

6 January 2006

The Year 2005 in Review: An Update on Bison Conservation Activities and the North American Bison Conservation Status and Action Plan

2005 was an eventful year for bison conservation. In early May, Ted Turner and Marv Jensen hosted a foundational meeting of the North American Bison Specialist Group at Vermejo Park Ranch in northern New Mexico.



The historic 588,000 acre ranch provided a perfect setting for the event. Abundant free-ranging deer and elk shared the high altitude grasslands with the ranch's bison herds. Participants enjoyed an evening tour, guided by Ted and Marv. We visited the famous Castle



Rock herd, the cattle-gene-free descendents of bison translocated from Yellowstone National Park in the 1930s. Guests were accommodated adjacent to the main lodge in cottages built in the early 1900s. Ranch headquarters was in a building named Casa Grande, one of the original residences of the Bartlett era, representative of the charm and elegance of period. Ranch staff provided superb service and excellent meals, eliminating the need for any subsistence distractions. Several participants

commented that this remote historic setting provided an ambiance fostering comradeship and collaboration that

would have been difficult to achieve in a conventional urban conference setting. The Bison Specialist Group is truly

grateful for the care and attention afforded us by Ted Turner, Marv Jensen and staff at the ranch.



The Vermejo meeting was attended by over 50 people from private and public organizations throughout the distributional range of North American bison. Mexico, the United States of America, and Canada were represented. In addition, Dr. Wanda Olech, Chair of the European Bison Specialist Group, graced the meeting with her knowledge and charm. We are grateful for her

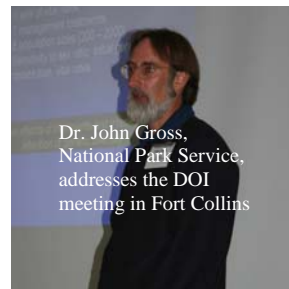
interesting and informative presentation on European bison conservation, delivered in an evening session.



The two and a half day meeting covered formal technical presentations on the status of bison, bison genetics, and population and disease management. Three potential transboundary, international projects were described, including: 1) recovery of the remnant Janos Hidalgo herd (about 130 plains bison) that currently ranges in northern Mexico, crossing the border onto private ranches in southern New Mexico; 2) the American Prairie Foundation project in northern Montana, which has the vision of a large-scale international initiative involving grassland ecosystem restoration in Montana, and southern Saskatchewan and Alberta; and 3) restoration of wood bison to Beringia by building on the successful reintroduction in the southern Yukon, and community and state level interests in restoring wood bison to interior Alaska. In addition to sharing information and visions for conservation and recovery of bison, the workshop produced a pathway for completing a range-wide status and action plan for North American bison. The process involves a collaborative, largely volunteer, effort led by designated Task Group leaders who will engage BSG members and other cooperators in drafting the document. You will hear more about this in the

coming weeks as Task Group Leaders approach individuals to contribute information and/or writing talent – more on this effort below. Power Point presentations at the Vermejo meeting may be viewed at the following website: <http://www.notitia.com/bison>.

In early June, several members of the Bison Specialist Group attended a meeting in Fort Collins, CO of Department of the Interior agencies mandated with bison management (national parks and refuges). The meeting focused on means to develop conservation management guidelines for bison herds managed by the Department of Interior. Guidelines would be based upon the best information on DOI herds, and would recognize the IUCN Bison Conservation Group (North America) Strategy for Bison Conservation. There exists considerable information on the genetics, demographic and biological



characteristics of DOI bison herds. Participants were asked to identify issues to be addressed in the guidelines.

Some of the issues identified were: creating awareness of the value(s) of federal herds; consistency of policies and management among units; conservation genetics; health and disease risk management; population management; ecosystem management/biodiversity conservation; and ensuring adequate resources for management programs. The meeting concluded with a call for formation of a steering group to develop the concept further. The next DOI bison

management meeting will be held at the Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge in April 2006.

In late September, on the eve of the 100th anniversary of the American Bison Society (ABS), the caretaker of the name of this historic organization sponsored a workshop on bison recovery. The Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS)



Participants in the WCS bison conservation workshop, October 2005, Wind River Ranch, New Mexico

hosted bison specialists and conservation biologists at the 6,000 acre Wind River Ranch in eastern New Mexico. Dr. Brian Miller, Conservation Biologist, hosted the meeting. The hospitality provided by him and his wife was much appreciated by attendees.

The purpose of the meeting was to ascertain if leaders of the bison conservation world would welcome revitalization of the American Bison Society (ABS), and if so, whether they proposed Range-wide Priority-setting (RWPS) exercise for the species. There was enthusiastic support for WCS committing its experience and resources to help the bison community establish long-term priorities for bison conservation and recovery. Moreover, there was hope that ABS would take on the role of the long-term advocate for these priorities. This response was particularly welcome since the IUCN Bison Specialist Group is actively

working on a draft status and action plan. The priorities emerging from RWPS will largely form the geographic priorities advocated in the action plan. To this end, Dr. Eric Sanderson of WCS was asked to write the chapter on

Conservation and Recovery Potential in the action plan. WCS will separately lead a scientific publication reporting the results of the RWPS. The

workshop will be held in May 2006 at Vermejo Park Ranch.



Dr. Kent Redford, VP Conservation Strategy, WCS

On the evening of October 18th, WCS President Steve Sanderson announced the reactivation of the American Bison Society at an event for trustees and donors. In addition to celebrating the ABS centenary, Dr. Sanderson took the occasion to state an ultimate goal of "nothing less than a

transformed world in which viable herds of bison interact with a full diversity of other native species at multiple, large-scale landscapes across western North America." The actual form and activities of the ABS are under discussion, informed largely by suggestions from the Wind River workshop.

