

Tribal Buffalo Vision

National Wildlife Federation Tribal Partnerships Program

When Lewis and Clark ventured west on the Corps of Discovery in 1804, they witnessed and described 30-60 million buffalo. By 1902, there were less than 100 *wild* buffalo in the US, restricted to Yellowstone National Park (with most buffalo relegated to domesticated or semi-domesticated herds on private lands). The systematic destruction of millions of buffalo had drastic consequences for Indian peoples and the landscape. As Native Americans were subjugated to reservations and buffalo were eliminated to make way for cattle and the agricultural industry, manifest destiny seemingly justified the removal of lands from Native Americans. Colonization was the goal, and it was no secret. What was imposed on Tribes across the continent was a change in paradigm, from communities that relied on a wildlife economy, to that of an agricultural, money-based colonial paradigm. For Tribes whose survival, culture, and communities were dependent on buffalo, such as the Eastern band of Shoshone who were known as the *Gweechoon Deka*, the buffalo eaters, the loss of buffalo was much more than a wildlife tragedy, it was a fundamental dismantling of their ways of life.

The restoration of buffalo to Tribal lands is critical to not only return this keystone wildlife species to its former habitat, but to restore buffalo to Tribal lands and cultures, and start rectifying historic environmental and socio-economic injustices. Imagine tens of thousands of buffalo on millions of acres of Tribal lands, with adequate capacity, training, support, and financing for Tribes to sustain critical conservation herds across the continent. Such an effort would forge a pathway for revitalization of Tribal communities, bringing economic security, food sovereignty, youth engagement, and environmental justice, while building Tribal power and creating a platform for Tribes to address many other injustices, from health care, to poor housing to clean water. Done thoughtfully, with Tribal values and priorities at the forefront, this vision would form the cornerstone of a movement for Tribal revitalization, self-determination, and prosperity.

Over decades, the National Wildlife Federation's Tribal Partnerships Program has made significant strides in advancing collaborative efforts to restore buffalo to Tribal lands, through partnerships with the Inter-Tribal Buffalo Council (ITBC) and individual tribes, place-based efforts on the Ft. Peck and the Wind River Reservations, and advocacy from Yellowstone to DC. Building on this foundation, NWF will launch a strategy built with and for Tribal partners to develop a national network and system that builds power for Tribes to restore buffalo to their lands. This network will focus on the restoration of conservation herds of buffalo to Tribal lands across the U.S., addressing the full suite of needs to build and sustain buffalo herds while supporting Tribal sovereignty.

The cornerstone of this strategy will be deeper partnerships with core partners to leverage and amplify Tribal buffalo restoration work that is already in place. Working with the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho Tribes on the Wind River Reservation, we will create a hub of Tribal buffalo restoration that will amplify and support work being done by the ITBC and the Fort Peck Tribes. By building a complementary initiative that adds capacity and value to existing efforts, this strategy will result in more buffalo on Tribal lands for Tribal communities.

On the Wind River Reservation, NWF will work with the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho Tribes to leverage our resources and build a comprehensive system for Tribal buffalo restoration. This system may include:

- **Expanding the existing buffalo conservation herds on the Wind River Reservation**, which is over 2.3 million acres and has potential to support thousands of animals on hundreds of thousands of acres of Tribal lands. This will include political support from both Tribal Business Councils, with whom we would work to approve long-term management plans and update game codes for buffalo to be treated as wildlife, not livestock. By successfully demonstrating the details needed to support long-term management of a viable conservation herd(s) managed as wildlife on the Wind River Reservation, proof of concept and lessons learned may be applied across the nation and be replicated on additional Tribal lands.
- **Development of educational programming and capacity**, which are centered on the gifts and teachings of the buffalo for Tribal youth and the Wind River Tribal community. This may include curriculum, a Youth Buffalo Cultural Institute, or other resources to reconnect young people and community members with buffalo. Wind River will be a hub for tribal youth education on buffalo ecology and culture that will welcome youth from other reservations across the U.S.
- **Development of a Buffalo Manager Training Program** (including curriculum, toolkits, and possibly an Institute) that would serve as a national hub for Tribes to build skills and capacity. Turner Enterprises is already an identified partner for this effort.
- **Creation of a quarantine facility** to complement facilities at Yellowstone National Park and Ft. Peck to assure (A) a consistent supply of genetically-pure buffalo for Tribes across the U.S., and (B) an alternative to sending hundreds of Yellowstone buffalo to slaughter each year.
- **Creation of an endowment** to support the development of the various components and to assure that the Wind River Tribes have resources to adopt and manage the operation sustainably. Consider initiating a non-profit that can support Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho ownership of the Wind River work.
- **Exploring economic development opportunities** for Tribes to develop revenue-generating activities related to buffalo restoration (e.g., tribal wildlife/buffalo staff and eco-tourism).
- **Tribal ownership, management, and full benefits** from the establishment of a buffalo conservation herd on the Wind River Reservation.

Successfully accomplishing the above work on the Wind River Reservation would result in models, best practices, capacity, and extensive resources that can then be applied to Tribal buffalo conservation efforts across the country. These national tools would include: a model for establishing and growing buffalo herds, youth and community engagement resources, a training program for buffalo management, and models for policy and economic sustainability that can result in long-term community benefits.

To complement the work focused on the Wind River Reservation, NWF will simultaneously advance multiple initiatives that will expand the opportunities for Tribes across the country to successfully initiate and grow conservation buffalo herds. These activities may include:

- **Active expansion of herds to tribal lands across the U.S.** This includes existing efforts with the Jicarilla Apache (NM), Red Lake Band of Chippewa (MN), Pit River (CA), Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nations (ND), and the Abenaki (VT), while growing capacity to support additional Tribes.
- **Deeper partnership with the Inter-Tribal Buffalo Council** to support their efforts and identify ways for NWF's Tribal Buffalo work to add value and support growth and capacity for ITBC.
- **Story-telling and marketing** to normalize and build momentum for buffalo restoration on Tribal lands, led by Tribes. This would include the development of a film and videos, other outreach tools such as a story-map, and a strategy to disseminate and expand the influence of these resources.
- **Advocate for federal and state policies** that support Tribal sovereignty, capacity, and ability to restore buffalo to their lands. This would include passage of the Indian Buffalo Management Act, implementation of Department of Interior and Agriculture protocols, and addressing state-level policies counter to Tribal buffalo restoration.
- **Build capacity for Tribes** to restore buffalo to their lands. This would include an endowment to provide financial support and incentives for buffalo restoration, to complement training and education.

The full body of work described above, taken together, would create a foundation and sustainable engine of support for the restoration of buffalo to Tribal lands across the U.S., with Tribes as the main leaders and beneficiaries of the work. This is about more than seeing hooves on the ground where they once belonged, this is about restoring cultural ties, engaging youth, supporting economies, demonstrating sovereignty, producing sustainable food sources, and addressing historic injustices. This comprehensive vision for what is needed to restore buffalo as wildlife to their traditional lands managed by Tribes is based on years of knowledge and relationships but will require substantial investment in a long-term strategy. But, there is no time better than right now to launch this initiative, which can serve as a shining example of wildlife and humans thriving together. The restoration of buffalo to Tribal lands and communities is the launching point to support Tribal priorities for the conservation of additional wildlife species, habitat protection and the environmental issues that are paramount to Tribes.