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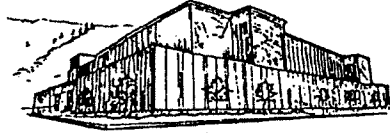
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BUFFALO HIPPIES

By

Brooke Gibbs Hewes

B.A. Middlebury College, Middlebury, Vermont 2001

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

Master of Arts

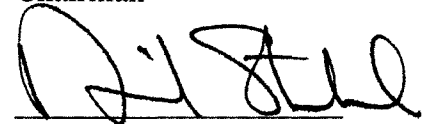
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Buffalo Hippies

Chairman: Michael Downs *MGD*

The Buffalo Field Campaign is a non-profit organization based in West Yellowstone, Montana. Since 1997, from sunup to sundown, seven days a week, volunteers monitor those bison that wander in and out of Yellowstone National Park. When the animals stand, the activists stand; when the animals roam, the activists roam, ready with video cameras to document what they term “the slaughter and harassment” of “country's last wild buffalo.” They exist to protect the animals from those who manage them—the Montana Department of Livestock and the other four agencies charged with keeping bison and the bacterial disease brucellosis that they carry away from cattle. When not in the field, campaign members live communally in a log cabin on Hebgen Lake, where room and board are exchanged for a two-week minimum commitment.

Some call the activists “buffalo soldiers”—stewards who actually practice what they preach. Others dub them vagabond hippies — trust-funded environmentalists just looking for a cause. But what and who are the Buffalo Field Campaign *really*? How, amid such persistent physical and emotional strife, do the activists maintain focus and determination? And why, beyond their stated compulsion to save Yellowstone bison, do the activists continue their protest; indeed, why do they *come*, but more importantly, why do they *stay*?

The Buffalo Field Campaign is much more than the swirling stereotypes that follow them. They are a grassroots protest of substantial momentum and influence. The campaign's passion—the drive that has sustained the activists' work for nearly a decade—however, has unique consequences for its cheerleaders, its critics, and its members. And for journalists, who like me, seek to tease truth and balance from emotion.

Acknowledgments

Thank you, thank you, thank you Michael Downs—you are a phenomenal editor. Thanks Gunnar Carnwath for sage advice and constant encouragement. Also, and always, thanks Mom, Carlie and Dad for everything.

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Finally, thank you to all the BFC volunteers and staff who let me tag along.

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Article One

The Campaign, *From the Inside Looking Out*

The night before the hunters came, Tom Scites led a prayer circle for the bison.

Holding a tightly wrapped bundle of sage, he crossed the room and crouched beside the cabin's broad wood-burning stove. Scites creaked open the cast-iron door and placed the soft green leaves against the flames until they glowed red. He stepped carefully back into the circle, bringing with him a thick stream of musty smoke.

"Creator, grandfathers, grandmothers, four directions, we ask that you take our brothers and sisters as easily as possible," Scites said with his slight Appalachian drawl. He asked that the bison's spirits settle in a good place, that they die free from any pain or fear.

With everyone else sitting, Scites looked giant. His round belly drooped slightly over stained work pants, which were haphazardly tucked into leather boots. Above his white beard and dark, narrow eyes rose a wool cap. He looked like a tired Santa Claus, caked in the dirt and grease of a long day spent making toys. True to his accent, he grew-up in West Virginia, but came to West Yellowstone, Montana, at the urgings of his Northern Cheyenne chief and adopted clan mother. "I was wanting to go to Arizona where it was warm," he said, chuckling at the irony of ending up at one of the coldest places in the lower 48. "I was informed that I was coming to Montana to work with the buffalo. 'You need to go out there and help,' [they said], so that's what I did."

As he spoke, Scites occasionally glanced into the video camera pointed at him from across the room. It was propped on the shoulder of one of three film students down from Bozeman, who, like me, were staying with the campaign to cover the first day of the long-anticipated hunt. Unlike like them, however, I was more interested in the campaign than I was the hunters.

Scites told us to be careful tomorrow. “Watch your back,” he said. “Watch your partner’s back. As I said, we are dealing with an unknown element out there. Everyone be cool. We’ll try to get through this.” He blew into the sage, sending weightless ash across the living room’s wide-planked wooden floor. Then he explained why he didn’t like these ceremonies. Usually, Scites said, they honor the spirits of the dead, those bison shipped to slaughter after being held at one of Montana’s several bison capture pens in or near Yellowstone National Park. And though no bison had died today, he reckoned that some would tomorrow.

What would happen tomorrow, though, was anyone’s guess. The last time Montana held a bison hunt was in 1991 and well before most of the people in the room had started high school, let alone dedicated themselves to saving Yellowstone’s wild bison. Most of the Buffalo Field Campaign volunteers around the circle were from the East Coast and probably didn’t even know the herd existed 15 years ago. Even Dan Brister, who has been with the BFC eight of its nine years, was in Vermont then and not yet versed in the bison controversy.

A woman sitting cross-legged in a brown, tattered loveseat took the smoldering sage, also called a smudge in Native American rituals, from Tom Scites and thanked everyone for setting aside their own lives and working toward a greater cause. She passed the smudge to Adam a 26-year old musician from the Bay Area who recently quit his job, sold most of his possessions and joined the campaign. He prayed for the health and strength of everyone in the room. Josh Osher, one of the campaign’s few paid coordinators, traced his body with the smoke before closing his eyes and inhaling deeply.

“In my times of ceremony,” Osher said, “I was taught to always first give thanks — because the truth is we have it pretty good. We are alive here on this planet Earth, and we enjoy health, and smell the roses so to speak.”

He paused and again fanned the streaming smoke toward his face.

“I was also taught to only ask for one thing: that the understanding of the goodness of life, the respect for all of creation, be broadened to more people. That more see this way and understand our relation with all of the creation from the littlest creatures to the biggest, tallest trees. I ask that understanding come to those who do not see what is going on here for the next three months. That understanding comes from the education and inspiration from being around the buffalo and that at least some hearts are turned, some minds changed and that the buffalo will enjoy a better future.”

Osher took one more breath over the smudge before handing it to his mother who was visiting “camp”— what the campaign’s log cabin/headquarters on Hebgen Lake is often called — for her seventh time. She nodded affectionately at her son, then thanked the buffalo for their inspiration. Society, she said, couldn’t afford to lose this herd. Others followed, praying aloud or to themselves over the wafting smoke. The circle closed with hugs and chocolate bars, which everyone passed to the left after taking a piece, just as they had done with the smoke and their prayers.

The Buffalo Field Campaign was founded in 1997 by activist Michael Mease and Lakota elder Rosalie Little Thunder to protest the treatment of Yellowstone bison during

what they call “the hard winter.” Snow and rain followed by bitter cold and more snow made foraging impossible for much of Yellowstone’s wildlife including bison, who migrated by the thousands towards lower elevations outside of the park. Hundreds, freezing and starving, perished; roughly 1,000 more were killed or sent to slaughter as they crossed from the park into the state of Montana. From then on, the BFC, originally named Buffalo Nations to honor a long history of American Indian and bison interdependence, pledged to document and disseminate what they deem the mistreatment of Yellowstone bison; they vowed to hold Montana Department of Livestock and other managing agencies accountable for those and the more than 1,500 bison slaughtered since. And for the last nine years they have worked toward this end, monitoring Yellowstone bison from sun up to sun down, seven days a week October through June. On occasion, they shoo the animals from “danger”—from cattle, private property, state and federal agents who chase, capture, and sometimes slaughter bison outside the park.

