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## Contemporary Tribal Bison Ranching on the Great Plains: Economic, Ecological and Cultural Restoration?

Sebastian Felix BRAUN      Assistant Professor, Department of Indian Studies,  
University of North Dakota

*Since the early 1970s, bison ranching has become an economic force on the Great Plains. For many Plains Indian nations, bison are traditionally sacred animals. Many reservations are building on the tradition and have established tribal bison ranches. Hopes are that these cooperatives will provide jobs and other economic opportunities, but also that the renewed connection to the animals will bring cultural restoration with it. In this paper, I will explore whether these local, indigenously controlled and conceptualized development projects can serve as a model for other indigenous peoples.*

*Depuis les années septantes, l'élevage des bisons est devenue une force économique sur les Grands Plaines. Les animaux étaient considérés sacrés par les Indiens des Plaines. Les réserves ont établies des opérations d'élevage, non seulement en espérant de nouveaux opportunités d'emploi, mais aussi une rénovation des rapports culturelles avec les bisons, ce qui va permettre une ressuscitation de la culture. Cette contribution examine la possibilité de ces projets de développement locales servir de modèles pour des autres peuples indigènes.*

When speaking about environmental interactions and indigenous peoples in North America, one subject that is bound to come up are the bison, or buffalo hunters of the Great Plains. Plains Indians have long come to serve as the incarnations of native North America, and one of the first images of American Indians that usually come to mind is a version of Bodmer's painting of a mounted warrior hunting a bison with bow and arrow.

Contemporary interest in North American Indian human ecology issues focus more on other animals; whale hunting and salmon fishing rights on the Northwest Coast, or caribou calving grounds in the Artic National Wildlife Reserve, for example. Bison have become important again in the late 1980s, but not so much in conjunction with Plains Indians as in the context of the so-called "Buffalo Commons" proposal (Popper and Popper 1987) and various offshoots (e.g., Callenbach 1996), which saw the future of

the Plains as a bison grazing ground rather than a continuation of subsidized, irrigated, and ecologically questionable farm enterprises. These authors had concluded that an economy based on intensive agriculture was not sustainable on the Plains, and reacted to research indicating that cattle ranching was destroying the ecosystem in the arid and semi-arid western United States (e.g., Donahue 1999). They therefore proposed a return to pre-settlement ecology, and an economy based on bison hunting and eco-tourism.

Bison ranching had become popular in the 1960s (Rorabacher 1970), coincidental to a growing tourism industry, ecological awareness, and romantic appropriation of the Indian past, which turned bison into symbolic commodities, valuable beyond the very limited specialty market for bison meat. Especially with the farm crisis of the mid 1980s, however, exotic animals, as which bison are classified in North America, came to play a larger role in the agricultural sector as farmers and ranchers were looking for niche market alternatives to the lower and lower prices they received for traditional products. Bison ranching grew into the "Buffalo Industry." This new interest for bison was also a reaction to the buffalo commons concept, as the new niche market was perceived as a potential economic savior for the rural population of the Plains. A bison industry would enable ranchers to stay on their land, and prevent the plans of an ecological reversion to the pre-1860s.

The new prominence of bison coincided with growing numbers not only on private ranches, but also in national and state parks and game reserves. The federal and state governments were running out of space for the animals, and were looking for buyers. At the same time, activists on Indian reservations began to show increased interest in bison. The booming market at the time as well as the spiritual and economic

importance of bison in traditional Plains cultures seemed a perfect opportunity to develop locally controlled, culturally and ecologically sustainable, holistic development projects.

Some Indian reservations, and individuals on reservations, had kept bison herds of varying sizes for a long time. In the early 1990s, however, a concerted effort began to increase tribal bison herds on reservations. With this goal in mind, the InterTribal Bison Cooperative was founded in 1992. In its first six years, the number of tribal buffalo programs more than doubled, and the number of buffalo on reservations increased from 2,800 to about 8,000. Around 500 tribal jobs were created by the buffalo programs, either directly or indirectly (ITBC 1998:9). Bison herds have since been growing on many reservations. Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation in South Dakota alone has grown its herd to about 3,500 animals. Many of these tribal herds were spawned and increased by bison from national parks, as the park system offered surplus bison to the tribal governments. While ITBC is placing emphasis on the sound economic foundations of tribal herds, the main goals of establishing tribal bison operations are not only economic, but just as much cultural.

The simple physical return of buffalo to native lands by itself is seen by many of those who work towards traditional goals as an irreversible trigger for cultural revitalization. Bison represent the traditional society and its ways of life; they also represent traditional virtues, such as respect, responsibility, and generosity. With the current social problems on most reservations - unemployment, systemic poverty, alcoholism, violence, drug abuse, and epidemic diabetes - a return to certain aspects of traditional culture and a revival of traditional virtues seems to avoid the downfalls of total assimilation and its negative consequences. Bison have been and are used by some

reservations and tribal courts as teachers for neglecting parents and drug users. In accordance with traditional notions that bison brought Plains Indians their culture, long-term observance of the animals and their social behavior as a model instills responsibility in people. Bison meat, which is very low in cholesterol, is hoped to alleviate the spread of diabetes. Many reservation residents blame the disease on changes in diet. A return to the traditional diet, they hope, will make people healthier.

