of the history of Native peoples’ relationships with buffalo? Do these relationships have a place in modern times? How can buffalo culture survive today?



RESOURCES

Yellowstone National Park

Public Affairs Office: 307/344-2013 www.nps.gov/yell/index.html

USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service

The mission of APHIS is to protect America’s animal and plant resources by: safeguarding resources from exotic invasive pests and diseases; monitoring and managing agricultural pests and diseases existing in the United States; resolving and managing trade issues related to animal or plant health, and ensuring the humane care and treatment of animals. 301/734-3256 www.aphis.usda.gov/vs/naahps/Bruce/Bruc.html

The Buffalo Field Campaign

The Buffalo Field Campaign is a grassroots volunteer group whose mission is to protect the last wild free-roaming herd of buffalo in the country. 406-646-0070 www.wildrockies.org/buffalo/

The Great Plains Restoration Council (GPRC)

GPRC’s mission is to restore the ecological health of a significant portion of the North American Great Plains ecosystem, so that all native wildlife and ecological processes exist into perpetuity. GPRC believes that all native wildlife has a right to a self-determined, free-roaming existence inside healthy, traditional homelands. wakinyela@yahoo.com www.gprc.org

The Greater Yellowstone Interagency Brucellosis Committee (GYIBC)

To facilitate the development and implementation of brucellosis management plans for elk and bison in the Greater Yellowstone Area. 208/332-8540 www.nps.gov/gyibc/index.htm

Greater Yellowstone Coalition

To protect and conserve the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem for its wild creatures and human inhabitants, and for future generations. 406-586-1593 gyc@greateryellowstone.org

Indigenous Issues Forums

The Indigenous Issues Forums, a program of Rural Alliance, Inc., encourages partnerships, conducts workshops and training, creates frameworks and discussion guides, and forms alliances to create a safe and productive space to talk together respectfully about challenging Tribal issues. 605-574-2165 kfyellowhk@aol.com

Montana Department of Livestock

In 1995, the Montana DOL was statutorily requested to serve as the lead agency to manage the bison/brucellosis disease issue for Montana, with Yellowstone National Park bison being described as a species in need of disease control. Part of the DOL’s mission is to protect animals from disease and to prevent the transmission of disease to other animals and humans. 406-444-9431 www.liv.state.mt.us

Seventh Generation Fund

Founded in 1977, the Seventh Generation Fund is the only Native American intermediary foundation and advocacy organization dedicated to promoting and maintaining the uniqueness of Native peoples and their nations. SGF provides advocacy, small grants, financial management services, nonprofit administration, leadership training, and technical support for numerous innovative Native community projects. 707-825-7640 www.7genfund.org

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bison, Monarch of the Plains. Photography by David Fitzgerald, text by Linda Hasselstom. Portland, OR: Graphic Arts Center Publishing Company, 1998.

Atlas of the New West: Portrait of a Changing Region. William E. Reibsame, Boulder, CO: Center of the American West: University of Colorado, 1997.

Who Owns The West? William Kittredge. San Francisco, CA: Mercury House, 1996.

A Chorus of Buffalo: Reflections on Wildlife Politics and an American Icon. Ruth Rudner. Short Hills, NJ: Burford Books, 2000.

Greater Yellowstone Coalition Field Guide to North American Bison: A natural history and viewing guide to the Great Plains buffalo. Robert Steelquist. Seattle, WA: Sasquatch Books, 1998.

The Destruction of the Bison : An Environmental History, 1750-1920. Andrew C. Isenberg. Boston, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

FOR YOUNGER READERS

Thunder on the Plains: The Story of the American Buffalo. Ken Robbins. New York, NY: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2001.

Back From the Edge: The American Bison. Lynn M. Stone. Vero Beach, FL: The Rourke Corporation, Inc., 1991.

American Bison. Ruth Berman; photographs by Cheryl Walsh Bellville. Minneapolis, MN: Carolrhoda Books, Inc., 1992.