The campaign’s opposition to the hunt and its promise to document every kill rests on the same premise as its nearly year-round protest: Yellowstone’s some 5,000 bison need permanent, protected habitat beyond the national park’s boundaries. The animals, the BFC maintains, deserve a home in Montana, which they won’t get until what the campaign calls “the brucellosis myth” is exposed. Brucellosis is a bacterial disease that between 40 and 50 percent of Yellowstone bison are believed to carry and that can cause cattle to miscarry their first calf. Brucellosis is the primary reason that managers restrict most bison to the park. The disease is a myth, says the campaign, because it has never spread from bison to cattle in the wild.

Of course there are points specific to the hunt that the campaign contests, namely its fair-chase premise and Montana Fish, Wildlife & Park's claim that harvesting 50 animals in three months will help cull the herd and contain the spread of brucellosis. If bison are going to be hunted like wildlife, the BFC says, they should be afforded the rights of wildlife: room to roam and run. And hide.

This hunt, however, as illustrated by the presence of my film-student bunkmates and the half a dozen news crews slated to arrive the next day, had a bright side: it lent an international spotlight—an opportunity to illuminate the otherwise passé (albeit colorful) struggles of the campaign, which has been recognized as one of the longest continuous environmental protests in U.S. history. For me, the hunt also lent much, but mostly the opportunity to observe the activists confront what Scites called “the unknown.” Being there, seeing if and how the activists supported one another, I could see the substance and shades beneath the spotlight's illuminated surface. This was a time for me to begin parsing truth from stereotype.

By 5:30 a.m. the next morning, nearly all of the mattresses in the cabin were empty. Volunteers layered warm clothes and helped themselves to the cowboy coffee bubbling on the stove. A line soon formed behind a huge pot of oatmeal set out on the counter, beside which sat bowls of raisins and brown sugar and a shoebox full of banana bread. We all ate quickly, standing around the wood stove as it rumbled to life, and piled our dirty bowls in the sink as we finished. Volunteers grabbed video cameras, handheld

radios and fistfuls of blaze orange vests on their way out the door. Outside, a volunteer named Cody sat behind the steering wheel of one of four vibrating 1980-ish Subarus. A wool blanket covered his shoulders and his head leaned slightly over the steaming coffee mug between his hands. Ryan, another volunteer, barely visible against the dark sky except for his thick breath, worked a plastic scraper against the passenger-side window.

Cody leaned over and tapped the half-cleared glass.

“I can see,” he said to Ryan and motioned for him to get in.

Ryan continued.

“It’s fine,” Cody said firmly. “Get in.”

Ryan mouthed that he, for one, still wouldn’t be able to see, and that *no, it wasn’t fine*.

“Let’s just go,” Cody said, leaning heavily back into his chair. “I’m anxious.”

Ryan finished clearing the windshield and got in. As soon as the door creaked closed Cody reversed past the other warming cars and spun forward. Ryan reached out and turned on the radio scanner perched on the dashboard in front of him, finding mostly static. He pushed a worn cassette in the player instead, and we listened to the Grateful Dead as we drove east toward the park and into the soft light stretched across the horizon.

At Fir Ridge we stopped, grabbed our backpacks and began walking. I followed Cody and Ryan past a small signpost welcoming us into Yellowstone and into a tall-grass meadow where three bull bison stood grazing. We stopped and so did they, watching us watch them. We then circled widely around them, eventually rejoining the crusty imprints of more than a month of patrols since snow had fallen in October.

The first bison was killed just after 9:30 a.m. near Gardiner, Montana, a small town just northwest of the park and the other hunting hotspot. By that time Cody and Ryan had joined Scites and the film students on Horse Butte Peninsula, a narrow isthmus west of the park straddled by Duck Creek and the Madison River before they converge into Hebgen Lake.

“It took 5 shots and 30 minutes,” said Scites. “To me it’s blatant stupidity—another way the DOL has figured out how to kill 50 buffalo without getting a bad rep. Welcome to Montana.”

Scites launched into a speech about Montana’s dwindling freedoms: first a speed limit, then no drinking and driving, and now a bison hunt. He didn’t like that hunters could just drive around all day looking for bison and burning up fuel. Hunting bison wasn’t like hunting elk or deer, which required hiking and tracking skills. No, in a bison hunt, hunters could find and kill a big bull without having to walk too far from their cars. “Where’s the sport in that?” he asked, leaning against the rusty, open door of one of the campaign’s Subarus, whose engine hummed warmly despite the cold.

As he spoke, a truck drove past towards Yellowstone Village, a housing development sprouting just to the north. Two men in florescent orange used their hands to shield their faces. Hunters knew about the BFC; they had been warned about media and activists during a safety talk in September.

Scites waited for the film crew to shoot the bison-skull-clad Montana license plate before returning to the subject of the hunt. “It’s sad to lose them like that,” he said

between drags off his cigarette. “It’s even sadder to lose them with what they do after they hunt. As soon as the tags are filled, they will start hazing and capturing again.”

Hazing—chasing bison into the park on horseback, all-terrain vehicles or in helicopters—and capturing are, like the hunt, part of the controversial Interagency Bison Management Plan, passed in 2000, which divides responsibility for bison management between the Montana DOL, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks and three federal agencies: the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Agency, the U.S. Forest Service, and the National Park Service.

The plan’s purpose is twofold: maintain a wild, free-ranging population of bison and prevent the transmission of brucellosis from bison to cattle. But because of the disease, the bison cannot roam free and, at least for now, the two mandates butt heads. About 150 cattle graze on Horse Butte from July to October, and about 250 live year-round near Gardiner. The Montana DOL and the park service, the two agencies in charge of hazing and capturing, usually try to haze first. If their efforts are unsuccessful due to “heavy snow or coverage, the bison traveling too far from the park, interference from protestors or activists,” according to MDOL’s website, bison are captured and tested for brucellosis. Those that test positive are slaughtered. Most others are released into the park. Increasingly, however, as their numbers climb above 3,000 — the interagency plan’s current target population — bison are slaughtered without being tested.

Later, after another bison had been shot and all the volunteers had returned to camp, we watched video clips of the first kill. The hunter, George Clement Jr., a 17-year-old from Belgrade, Montana, who had taken the day off from high school, was kneeling between snow-dusted clumps of grass and sage beside his father and a few other men.

The cameraman, a BFC volunteer, announced his intention not to disturb the hunt, but after two of at least four shots, asked Clement why he didn't just kill the animal. Eventually, the animal fell and Clement and two other men approached the convulsing bison. As they did, the four bulls that had been grazing with the fifth before it was shot wandered back. The men didn't want the animals around and threw rocks to scatter them. The bison left, but soon returned, scattering the hunters when they did.

I couldn't tell how long it took for the animals to stay away or for the injured bison to stop breathing—the video cut off before either happened. The clip showed something else, though. A likeness. Animals and activists rode the same nervous tension between confidence, confusion and curiosity. No one really knew what to do, or think, and it showed. Each time the bulls wandered back, they circled around the dying animal. Each time they left, the hunters and activists did. I thought about the night before, the passing of the sage, and the circle of ashes. It wasn't the first or last time I equated the two —the campaign and the animals around which it revolves. The animals for their unpredictability and fierce resistance to domestication, and the campaign for its sometimes drastic and usually unconventional ways. The animals that migrate together behind the lead of older bulls and the influence of strong seasonal instincts, and the campaign, which maintains strength and momentum from those activists who return each year as summer shortens into fall.

