

LETTER TO THE EDITORS
OF NATIONAL WILDLIFE:
BISON, RANCHERS, RIGHTEOUS BELLYACHIN'

by Francis Baumli, Ph.D.
4 Ranch Lane
Saint Louis, Missouri
63131
Phone: (314) 966-2167

Dear Editors,

Your article, "Restoring a Prairie Icon," (National Wildlife, Dec./Jan. 2012) pays homage to the beautiful, majestic, and maltreated wild bison which were almost wiped out in the late 1800s. I applaud efforts to preserve the "domestic bison" while giving "wild bison" a chance to roam freely over at least a part of what once was their natural range. However, I believe your approach to restoring the wild bison is rashly creating a new problem in the course of trying to remedy an old problem.

Regarding the wild bison, your article states, "By the beginning of the 20th century, a species of tremendous ecological, cultural and economic importance had vanished from the prairie." These are trenchant words summing up a zoological catastrophe. But your article ceases to be trenchant, in fact it takes on a callous tone, as it

addresses (while failing to truly address) another matter: namely, the fact that ranchers are being economically harassed, bankrupted, and displaced by this pro-bison program. Note your own language which disingenuously glosses over a major problem: “The nonprofit group [American Prairie Foundation] has purchased or leased about 120,000 prairie acres adjacent to CMR.” Also, “While APF has been purchasing private lands adjacent to CMR, NWF [National Wildlife Federation] has been developing agreements with ranchers who hold cattle grazing permits on the refuge. These agreements, which only permit livestock grazing if it is needed to help improve wildlife habitat, are a critical part of creating space for bison.”

I personally know ranchers in this region, and I know what is happening: ranchers who already were barely maintaining a foothold with their way of life are finally selling out because of tax increases. And the American Prairie Foundation (APF) and also the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) are the buyers, i.e., the predators swooping in to greedily grab what these ranchers are losing. Meanwhile, the ranchers who have not yet sold out are losing cattle grazing rights because now the bison are going to need that land for grazing. All this translates into more economic hardship for ranchers. Where are they going to graze their cattle when this program you so glibly

praise is “retiring nearly 600,000 acres of grazing allotments in the process” [of acquiring this land]? You state, also, that NWF “has negotiated voluntary grazing agreements with multiple ranchers on CMR lands, safeguarding some 54,000 acres of wildlife habitat that now is potentially available to bison.”

“Negotiated,” you say? Ranchers who are already being driven out by the current (albeit camouflaged) economic depression, and also are being driven out by residential developments, and are being driven out because land that is coveted by NWF thereby takes on more value and hence gets reassessed at higher tax rates, are not actually being “negotiated” with. They are being squeezed out.

Do a tally of what, by your own account, you and your associates have grabbed already. It amounts to at least 874,000 acres, or 1366 square miles! Do wild bison really deserve that much land? Do ranchers deserve to be deprived of that much land?

I fear that as wild bison make a come-back, a different “species of tremendous ecological, cultural and economic importance” will have “vanished from the prairie.” Namely, ranchers, who will have “survived only in small captive herds,” i.e., in places like trailer parks, remote small towns, and rural ghettos that look “quaint” to bored, fat tourists.

As for that program which the National Wildlife Federation has already been rashly, speedily, and inhumanely implementing, I am also concerned about consequences for the wild bison.

I have already watched many programs, exactly like this one, appear to succeed when actually they are failing. Such will be the case with this plan for reintroducing the wild bison. It will proceed thus:

1. The American Prairie Foundation (APF) and its cohorts like the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) will spend many tax dollars, along with donated dollars, to provide a refuge for the bison while buying out ranchers who can't afford not to sell because of what taxes have done to them.

2. The bison will thrive, while not being thinned out by natural forces such as harsh weather, sparse food, and wolves. Shelters will be built (with more tax, or donated, dollars) for the bison, even if these shelters are only specially planted groves of trees. If the bison have insufficient food because of a terrible winter, hay will be dropped by helicopter. And wolves won't reduce their numbers because many people shoot them anyway.

3. Lo and behold, there suddenly will be too many bison.

Disease will take its toll, but still, there will be too many, and people will get worried about what those bison's diseases might do to cattle.

4. Someone will put forth an agenda (perhaps a bill in the state legislature) to cull the herds.

5. Animal rights activists, well funded by donations, will make a great noise about how inhumane this culling would be. So the culling will be put off for several years.

6. Finally, someone in an executive position will give an order (which needn't be approved by law) to cull the herds. This order, and culling, will probably be done some time between Thanksgiving and New Year's when people are too distracted by holiday money worries, year-end property tax bills, and family obligations to pay much attention to, much less stop, what is going on. The bison meat from this culling will go to expensive restaurants which cater to wealthy patrons.

7. All this entire while, the price of beef--"grass packaged inside a cow" as the writer Linda Hasselstrom describes it¹—will have been going up, and people of modest income won't be able to afford beef.

8. And during this unhappy time, the people who run both NWF and APF, posturing as altruists and philanthropists who are doing all

this out of good will toward beast and man, will be drawing very hefty salaries while sitting in air-conditioned offices making decisions about terrain they have never walked on and animals they know nothing about.

Yes. Animals they know nothing about. Why was no mention made of how dangerous bison are? Back in the early '70s, my uncle and aunt were traveling in Montana, pulling a small trailer with a Jeep. They had left the trailer behind that day, were traveling along a remote road, and a bison bull charged their Jeep on the driver's side. He pushed the vehicle off the road and about 50 feet down a long embankment, rolling it over several times. When he finally stopped, all the glass, including the mirrors, was broken. The radiator and two of the tires had been punctured by his horns, and the entire exhaust system had been torn off. Fortunately, my uncle and aunt were wearing seat belts, the doors were locked, and the Jeep had a roll bar. My uncle would later tell me, "When that bull trotted away, I wanted to shoot him in the ass with my .22 rifle, but I knew it would just make him charge again."

My uncle and aunt incurred bruises. The body of the Jeep was all but ruined.

Is it safe to introduce that many wild bison to this area?

Consider: Would anyone want to introduce that many grizzly bears to this same area? Of course not. Carrying a .44 magnum revolver, I would feel much more confident confronting an angry grizzly than an angry, wild bison.

When all is said and done (or undone), a few of those tourists visiting this region (the ones who aren't fat and bored) might look around and ask, "Where have all the ranchers gone?" Someone might reply, "Well, they were driven from the prairie by the APF and several of their affiliates like the AWF. These ranchers now survive in small captive herds. But of course, a rancher in a captive herd isn't really a rancher anymore."

But those baby bison calves sure look cute, don't they? However, old ranchers who are uprooted, poor, and depressed aren't cute enough to get any tax-free donations by the same philanthropists who support the wild bison. They may get a few meager tax dollars in the form of welfare, now that they can no longer earn a living; but they will be stigmatized, while the wild bison are glorified.

Is anyone out there feeling queasy at how thoroughly inhumane, and utterly absurd, this program has already proved itself to be?

¹ Linda Hasselstrom, Windbreak: A Woman Rancher on the Northern Plains (Berkeley, California: Barn Owl Books, 1987), p. xiv.

(Written: Jan.-Feb. 2012.)
(Posted: August 20, 2012.)

(Note that this letter to the editors, insofar as it is an article, is included in this section because it is, de facto, a very practical foray into one of the three species of axiology, namely: social and political philosophy.)