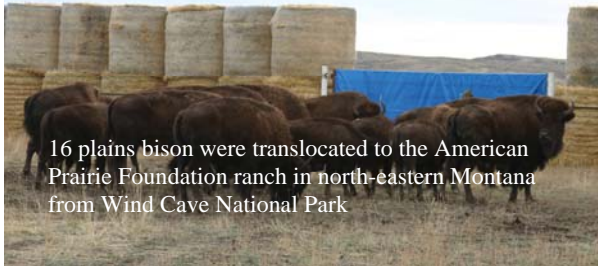
Also in October, the American Prairie Foundation translocated bison from Wind Cave National Park to a 30,000 acre land base located north of the

Charles M. Russell Wildlife Refuge in north-eastern Montana. On a cold and rainy night, not long past midnight on October 20, sixteen bison stepped back onto the Montana prairie after an absence of over 120 years. The next morning, American



Kyran Kunkel and Curtis Freese (WWF) express pleasure at the successful translocation

Prairie Foundation and World Wildlife Fund staff members and I watched as the bison began to graze in the holding pasture where they would acclimate to their new home before being released into pastures that are more extensive. APF and WWF are now working to ensure the new herd is healthy and well cared for and are collecting scientific data that will guide the management of the herd and future restoration work.



16 plains bison were translocated to the American Prairie Foundation ranch in north-eastern Montana from Wind Cave National Park

American Prairie Foundation's long-term goal is to restore the genetic health and ecological role of bison as part of its mission to conserve native prairie wildlife. To achieve this at an ecosystem scale will require long-term effort and building effective partnerships with state and federal resource management agencies, local landowners and environmental organizations. The central challenge to conservation biology is its implementation, which requires linking knowledge to action, the central purpose of effective planning.

The Bison Specialist Group is developing a conservation status and action plan to provide support and guidance for policy development, and conservation planning and implementation for public and private sector projects, including:

- To the extent known, the current numeric, geographic and genetic status of North American bison, including public and private herds.
- Geographic assessment of priority conservation areas in North America, in participation with the Wildlife Conservation Society.
- Critical assessment of conservation needs to achieve restoration of bison, to the extent possible, in numerous viable populations on extensive landscapes, where the broadest suite of natural selection factors act to shape the continued evolution of the species, ecological function and structure (biodiversity) are priority management objectives, and sustainable benefits are provided to local human communities.
- Guidelines for assessing population viability.
- Guidelines for reintroductions.
- Guidelines for population management, including demographic and genetic management.
- Guidelines for conservation management of private herds, which may be used by the commercial industry to establish a conservation certification system providing market incentives for participation in

herd management for conservation.

- Guidelines for bison conservation in the context of ecosystem management (economic, cultural, and ecological missions), emphasizing restoration and management of bison on large, ecologically functioning, cultural landscapes.
- Enhancing the capacity of members of the Bison Specialist Group, and the organizations they represent, to provide timely innovative and practical solutions to conservation problems.

To this end, the BSG has divided the responsibility for writing the document in the following fashion:

Conservation Status

Task Group Leaders: Delaney Boyd (DND Canada) and Dr. James Shaw (U. of Oklahoma)
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Population and Genetic Management

Task Group Leaders: Dr. John Gross (NPS), Dr. Jim Derr (Texas A & M Univ.)
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Geographic Conservation Assessment

Task Group Leaders: Dr. Eric Sanderson (WCS), Dr. C. Gates (U. of Calgary)
Email contact: Esanderson@wcs.org

Ecosystem Restoration and Bison Conservation

Task Group Leaders: Dr. Kyran Kunkel (WWF), Dr. Paul Robertson (TNC), Robert Stephenson (Alaska Dept. Fish and Game), Tom Jung (Yukon Department of the Environment)
Email contact: Kyran@montana.net

Review of Legislation and Policies in North America

Task Group Leaders: Keith Aune (Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks) and Dr. Glenn Plumb (NPS)
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Mandy Kotzman (mandyk@lamar.colostate.edu) will serve as Task Coordinator, working with Delaney Boyd who manages the BSG website, Cormack Gates and Pete Gogan, to keep the Task Groups on task, and to compile the material produced into a cohesive document suitable for editing. The Task Coordinator will be responsible for formatting tables, figures, and the document in general. Joe Truett (jotruett@gilnet.com) of the Turner Endangered Species Fund will serve as editor in chief. He will edit, including rewriting as necessary, all sections of the North American Bison Status Report and Conservation Action Plan so as to maximize clarity, uniformity of style among sections, brevity, and internal consistency of information.

Task Group Leaders are in the process of contacting BSG members and others to invite them to contribute to writing parts of the plan. If you have not yet heard from one or more of them and wish to contribute, please refer to the contact information provided above.

A workplan and schedule is attached. A workshop for Task Group Leaders, the coordinator, organizers and the editor is being planned for early March in Bozeman by Peter Gogan (Peter.Gogan@usgs.gov) and Steve Forrest (Steve.Forrest@wwfus.net).

The Bison Specialist Group for North America was established under the umbrella of the IUCN/WCU Species Survival Commission, currently chaired by Dr. Holly Dublin. It consists of more than 50 individuals representing state/provincial/territorial, federal, aboriginal, and private interests, and spans three nations: Mexico, the United States, and Canada. Development of a meaningful



contribution to the conservation and recovery of bison at this scale based largely on volunteerism will require effective communication and coordination and a significant commitment by Bison Specialist Group members and supporting organizations. I look forward to working with you on this ambitious task during 2006.

Sincerely,
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Work Plan and Schedule for Drafting The Conservation Status and Action Plan for North American Bison