Ryan and Cody were two of the first people I met at camp. Ryan, 22, and Cody, just 21, were both returning volunteers. Ryan first learned about the campaign when he was living in Portland, Oregon. He found a BFC flyer soliciting donations for food and clothes wedged between albums in a record store. "I kept hearing about it again and again," he said, "so when I turned 18 I came out." And except for one year working on the anti-whaling ship *Sea Shepard*, known for its rigorous front-line activism, he has remained. Last summer Ryan worked on an organic farm in Arlee, Montana, trading work for room and board and crates of vegetables for the upcoming winter. This season, as volunteer coordinator, he fields e-mail inquiries from around the world and makes sure new arrivals have a place to sleep. He is kind and youthful, but serious about his work, as most of the volunteers are. Camp is an intense place, full of intense people. Those who stick around develop ways to cope, to cut the intensity, like Ryan and Cody, who frequent the small pub at the end of the driveway to shoot pool and blow off steam. Or like Ryan, who can laugh at himself.

"If you take a step back and look at this whole thing there's something comical," Ryan told me one day on Duck Creek patrol, where we sat inside a Subaru parked across the water from rancher Dale Koelzer's house. "We've been sitting here for nine years watching this guy's house." Koelzer lives less than a mile from Yellowstone's western border and rents his basement and a chunk of land to MDOL, the latter of which the agency uses for one of its two bison capture pens. The patrol keeps tabs on the livestock agents as well as any bison that get too close to the rancher's property. (In 1999, Koelzer was convicted of wasting game animal meat when he illegally shot a bull bison that was "bothering his truck.")

“Recons,” “patrols,” listening to “agents” over the radio, Ryan says, can feel a bit cops-and-robberish.

Like Ryan, Cody is serious about saving the bison. He arrived last December with a friend from high school, and like many volunteers, planned on staying a week. “Then I went on patrol and saw my first buffalo and stayed ‘til June,” he said, adding that his parents are still trying to deal with the fact that he’s not in college. Still, he is young and exploring. One night I overheard him on the cabin’s one cordless phone telling his parents about a 10-day meditation retreat he and his girlfriend recently attended. “I was thinking about you guys the whole time,” he said into the receiver. “Maybe it won’t change your life, but it will make you happy for a little while.” The next day I noticed a message stuck on his water bottle inviting positive thoughts. It was a personal experiment in quantum physics, he said.

Both Ryan and Cody seem to grow older, more solemn, when talking about the hunt. It is a ploy by the state of Montana to distract media from the real problem, they agreed, saying that “real” problem is the interagency bison plan and its “federally funded bison slaughter.” And “the truth” about brucellosis, which they likely learned from Josh Osher, the resident brucellosis expert whose educated and well-versed argument has convinced more than a few.

“The hunt is an extension of Montana’s zero tolerance policy of bison,” Osher explained to me and into the film students’ camera before the hunt. Brucellosis is a fear, he said, but largely unfounded. The bacterial disease is spread primarily by pregnant bison when and if cattle eat infected afterbirth. Male bison, he reasoned, have little to no chance of spreading brucellosis and for the most part, only males come out of the park

before spring when females venture out to give birth. (According to Montana’s state veterinarian Tom Linfield, however, bull bison do pose a threat because they attract other bison, including pregnant females, and because bulls may spread brucellosis through their urine and/or feces, although science has yet to confirm either.) Montana’s bison-intolerance, Scites later added, is about cattle and the grass they eat, but no one is man enough to stand up and say we don’t want bison eating our grass.

“If the Creator snapped his fingers and there was no brucellosis left in the world, they would come up with something else [like] buffalo got mad cow disease or they’ll give you cancer,” said Scites.

In recent years—and arguably due to the campaign’s scrutiny—MDOL, says Osher, has had a hard time defending the killing of bulls. The hunt, he says, gives the agency an excuse to deflect negative publicity by making hunters do their “dirty work.” And while Osher acknowledges that hunting may be a part of Montana’s heritage, it isn’t, or shouldn’t be, when the targets are managed as “species in need of disease control” nine months out of the year and wildlife for three for the purposes of a hunt. Plus, said Osher, the herd is unique; not only are they one of a few free-roaming herds in the U.S., they descend from wild, native ancestors.

“Montana has a unique responsibility,” he says of the genetic purity of the herd, “and so far, they have been a very poor host.”

The nearly 5,000 bison that roam Yellowstone National Park are one of two genetically pure herds of buffalo in the United States—a herd in Wind Cave National Park, South Dakota, is also pure, or free of cattle genes, but is fenced in and heavily managed and, as Osher says, not “wild and free roaming.” Yellowstone bison, unlike the majority of the 300,000 buffalo across the nation, do not have cattle genes and still occupy portions of their native habitat. Yellowstone bison, in other words, are *all* Yellowstone and *all* bison.

Well sort of. At the turn of the 20th century, all but a few pockets of the between 30 and 60 million bison estimated to roam North America 200 years before were gone. European settlement, the introduction of guns and horses to Plains Indians, and foreign markets hungry for buffalo hides and coats were among the factors driving the coast-to-coast slaughter. Between 1872 and 1874, more than 4 million buffalo were killed on the Great Plains. Buffalo hunting became all the rage, encouraged as much by railroad expansion as by the popularity of dude hunting, the latter of which led by the infamous William Fredrick Cody (a.k.a. Buffalo Bill), who was said to have killed as many as 4,280 buffalo in 18 months.

A 1902 survey of Yellowstone National Park found 23 bison in the remote Pelican Valley. The U.S. Army, which managed the animals until the National Park Service was created in 1917, started the Buffalo Ranch in the park’s northern Lamar Valley with 18 bison from a Montana ranch some 500 miles away and three from a ranch in Texas. And though the original Yellowstone genes have since mixed with these domestic descendants, the BFC maintains that they are genetically pure via their wild ancestry.

While some debate the purity of the Yellowstone herd, others debate their wildness—their freedom from civilization’s heavy hands. Bison, after all, cannot freely wander from Yellowstone into Montana. And, in many ways (physically, spiritually, intellectually), bison are property: they belong to the state and federal agencies who manage them; they belong to the idea of a Wild West and the tourists who flock to the oldest national park to see its living vestiges; they belong to Native Americans who once co-existed with the animal and depended upon them for food, shelter and tools; and, in many ways, they belong to the BFC, who wouldn’t exist without them or their debated autonomy.

The hunt was my second trip to camp. The first time I hiked Fir Ridge there wasn’t any snow; it was October and few volunteers were around. The aspens and willows lining Hebgen Lake still clung to their gold and amber leaves. It was warmer then, and more relaxed. With no snow in the park, bison had little reason to migrate to lower elevations, and with few bison around, volunteers filled their days cutting wood, digging a root cellar, and among other seasonal preparations, organizing gear.

Tom Scites, bent over a propped-open hood of one of two of the Subarus he was dissecting, was the first person I met. He and another volunteer were heading up to Bozeman later that day to swap the newer Subaru with its sizable dent for two older ones. Except for a donated Suburban and what looked like a monster truck that was going to be used for incognito patrols in Gardiner—“It’s the perfect red neck disguise,” Mike Mease

had told me earlier—they kept Subarus because they lasted, were good in snow and had interchangeable parts.

Cars, I quickly noticed, filled much of the front yard. Volunteers owned some; others minus wheels, hoods and mirrors, were used for parts. On the far side of the log cabin, firewood was neatly piled. The broad front porch teemed with cross country skis, tool boxes and snowshoes, and an unobstructed view of the lake and the dramatic peaks of the Madison mountain range tapering south. To the east you could just make out Horse Butte and West Yellowstone Village.

