22

Breakthroughs in Bison Conservation Bring Recovery a Bit Closer

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Session overview

If we want wild wildlife in the Anthropocene, then we will have to go about it with intention. A prime example of this challenge is the case of the plains bison, an iconic American animal that we will have to work hard to keep wild.

Plains bison have gone through distinct demographic phases over three centuries. In the nineteenth century the population estimated at 30 million covering much of North America was decimated to about 1,000. Early in the twentieth century, the American Bison Society was started and its members built back the population from five remnant herds. By the end of the century, you could watch herds in parks and on wildlife refuges and you could buy the lean meat in grocery stores. In the twenty-first century, advances in genetics and animal breeding are likely to further domesticate our buffalo. The question is whether we will take comparable steps to let our wild bison continue to adapt and develop under natural selection.

Why is maintaining and expanding wild bison such an ambitious goal? Nine out of every ten of the 400,000 or more bison in this country are managed as livestock. In many states they are classified as livestock, and their health and management is the responsibility of the state agricultural agency. Domestic bison producers provide a valuable product and, represented by the National Bison Association, helped get the species recognized as the national mammal in the United States. Nonetheless, wild bison continue to face significant challenges in the twenty-first century.

Most of the plains bison that are in conservation herds are also behind fences, at least in the United States. In Canada, many are free-ranging. The challenge for us in this century is what actions we should take to develop more herds where bison are treated as wildlife.

Citation: Weber, Samantha, ed. 2017. *Connections Across People, Place, and Time: Proceedings of the 2017 George Wright Society Conference on Parks, Protected Areas, and Cultural Sites*. Hancock, Michigan: George Wright Society.

The following group of four papers (Hartway and Hardy, Barfield, Garvoille, and Jones and Dratch) focused on work being done in four disparate fields of the natural and social sciences, with the common goal of expanding the recovery range and bringing about the ecological restoration of these bison.

References

Barfield, Jennifer. 2017. Using assisted reproductive technologies to mitigate disease and preserve genetic variation in bison. [This volume.]

Garvoille, Rebecca. 2017. American icons in metropolitan grasslands: People, place and bison recovery along Colorado's front range. [This volume.]

Hartway, Cynthia, and Amanda Hardy. 2017. Informing bison conservation strategies using population viability analyses for Department of the Interior bison herds. [This volume.]

Jones, Lee, and Peter Dratch. 2017. Transforming Department of Interior bison from livestock to wildlife. [This volume.]