Economic opportunities linked to bison start with the direct marketing of meat and byproducts, which vary from hides and robes to painted skulls. The development of local arts cooperatives would also provide marketing opportunities for artists working with other materials. Tourism is another market that reservations would like to grow. Wildlife tourism is on the rise in North America, and bison, as one of the national symbols, are a main attraction on the Plains and elsewhere. These activities, it is hoped, will create much needed jobs for reservations, and provide income. In this sense, then, the bison would continue the traditional relationship of providing for the people. In a more practical sense, however, and for the time being, the people have to care for the bison. The emphasis on cultural revitalization, and long-term improvement of the situations on reservations, is taking a heavy toll on bison projects, because they refuse to get involved with industrial agriculture practices.

The traditional assumption that bison are relatives, a related nation or people with their own culture and social order, and their role as bringers of culture to the people implies that their treatment should not include ranching practices such as branding, hot prods, chutes, feedlots, and narrow corrals. The total potential economic value is not exploited, because the relationship is more than economic. With most reservations being

split between "traditionalists" and "progressives", and the latter mostly ranchers on Plains reservations, this can create problems for bison operations. The progressives, who advocate for economic development by adoption of mainstream economic strategies, often see the revitalization of aspects of traditional culture as a hindrance to the future well-being. They see tribal bison operations that advocate for traditional management practices as wasting resources instead of streamlining productivity. Indian cattle ranchers also fear that with the spotlight on bison, they might receive less attention and resources for their venues. Opposition to lean bison on reservations runs fairly high and thus mirrors off-reservation society, where people have become used to the fattier beef. Many non-tribal bison producers have started to feed their bison corn in order to make the meat fattier, and, it is hoped, more acceptable to the average consumer. This runs counter to the efforts of some traditionalists on reservations to reduce diabetes by replacing beef with lean bison meat.

Although many tribal bison operations have developed growing pains, they can be considered a success as locally controlled development projects. Over recent years, development efforts have changed from the global to the local, and as such also toward revitalization of traditional cultural and ecological knowledge and an emphasis of ecological, cultural, and political sovereignty. As Smith (1994:187) points out, there has been, in the last fifteen years, a realization that "although tribal enterprises and entrepreneurial activity must be competitive in the global or local marketplace, the goals of those activities need not be the same as those of non-Indian businesses." Loayaza (2000:19) says, "the cultures imposed on us have so far brought us nothing but problems: first poverty, then division, and now individualism. But with our own culture, we will

regain strength. . . . It is our firm belief that we are not mistaken and that development must be based on local cultures!" Over the last years, attempts to achieve this have increased in numbers, and the tribal buffalo programs are but one example of this trend.

There are numerous examples from North American indigenous communities in which the goal is economic independence, "but mainly so that the community can fully restore cultural continuity and a holistic interaction with the land" (Strang 1997:106). Makah, Inupiaq, and Inuit whale hunting are examples of cases in which societies are trying to rebuild communities based on traditional relations to animals. Whaling is explicitly linked to religious activities, and the hunt is portrayed as a spiritual, not only a subsistence relationship (Freeman et al. 1998:53-56). "Resistance to changes in the traditional relationship with the land," Schreiber (2002:375) points out in expanding her discussion of salmon fishing on the Northwest Coast to include the James Bay Cree, "is associated with individual well-being and notions of health and prosperity." Whales and salmon have become a symbol of cultural affirmation, and fill a very similar role to that of buffalo on the Plains. However, symbols of cultural resistance and sustainability used in development projects do not need to center on animals. In the case of the Menominee Indian Tribe, the focus is the forest. Sustainability is again defined through community participation: "One tenet of Menominee sustainable development stresses the importance of maintaining communal ownership of the forest and the Menominee environment" (Davis 2000:53).

As Kalstad (1998:243) points out, the choice of a knowledge system to be applied in resource management "is a practical as well as a political issue." In the case of tribal bison operations, the traditional people argue for hands-off management, and try to leave

the bison as wild as possible. They argue that to do otherwise would change the bison culture, and would domesticate the bison in the same way that Indian societies were changed by being forced onto reservations and into assimilation. Progressive ranchers, on the other hand, argue for the application of typical ranching practices to the bison, which they see as wilder, furrer cows. Resource management might not be the most important debate in this dispute, however; the symbolic aspects in development debates need more attention. What is at stake in this discussion over resource management and ecological knowledge might not be economic productivity, or even the well-being of the buffalo, but the identity of Plains Indians as distinctive cultures. In other words, for traditionalists, the buffalo, and how they are treated, have become icons of cultural difference between Indians and the American mainstream. It would be a mistake to see this only in terms of identity politics, however. Rather, I would suggest a long-term approach to economic development and resource use that includes the sense of community.

Even though it might not contribute to direct subsistence or economic gain, bringing a community together is the basis for all other activities because it shows people, or at least makes them reflect upon, who they are as a community. This is most important in societies whose history, culture, and knowledge have been challenged by colonial powers, often in direct conjunction with forced assimilation into a capitalist economy that runs counter to traditional values. Reinstating pride in one's culture, and a feeling of self-worth and knowledge that one can achieve complex tasks, is fundamental to community health, and only healthy communities can achieve long-term economic success. Symbolically powerful animals such as reindeer, whales, salmon, or buffalo, or symbolically powerful plants such as trees or corn can be a catalyst on which the

community can build. This is as much true for Plains Indians as it is for other indigenous societies.

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Sebastian Braun  
Department of Indian Studies  
University of North Dakota  
Merrifield 213  
Grand Forks, ND 58202  
USA

[sebastian.braun@und.nodak.edu](mailto:sebastian.braun@und.nodak.edu)

phone: (701) 777-4315 / (701) 777-4314

fax: (701) 777-4145