Ryan greeted me, found me a bunk and showed me around. I met Cody next, who leaned over a box of assorted, mostly donated Patagonia jackets, hats and gloves just inside the front door. He was the gear coordinator this winter. To the right of the front door was one of four bedrooms. Split-level bunks lined three of the four walls. An old computer set-up for e-mail sat beside a stack of National Geographic magazines and an assortment of video cassettes. A sewing machine, guitars, drums and tattered pro-bison signs piled in the far corner. For privacy, tapestries hung between the upper bunks.

Left of the front hall was the living room and its Goodwill couches and cast-iron stove, the cabin's primary heating source. Two wooden ladders toward the back of the room reached up toward a loft crammed with mattresses. Behind the ladders, pantry shelves partitioned a narrow cooking space stocked with bags of bread and cereal boxes. Tea filled baskets between two dorm-room size refrigerators and an electric range countertop. Left of the living room was another bunkroom. Without a stove or much insulation, it was called Siberia, and at the time looked more like a pantry than a bedroom. Bunks were crowded with canned goods, root vegetables and dried beans rather

than sleeping bags. A gutted deer carcass killed a few weeks before hung above metal bowls of freshly butchered meat.

A narrow kitchen spanned the back of the cabin, lined with spices, oils and peanut butter on one side and two industrial sinks and dish racks on the other. Cookbooks — mostly vegetarian and vegan — crowded a shelf across from the fridge. All told, the cabin isn't much more than 2,000 square feet, but has housed as many as 72 volunteers at one time. I have seen pictures of all-camp meetings during the busy season with volunteers crammed side-by-side on couches, cross legged on the floor, and even sitting five feet off the ground on the narrow ladder rungs leading up to the loft. It's no wonder Mike Mease, who I could then see through the kitchen window as he walked down from his teepee toward the cabin, had his own space. Plus, he later told me, it helps him avoid camp drama, what he jokingly calls *As the Teepee Turns*. ("We have a couple mediators on call," he said with a knowing smile.) Since the kitchen was the final stop on our tour, I walked outside to say hi to Mease, who was wearing the same black tee-shirt with a white buffalo as the first time we met.

Though the group doesn't have official leaders, BFC co-founder Mease is one. His build is sturdy, suitable for the -40 degree weather that blows through West Yellowstone each winter. His wide and particularly white smile stretches between round cheeks, off-set by salt-and-pepper shoulder-length hair. He said he was on his way to sight his rifle – elk hunting season started the next day – but would take me on a driving tour of the area when he came back. He wanted to show me where Montana DOL keeps bison before being testing and either releasing or sending to them slaughter.

While I waited, Ryan and Cody said they were going to visit “the mama bison” and that I could tag along. Ryan grabbed a lighter and a bundle of sage and headed up a faint trail behind the cabin. Cody and I followed. We stopped at a peeling birch tree and looked up.

“She was an old pregnant cow found on the south side of Horse Butte, near the Madison River,” Cody explained. Wedged between the trunk and a branch about 10 feet from the ground was a bison skull. They were not sure how she died but hoped from old age. A native elder had told them to leave it in the tree for a year to let bugs and birds pick it clean. After that they could pay it proper homage or bury it.

Back at the cabin, Adam, Cody and Ryan discussed the compatibility of hard rock music and manual labor.

“The best is listening to Tool and chopping wood,” said Adam, who had just turned up the volume of one of the group’s cacophonous albums.

“I like to do it Zen style,” said Cody, who was sitting on a couch flipping through a new-age book on energy.

Adam revised his earlier statement and said he liked to do it Samurai style, demonstrating his inclination with a couple air-karate chops. The conversation drifted from music to a primitive skills school that several volunteers have attended to learn how to live more closely with the land.

“I think that would get a lot of that sludge out of your mind,” said Ryan.

“None of it’s applicable anymore because of the 6.5 billion people,” said Cody, looking smugly up from his book.

“Six and a half billion people equals ecological destruction,” agreed Ryan.

Cody threw up his arms and said he didn't want to talk about it anymore. It was too depressing. He and Ryan decided to go shoot pool.

Later, driving around Horse Butte with Mease, I saw the spot where the mama bison died. Six months later her wallow was long gone, but less than a quarter-mile away I could still see the imprint of MDOL's capture pens. Dead sage and grasses laid flat across a wide swath between the road and the Madison River. Mike said last time the pens were used was in 2003. Increasingly, he said, the agency had to be careful. The BFC had filmed them illegally flying over a bald eagle nesting area that was off limits to air, all-terrain-vehicle or horse traffic from Dec. 1 through Aug. 15; plus, local opposition was mounting. In addition to the BFC, locals formed the Horse Butte Neighbors of Buffalo in 2003 because, says coordinator Kerrie Taggart, "enough was enough." Hazing bison, she said, squanders MDOL's time, money and credibility.

Many of the homes in the subdivision had yellow "Bison Safe Zone" signs in their window or hanging from their porches. Taggart distributed them so MDOL would know which residents don't approve of animals being hazed across their lawns. Horse Butte neighbors and the BFC agree that Yellowstone's bison should be afforded more rights. Taggart and Mease are friends, and each respects the way the other works on behalf of the herd.

"They are our allies," Mease told me as we drove by Taggart's home. "Sometimes when I come back from patrol, there are warm cookies and hot cocoa on the front seat. That's what the buffalo teach: community."

On the drive back towards camp, Mease said he was anxious about the upcoming winter. It was bound to be one of the craziest years BFC has ever seen, he said. Maybe even the worst, he confided, since 1997, the “hard winter.”

Mike Mease spent much of his childhood on military bases around the world. His father went to West Point and both parents are Catholic and Republican.

“People go to church and pray to a hippie and then spit on the first poor person they see,” he said. “The system lets you justify your behavior; it’s set up so you don’t question it.”

Conforming to such beliefs causes anguish, he said, and to soothe or distract themselves, kids today scar their bodies with tattoos and piercings. Others, he said, consume—food or clothes or other material stuff. Thankfully, Mease said, he found activism.

After studying journalism and psychology at the University of Montana, he joined front-lines campaigns like Greenpeace and Friends of the Wolf. (It was while protesting for the latter that he lost the two front teeth his shiny, white ones now replace.) He practiced what he calls guerilla journalism, or “sneaking into places I shouldn’t be.” He told me something about walking “30 miles at night” to film illegal activity at a radioactive test site “the size of Connecticut.” Though the specifics seemed grandiose, I have little doubt that he, as he said he did, helped shut the program down.

Mease went to Yellowstone in the mid 90s with the Missoula-based media group Cold Mountains, Cold River, which he also co-founded, and began documenting the hazing and capturing of Yellowstone Bison well before the Interagency Bison Management Plan. Mease pledged to become the number one news source on the issue. Plus, he fell in love with the bison, and has since fallen in love with the place, what has become his home beside Yellowstone National Park.

Crawling in and out of a tied open canvas door—"It is a perfect day for teepee patching," he said—Mease explained that one day, maybe even soon, the BFC will no longer be needed.

"The whole reason we're a campaign is because we want to solve this issue and move on," he said, dabbing glue to the back of a small square of white canvas and then holding it over a rip by the door.

The campaign, he pointed out, is unlike big conservation groups that with high-paying positions operate more like corporations than non-profits. For him it's not about the money; it's about getting the job done. Laughing, he said he still gets pressure, at 40 years old, from his parents for a steady paycheck, health insurance, a "normal job."

