



Stop the Slaughter: Yellowstone's Buffalo Herd Must Be Protected

Yellowstone Park has long been a sanctuary for buffalo, providing a home to the 23 members of the species that survived mass killings in the 19th century. Since then, buffalo populations have grown to healthier numbers in the West. But now the Montana Department of Livestock and the National Park Service are killing the thousands of buffalo that roam in Yellowstone National Park, claiming that the buffalo could transmit brucellosis to cattle in the area—even though there is not a single documented case of cattle contracting the disease from buffalo. NRDC is fighting to protect Yellowstone buffalo from senseless killing and to safeguard the park's wildlife resources for future generations.

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The State of Montana and the National Park Service Are Killing Yellowstone Buffalo

Already this year, approximately 1,200 Yellowstone buffalo have been killed—165 shot by hunters and the rest slaughtered after being rounded up inside the borders of Yellowstone National Park. The Park Service traps the animals in the northern part of the park as they try to follow historic migratory routes in winter in search of food at lower elevations with less snow. The Park Service then transfers the buffalo to the Montana Department of Livestock, which hauls them away to a slaughterhouse. With snow still falling and the end of winter weeks away, the death toll this year has already surpassed the record of 1,084 buffalo killed during the winter of 1996 to 1997.

In November 2000, a number of state and federal agencies established the Interagency Bison Management Plan to protect cattle from brucellosis and buffalo from slaughter. The plan accomplished the first goal, but not the second. The plan calls for the Montana Department of Livestock working with federal agencies (the Park Service and the U.S. Forest Service) to capture, vaccinate, and release the buffalo that wander outside of the park. But because the number of buffalo have exceeded the 3,000 that scientists estimate the park can support, the Department of Livestock is killing the buffalo after they are captured. Under the plan, almost 3,000 buffalo have been killed since 2000, mostly through the slaughter programs.



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Buffalo Slaughter Does Not Protect Cattle From Disease

The state of Montana and the National Park Service claim that the slaughter of buffalo is justified because it prevents brucellosis, a disease that harms pregnant livestock and causes other health problems. Roughly 200 cattle overlap the lands where buffalo currently roam, and no cattle in the area have died of brucellosis. Cattle ranchers do not even use most of the area around Yellowstone in the winter.

There are no documented cases of cattle contracting brucellosis from Yellowstone buffalo, and cattle in the vicinity have been vaccinated against the disease. Moreover, none of the buffalo slaughtered this winter were even tested for the brucellosis. And although some Yellowstone elk and other wildlife are infected with brucellosis, they are free to wander in and out of the park, despite the fact that they could transmit the disease to cattle. This double standard makes it clear that brucellosis is not the driving force behind buffalo control, but rather is being used as a weapon in Montana's ongoing feud against the federal government's role in wildlife management.

The Benefits of Buffalo Protection

While the threat of brucellosis from buffalo has been wildly exaggerated, the benefits of protecting the herd have largely been ignored. Buffalo play a critical role supporting the health of grassland ecosystems. Their hoofs keep grasses healthy by breaking up roots and dead vegetation, and recycling nutrients in the soil. They also provide an important food source for imperiled wolves and bears. Recovery of the Yellowstone grizzly bear population could be set back if buffalo numbers are reduced significantly.¹



A History of Buffalo in the United States

At one time buffalo were an integral part of the culture and history of the American West, and central to the lives and religion of Native American tribes. In the early 19th century, several million buffalo roamed the Great Plains, but by the mid-1890s, only a few dozen remained. The near extinction of the buffalo prompted the creation of one of the first conservation groups in the country, the American Bison Society, founded in 1905. The society bought private buffalo herds and helped purchase rangeland to provide buffalo habitat. The Yellowstone buffalo herd was the only free-roaming buffalo herd not exterminated by the late 1800s. Now restored to a healthy population size, the Yellowstone herd is still the only free-range herd in the country.

The buffalo's recovery from near extinction is considered one of the greatest conservation success stories in American history.

Recommendations for Better Management of Montana's Buffalo

There is a better way to manage Montana's herd without resorting to killing buffalo. NRDC recommends that state and federal authorities:

- Allow buffalo to roam freely on the easement lands recently purchased by the U.S. Forest Service from the Church Universal and Triumphant, a religious group that owned 7,800 acres of prime buffalo winter habitat outside the park. The Forest Service specifically bought this land for buffalo habitat.
- Allow buffalo to utilize public lands west of Yellowstone Park where cattle have been removed, and private lands where landowners support buffalo.
- Phase out cattle grazing on public land north and west of Yellowstone in potential winter habitat for Yellowstone buffalo.
- Revise the outdated buffalo plan so that the government protects, rather than slaughters, the buffalo.

Yellowstone is the only place in America continuously inhabited by wild, free-roaming buffalo, and the Yellowstone herd comprises the largest remaining population of genetically pure buffalo. The buffalo population level should be controlled naturally by wolf and grizzly bear predation, not interference from state and federal government agencies. Montana and federal agencies must protect the herd and allow it to do what it does naturally—roam.

¹ According to researchers Kerry Gunther at Yellowstone and Mark Haroldsen from the Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team.