Though not "normal" to some, his work with the buffalo is his job. And his passion and his life. For most of the winter, Mease rises as early as 4 a.m. to patrol and doesn't return to camp until 6 p.m., after the sun has set and any hazing or hunting has ceased. After dinner, he joins the other coordinators and volunteers in the living room for the evening meeting to discuss that day's patrols, where and how many bison are out of the park and MDOL's whereabouts, as well as to assign the next day's patrols. After "share bear," during which someone sings, recites poetry or shares something personal,

Mike retreats to the media cabin to edit film for the website. Some days he doesn't get to bed until 11 p.m.

“Most people go to the office and clock in and out,” he said. “If I was in Missoula while the hunt was going on I wouldn't be able to sleep. I need to be involved—it is what I do and what I want to be remembered for.”

The BFC and its volunteers — the more than 1,500 people who have come to camp from places as far as Israel and Australia in the last nine years — are his family, he said. Mease considers everyone important and takes it upon himself to make sure they know it. Just like bison do, he said.

“These bison live in a herd, a family, and everyone in that herd is as important as everyone else,” he told me the first time we met in Missoula. “They live in harmony because they care about each other. I look around our movement, I look at the world, and I laugh. We divide each other with -isms ... That's a lesson the buffalo teaches us. It is about coming together.”

Mease's white teepee has a reddish-brown bison cow and her calf painted to the left of the doorway. Inside, beyond a wooden-planked entryway, is more space than I thought possible. A bed covered by a brown blanket with the word “campaign” stitched beneath a bison is pushed against the far wall. A bison skull sits on a narrow table at the head of his bed. Three chairs, a wood stove, another table crowded with books and an oil lamp, and a pile of shoes fill the rest of the space. Overhead, hanging from the narrowing canvas are moose and elk antlers, some of which act as shelves, others as hooks.

“I love treasure hunting,” he said looking up. Personal time, though sparse, is vital and part of the reason he hunts for morel mushrooms and antlers in the spring and elk in

the fall. Time in the woods or tinkering in his teepee lends perspective and opportunities to digest or sort through his inherently manic job. “In the field,” he said, “you fall in love with the buffalo and see them get killed.”

“It took me a long time to actually shoot an animal,” he said. In fact, for the first five years he hunted, a friend of his would actually fire the gun. “I would just clean and butcher [the animal.]”

That campaign members hunt surprises people and the media, both of which are quick to assume the campaign is replete with animal rights activists.

“I never heard of the word vegan before I came out here,” said Mease, laughing and reiterating that the BFC isn’t against the bison hunt because it deems hunting unethical, but rather that this particular hunt is unethical because it isn’t fair chase.

Still, he admitted, one of the first things he did before becoming an activist is acknowledge and accept that, at times, he is a hypocrite. There is no such thing as perfect, he said, and realizing this lends tolerance and compassion for others.

“I don’t want to be better than you,” he said. “I believe in equal rights for all species.”

Outside his teepee the day is warm and the sky over Hebgen Lake bright blue. Looking out towards the water and the mountains beyond that, I tell him I understand why he has stayed so long.

“Spend some time with the buffalo, and then you’ll really understand,” he said.

Perched above camp, I was reminded of what Cody told me about male bison. In the spring they are the first ones to leave the park. They forge trail with their powerful bodies for the pregnant females and yearlings behind them. Sometimes the older bulls

drift away from the herd and live alone or in small groups for much of the year. I'm not sure why, or even if they all do. Maybe, like Mease, they seek peace after so many years of exposure, or want space and stillness after blazing trail for so long. Maybe, like Mease, the bulls wander off because they know the herd will follow.

Or maybe my urge to be poetic, to anthropomorphize and compare is too strong. Too contrived. The likeness between the seasoned bulls and the activist is already, naturally, striking.

Bison, most volunteers say, are the reason they come to the BFC.

Indeed, American Bison, the largest land mammal in North America, are compelling. At the shoulder, they stand up to 6 feet. Shaggy, coarse hair blankets their body brown, thickest around their shoulders and head. Males grow 11.5 feet long and can weigh 2,500 pounds; females measure up to 10 feet long, weighing as much as 1,100 pounds. Wide-set eyes, humped shoulders, and strong oblong heads for pushing aside snow to forage lend bison a prehistoric air, as if they have been around, and endured. Many volunteers call them majestic, even magical, and not just because of their grandeur; there is something more—something about their tenacity, their ability to overcome adversity that inspires so many to leave friends and families and jobs to stand with the bison, which some volunteers have never actually seen before arriving.

Like Adam, who was living in San Francisco two months ago playing classical guitar at private dinner parties for \$500 an hour. He was one of the first volunteers to

arrive for the 2005/2006 season, and when we met in October, he was one of 10 men and one woman at camp. His soft voice and slight features stood out, as did his greenness to activism.

“It was a whirlwind decision,” he said of coming to West Yellowstone. He heard about the campaign from Mease and Osher during the annual West Coast Road Show—the organization’s traveling outreach event that visits college campuses, Patagonia shops and book stores in California, Oregon and Montana. “Within two weeks,” Adam recounted, “I was selling most of my stuff and packing what was left. I just knew it was the right thing to do.”

I caught the end of the show in Missoula last September. Mease was handing off supplies to Dan Brister and his girlfriend Stephany Seay, who would lead a 10-stop East Coast tour during the following two months. In a mostly-empty lecture hall at the University of Montana, the close-knit BFC community was evident, especially to the few of us on the outside. At least 10 of the 15 or so in the audience knew each other and greeted one another with hugs and bison updates. Many wore the off-white with brown bison “Buffalo Nations” tee-shirts from the campaign’s early days.

Following a welcome and a brief introduction, Mease and Osher talked through a graphic video. “They are sacred beings. They belong in this landscape. They deserve to be here,” Osher said while the images flashed on a pull-down screen: *MDOL agents poke bison with electric cattle prods, hee-haying them into confined capture facilities to be tested or shipped to slaughter; Stressed, bison gore one other with their horns, or by slamming each other against the pen’s metal gates; Helicopters, horses and ATVs chase bison many miles across highways and through rivers; A bison crossing the road is*

struck and killed by a truck; Newborn bison, gasping for air and energy, are chased, some just hours after learning to walk.

These clips, which I have since seen people watch many times, turn stomachs. Even the unsympathetic close their eyes or look away—few are unaffected as bison gore and trample each other or get tangled in barbed wire fence. Or, as was documented this winter, drown in a partially frozen lake after being chased by MDOL agents in a helicopter. And although management is complicated and fear of brucellosis real, many are viscerally stirred and, like Adam, compelled into action. Such presentations help explain why joining the campaign “just feels right.”

While bison and their struggles compel many to join the BFC, they are only part of the reason people stay. Community, friendship and belonging are others—they are what help balance the rest, and what make watching the animals they love die day after day (and for some like Mike Mease and Dan Brister, year after year) tolerable.

Dan Brister was a graduate student at the University of Montana in Missoula during the hard winter of 1997. He watched as Mease and others from Cold Mountain, Cold Rivers posted signs around campus tallying the number of bison dead.

“When the death count hit 1,000 I started educating myself,” said Brister. The following year he traveled to West Yellowstone on Christmas Eve and like Cody, a week stretched into a season. He phoned his employer in Missoula and said he wasn’t coming back. From then until 2002, Brister alternated springs in West Yellowstone with autumns

in Missoula, where he wrote his master's thesis "In the Presence of Buffalo." He credits Yellowstone for pulling him west, away from his childhood in Massachusetts where, as the son of a fisherman, he watched his father chase cod—a species, like bison, he said, living in the shadows of former profusion.

In Yellowstone he found what he never knew he had lost. "Never before had I felt the humming of my every cell, my senses open to the work around me. This was living," he wrote of the park's vast wildness.

Still, Brister wrote, "the ever-present fear of capture and slaughter" can obscure the beauty. Living so close to life and death is taxing. Like the time the Montana DOL baited buffalo toward the Duck Creek capture pens with hay. Volunteers made a human shield between the bison and the food, and for more than a month, wrote Brister, maintained around-the-clock patrols on Duck Creek "weighing the evil of starvation against the certain death of the cage."

"This ideological divide between volunteers rears its head each winter," he wrote.

Like the bison managers they so vehemently oppose, the activists too assume righteousness. They too play God.

Despite the sadness so thick in his writing, Brister's voice is kind and gentle, and awash with compassion. As is his presence. His long dark hair is straggly, and he dresses like most at camp in wool pants or Carhartts or corduroys with various layers of long underwear and wool on top. At camp, he and his girlfriend, Stephany Seay, stay in a teepee behind the main cabin. They leave West Yellowstone each summer to live in the small log cabin Brister owns in Arlee, Montana, and while Brister continues outreach for the campaign, Seay works on a nearby horse farm.

Of her reason for joining the campaign, Seay credits the community. “That’s what I have always loved about the BFC—it is full of real people,” she said. “No one is there for the money—it is a lot of work for a pittance. People are there to help the buffalo, and that takes a certain type.” And in exchange, volunteers receive food and board and support. The cabin, states the BFC volunteer agreement, is a sanctuary for those who need rest and nourishment while “protecting the sacred buffalo.”

Some people, I suspect, are there *because* they are taken care of. “It is a pretty good deal,” a former volunteer confided. “All your meals are taken care of and you have a warm place to stay.” I asked Mease if there are a lot of free-riders looking for a warm meal and a bed. He said no, though every once in a while the coordinators ask someone to leave either because they are unstable or lazy or violating camp rules, which bar alcohol, drugs, discrimination and violence.

“We are a dry camp and don’t tolerate violation of personal boundaries. There are certain things we need to do to stay focused on the buffalo,” Ryan told me when I arrived.

Staying focused on the bison has meant different things at different times. In the campaign’s early days, volunteers tended toward more extreme activism. There were more protests and interfering with hazing and capturing.

“There was a time and place for that,” Ryan said while on patrol one day. Today the most effective strategy is documenting and public education. Things have changed, he said—the campaign has become a part of the local community.

Remnants from the “old guard” still sprinkle the cabin, from the protest signs to the vegan stickers on the refrigerator to a small framed picture in the living room

showing a volunteer perched above the Horse Butte capture pens on a single-legged wooden platform. The volunteer spent three days on the 30-foot high perch and eventually had to be cherry-picked out. During his stay, though, and for the rest of the season, no bison were held there. “That’s just one example of what people do when enough is enough, when they’ve seen enough killing and felt like there is nothing more they can do,” Josh Osher told me after recounting the story. “Some people take it upon themselves to be in the way to a point where they may be endangering themselves.”

Ryan said last year felt like a college fraternity with a lot of young, white males. And at least in the first few months, this year seemed to be the same. “Every year is unique in its own way,” Ryan said. “Two years ago was a prime time for kids. In the spring we had a seven and eight year old.” He said a couple with a baby came last year but soon realized camp wasn’t just a place to be fed and looked after. The couple, Ryan said, felt “the unwanted-vibe” pretty quick and left.

Mease told me about a woman at camp last year who became obsessed with him and had to be asked to leave. A few years back a father who was skipping out on child-support payments came to camp and was attacked by a grizzly bear while on patrol. News stations broadcast the story and alerted his ex-wife who, upon his release from the hospital, had him arrested. I could see why outliers would wander to camp, and actually met one within an hour of arriving last fall. The woman said she was from Arizona and seemed to talk more to herself than anyone else. She had dark leathery skin and at least one of her two front teeth was missing. Her cough, she told me, was the government’s fault—she had caught the super virus they were spraying over Oregon when she drove through. She also seemed convinced that federal agents had followed her there. I’m not

sure if the coordinators asked her to leave or if she left on her own. Either way, she was gone the next morning.

Besides a bed, a supportive community, and the bison, many join the campaign because of Yellowstone National Park—the nation’s first park and an enduring American icon of wildness, wildlife and the Old West. It is a place where you can see grizzly and black bears, wolverines and wolves, or at least be comforted by knowing they still live there. Geysers, hot springs and waterfalls infuse the dramatic plateaus. The landscape, like the bison, like the campaign, is resilient. It is a place of extremes and a remnant of our primitive, untamed selves, where, writes historian Alston Chase, “we might see what America was like before the fall.” And while Chase argues that Yellowstone, or at least parts of it, has fallen — that man versus nature and man versus man conflicts, exemplified, of course, by the throes of bison management, have buried the parks’ natural balance — its feral spirit persists. Like bison, ever roaming, ever reaching, ever resisting. Like BFC activists, who resist much of “tame” contemporary society with unkempt appearances, alternative lifestyles, and the primal blending of life and work and passion. The people who stay, the ones who ride out a winter with the campaign, are tough, like the environment around them. Indeed, both Yellowstone and the suffering or killing of bison, which volunteers inevitably witness, insist upon a sturdy spirit. Sturdy to deal with the external, as well as the internal—those who stay must face themselves.

A lot of people come, stay, and leave, and never come back. Many, it seems, move on because the lifestyle doesn't fit, at least not over the long term. Tyler Carlin lived at camp for two seasons. After graduating high school he was traveling the country by bus and an outstretched thumb. Between Berkeley and Santa Cruz he met a BFC volunteer who told him about the campaign. "I wasn't really doing anything so I hitched out," Carlin said. He had no idea where Montana was so he went from California to Utah to Colorado and then Wyoming before finding a bus that took him to West Yellowstone.

Carlin looks exactly as I had once imagined all BFC volunteers would. Thick blonde dreadlocks fall below his shoulders and, when he walks, swing beneath the blue bandana tied around his tanned face. On each side of worn Carhartts two knives hang in leather slings. He wears open-toed sandals long after it's cold enough for winter boots. When we first met I pegged him at 26 or 27, especially after hearing about his many travels and two winters working on a fishing boat in Alaska. He's 23.

Part of him wishes he could stay with the campaign all year, said Carlin. He can't, though. He's saving money to travel and backpack and maybe buy a pack horse and some land. Carlin respects those who do, revealing that they are part of the reason he comes back. "Mike and Josh and Danny—they are all such great guys. I have so much gratitude for them," he said.

Carlin also returns because it makes him stronger.

“I think that it is important to bear witness to the slaughter,” he said. “I think it is important to feel sadness. Watching the bison get captured and killed has really shaped me. I have had times where I was just extremely sorrowful about what happened. There’s been days when dozens of bison have been captured and I’ve seen a half dozen of my friends arrested. You feel helpless and sad, but it is one of those things that if it doesn’t kill you, it makes you stronger, just by living through it and being present.”

Carlin, as many volunteers are, is a traveler. He stores some of his stuff in Idaho where he and a girl he had met from the campaign lived for a bit. The rest he carries with him: a backpack, a sleeping bag, lace-up leather boots, a brown paper bag full of food and a camp chair. When not in Alaska or West Yellowstone, or visiting family in California, he stays with friends at the BFC in northern Montana. When passing through Missoula, Carlin finds room on a couch at one of two houses where mostly past-BFC volunteers live. In fact, a woman in one of the houses used to be my roommate, and I can attest to the BFC’s wide web of hospitality. I can’t count the number of nights I woke to strangers asleep on our living room floor, or helping themselves to coffee or food or liquor. I remember one morning, as I was gathering my things for yoga class, seeing a 30-something, scruffy stranger emptying a bottle of vodka that he had found in the freezer into a glass jar half-filled with orange juice. When I told my roommate about it she said that she had a hard time telling them to go. As another former volunteer who now lives in Missoula put it: “When you go to the BFC and out on patrol with someone, when you sit with them in the freezing cold for 10 hours watching buffalo, you bond. And later, when you reunite, it’s as if you are best friends. It’s like reuniting with a traveling partner.”

But like the contract of friendship between current and past volunteers, the urge and opportunity to lean too hard can be strong.

The bison hunt was divided into two seasons, and the second started on a Monday following a weekend of hazing that ended with more than 200 bison being held in capture facilities. Bison north of the park, Montana FWP's Kevin Arnold told me, were "causing commotion" on private property, and as is often the case around Gardiner, the pertinent property belonged to the Church Universal Triumphant. The religious sect owns 8,500 acres northwest of the park called the Royal Teton Ranch where church members "come to commune with Nature, God, and themselves." The church grazes cattle all year between Highway 89 and the steep, snowy Gardiner mountain range. (Year-round grazing in West Yellowstone, on the other hand, is impossible due to severe cold and snow.) Low, relatively lush and a direct path from the park along the Yellowstone River, the area naturally appeals to bison, which despite the \$13 million Montana and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation paid the church for "wildlife access" are not allowed. To allow bison on the property would mean relinquishing their grazing rights, which, the church said, would cost another \$2.8 million.

Less than a mile from church land and still within Yellowstone National Park is the third bison capture facility, which is in plain view from a BFC patrol across the river. On Sunday, the day before the second hunting season was to start, I sat with two volunteers watching five park officials on horseback prepare to haze 40 bison grazing

along the Yellowstone River. Closer to the mountains and farther from the water, nearly 200 bison grazed behind the capture pen's fences.

"Pick a spot in the middle of the herd," said Kim Achelon, a photographer and second-year volunteer staying in one of the two trailers BFC rents in Gardiner. "Once you find that spot relax your eyes."

I did, my sight slowly blurring brown. "Now let your imagination fill in the rest," he said. Brown spots spread into my periphery and bison seemingly swarmed the landscape. It was Achelon's way of glimpsing what 30 million bison must have looked like. It felt calm and beautiful, and then, suddenly, was gone. My focus returned as the herd started running west out of the park and towards the five men on horseback who stood along the park boundary. Less than 100 yards short of the relatively meek-looking barricade, the bison turned, and with the same speed that they used to cross the wide, grassy valley, veered towards the river and ran back deeper into the park.

The volunteers' expressions quickly oscillated from worry to relief. Achelon smiled. It is one of the ways bison give back, he said of the bison's rueful escape. We watched as the men on horseback trotted towards the pens without any bison in tow.

We spent the rest of the afternoon watching bison, and talking about music, summer jobs and school. Achelon said he was learning to tan hides and make a flute.

"The best way to really learn an instrument, its heart and soul, is to make it," he said. "People here understand that and are more than willing to sit down and help you. And they're excited about it; that's the great thing. They really want to help."

After a bit more reflection, he continued. "Yeah, you really get this artistic marrow flowing through the campaign." His comment garnered a smile from the other

volunteer in the car who agreed and added that's what's so neat about the BFC: you find people who say something like 'artistic marrow. "If America is supposed to be a melting pot," Achelon said, "then the BFC is the hot spot of the pot."

Around dusk we drove back to the trailer, where Achelon and I watched the other volunteers take turns at the "folding chair game." The goal was to navigate 360 degrees around a metal collapsible chair without touching the floor. Kim said he was too big for the game, and at 6 feet 5 inches tall with at least a half inch of fiery red hair on top of that, I figured he was probably right. Only one of the three pulled it off. The woman said she and Carlin had been practicing on patrol. Between bison hunts and keeping tabs on hazing and capturing, there are only so many long, cold hours of sunlight that one can watch bison graze.

It wasn't until the next morning that I saw my first dead buffalo. It was just after first light, and I and two volunteers followed the sound of gunshots over a half mile of rocky terrain, past sage brush and small herds of grazing bison. Over the two-way radio in Achelon's hand Mease said hunters on horseback were also looking for the animal, which must have wandered in our direction. None of the bison we saw looked hurt or even scared so we kept walking. And then, just over another ridge, we found it. Three of the six hunters were fastening rope to the bison's legs and then looping the other end around their saddle horns. A couple heave hoes was all it took for the heavy carcass to yield, leaving behind a trail of blood and a steaming pile of innards.

I waited as Achelon photographed the procession and then followed him back towards the road. Against the white snow and soft blue sky, Achelon's yellow jacket and red hair stood out even more than the camouflage jackets some of the hunters wore

beneath their orange vests. He wore -40 degree winter boots that Mease gave him after his toes were slightly frostbit last year.

A few minutes later Achelon stopped and looked around.

“You kind of get a sense of what this place must’ve looked like before people,” he said.

I agreed. With the exception of a few telephone poles, there was nothing but sage and snow and bison. To the south, you could look deep into Yellowstone beyond Gardiner’s gentle hills. Sepulcher Mountain and Electric Peak towered to the west. Again, at his suggestion, I let my imagination go, this time lingering. I understood why he did it – it was a way of balancing today’s fast-paced, seemingly unstoppable development with the peace of a more tranquil, less crowded past. It was his way of coping.

Eventually, I had to go. The volunteers made a small fire at the meadow’s edge and likely sat until dark, after legal shooting elapsed. By the end of the hunt, 40 bison were harvested. The park service stopped the hunt once more to corral bison into their capture facility. Hundreds, escorted by agents from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security after Montana Gov. Brian Schweitzer said the state shouldn’t be involved in the transport of bison to slaughter, were killed. The story was followed by Montana Public Radio, NewWest.net and one or two others, and, of course, the BFC, which plastered its website with photos and clips and bold headlines about the slaughter, the injustice, the travesty. So far this year, more than 1,200 bison have been held at the Stephens Creek Facility and 849 have been killed, proving Mease’s comparison between this and the hard winter true. And while the hunt and hazing and slaughtering have roused an air of chaos

around West Yellowstone and Gardiner, bison continue to walk in and out of the park as they always have. And the BFC, as it has for the last nine years, continues to follow.

Article Two

Yellowstone Bison and Brucellosis

In Montana, the assumption is that every bison in Yellowstone National Park is sick— that they have brucellosis, the bacterial disease that can cause cattle to miscarry, develop arthritis, produce less milk and become infertile. This is how it’s been for more than a decade, since the Montana Legislature defined Yellowstone bison as “a species in need of disease control” in 1995, and this is likely how it will remain until brucellosis is wiped out.

And for bison, this assumption means staying in the park, and *away* from cattle.

“As long as they are in the park, no action is taken,” says Montana Department of Livestock Public Information Officer Karen Cooper. “Once they exit Yellowstone, the agencies move them to protect cattle from the spread of disease.”

All of Yellowstone bison, however, are not sick. Actually, no one really knows how many of the approximately 5,000 animals have brucellosis. What bison managers and scientists do know, though, is that between 40 and 50 percent of the herd carries brucellosis antibodies, and while having an infection and having antibodies is not the same thing, current tests prove nothing more.

THE PLAN

Bison are hazed, or *moved* as Cooper says, under the provisions of the Interagency Bison Management Plan, which since 2000 divides management between two state and three federal agencies: the Montana Department of Livestock, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, the U.S. Forest Service, the National Park Service and the USDA’s Animal and Plant Health Information Services. The plan is not a brucellosis eradication plan, rather a bison management plan with the dual purpose of disease

prevention and maintaining a wild bison population. And as such, says Al Nash, chief information officer of the park, the goals must be intertwined—wildness can never trump disease control, nor can disease control ever undermine wildness.

With some exception, bison follow two main migration routes out of the park into the state of Montana each winter: west along the Madison River corridor into the West Yellowstone basin, and north along the Yellowstone River towards the Gardiner basin. In each area, the plan establishes three zones with varying degrees of bison tolerance—zone one is open to bison and is largely confined to the park; zone two is open to some bison sometimes, and is restricted to land just outside the park; and zone three, beyond one and two and closer to cattle, is off-limits. These zones are maintained by either chasing (called “hazing”), capturing and/or sending bison to slaughter depending on the number of bison already outside of the park, as well as the animals’ willingness to stay where they are allowed.

All in all, Yellowstone bison are tolerated to some degree on roughly 300,000 acres of private and public land west and north of the park. In reality, however, says Bill O’Connell, an outfitter in Bozeman and member of the Gallatin Wildlife Association, bison only use a portion of that.

“Only about 60,000 of the acres ... are actually used by bison,” he said this fall regarding allowable habitat for the bison hunt, which totaled to 460,000 acres. “The rest is unsuitable; it is mostly steep, mountainous terrain inhospitable to bison in the winter.”

THE CONFLICT

The interagency plan has garnered much criticism in the last six years. The agencies, however, in a recently published review, consider the plan a success. From 2000 to 2005, they reported, the Yellowstone bison herd grew from 2,616 to 4,054 individuals. However, more bison on limited habitat with limited forage has meant more animals attempting to migrate out of the park, which has meant more hazing, capture and slaughter. During the 2000/2001 season, there were 108 hazing operations west of the park and three north of the park (each involving between 1 and 178 animals), and six bison sent to slaughter; in the 2004/2005 season, 39 and 156 hazing operations (each involving between 1 and 345 animals) took place north and west of the park respectively, and approximately 100 bison were slaughtered. According to the report, however, hazing and slaughtering have paid off: Montana maintained its brucellosis-free status.

What the agencies call success, though, critics call too much. And domestication.

“If dead buffalo are a measure of cattle protection, the plan is doing a great job,” the Buffalo Field Campaign recently wrote on its website where it keeps an ongoing tally of bison slaughtered since 1985. “[We] still don’t have a truly free-roaming population of buffalo, not even in America’s first national park, where crossing an invisible line means death.”

Critics also question the real risk of disease transmission — because brucellosis has never spread from wild bison to cattle, they say it likely never will. Plus, according to the BFC’s 2004 newsletter, tissue cultures indicate that only about 20 percent of those bison that carry brucellosis antibodies (which, again, is roughly half the herd) actually have the disease, meaning only about 10 percent of the Yellowstone bison herd is

infected. (According to Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks' website, however, since culture tests show that approximately 46 percent of exposed animals actually have brucellosis, it is more likely that 25 percent of the herd is infected.) Following this logic, the real reason for the plan, some opponents say, is to protect grass: ranchers just don't want bison grazing where cattle otherwise would.

Others point to the hazing of bull bison as proof of the plan's faulty, pro-cattle premise.

"I don't understand the hazing," says Kerrie Taggart, who lives on Horse Butte, the stretch of land west of the park where bison come each spring to calve. "There aren't any cattle here in the winter. Plus, most of the bison are bulls anyway."

Even the agencies' five-year review calls the risk of transmission from bull bison "logically small," and says that "pregnant female bison from January through parturition season, which typically ends in early June" pose the highest threat. Still, says Tom Linfield, Montana's state veterinarian, because bulls are a risk at all, they must be managed.

"Brucellosis bacteria can remain viable in the environment up to 80 days," he says. And while the disease is primarily transmitted through bison afterbirth, it may also be spread through the urine or feces of infected bulls. Plus, he says, bulls attract those bison that do pose a risk out of the park.

Another point of contention for critics is the high cost of the interagency plan. In 2006, the USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, which provides most state and federal agencies with brucellosis-control related funding, spent more than \$10

million controlling the disease. Montana's Department of Livestock alone spent approximately \$3.5 million between 2000 and 2004.

In the long term, though, APHIS insists that preventative measures are inexpensive relative to what a brucellosis outbreak would cost.

“Annual losses from lowered milk production, aborted calves and pigs, and reduced breeding efficiency have decreased from more than \$400 million in 1952 to less than \$1 million today,” APHIS reports on its website. “Studies have shown that, if brucellosis eradication program efforts were stopped, the costs of producing beef and milk would increase by an estimated \$80 million annually in less than 10 years.”

In fact, according to a 2005 park service study, more than \$3.5 billion private and public funds have gone towards eradicating the disease in the last 70 years. In Montana alone, says Montana DOL officer Karen Cooper, more than \$30 million was spent eradicating brucellosis from domestic cattle between 1934 and 1985.

Still, critics insist that bison rather than cattle are so heavily managed because of the deep and powerful pockets of the livestock industry.

“Brucellosis is strictly a cattle problem, not because it is fatal, but because it affects production, which affects marketing,” Robert Hoskins, one such critic and president of the Dubois Wildlife Association, wrote on the online magazine New West. “It is an economic disease for the livestock industry that has largely been managed through the implementation of various controls and restrictions on the industry.”

And finally, the plan's critics often fault bison management relative to elk management: if elk also carry brucellosis, why are they and not bison allowed to roam free? Elk, after all, not bison, have infected cattle in Idaho and Wyoming.

Critics maintain that elk management (or what many perceive as a lack thereof) only justifies a pro-cattle corruption theory: elk aren't managed with heavy hands that reign in bison because elk hunting generates enormous profits for the state.

Instead of the Interagency Bison Management Plan, the Buffalo Field Campaign and other pro-bison advocate a three-year "time-out" from all hazing and slaughtering of bison. They also suggest that instead of managing a herd of between 3000 and 5000 wild bison, already domestic cattle should be managed with stronger fences, vaccinations, and cattle relocations.

But while the plan can change, says Montana FWP's Mel Frost, it is the result of more than a decade of compromises and concessions and isn't going away.

A HISTORY OF CONFLICT

Brucellosis was first detected in Yellowstone bison in 1917. Most accounts say the disease, which originally came from European cattle, made its way to Yellowstone through dairy cows kept for park visitors and employees. By the 1930s, brucellosis was rampant in cattle across the West and considered a serious problem by the nation's burgeoning livestock industry. A joint state and federal brucellosis-control program was created in 1934 to eradicate the disease and establish standards requiring all domestic livestock to be infection-free for one year before garnering a "brucellosis-free" status. Those bereft of such a status would face stringent and costly trade sanctions. From 1934 when the park reported around 1,000 bison to 1967 when 397 were counted, the Yellowstone herd was frequently culled inside the park. After 1967, managers decided to let nature regulate the park's population, but continued to restrict most bison to the park

by shooting wanderers. In the 1970s and 80s, bison managers met several times to discuss long-term bison management. In 1989, negotiations for a lasting, adaptive plan began, but by 1999, a decade later, were at a standstill.

“We were at an impasse,” says park biologist Rick Wallen. “No one was willing to budge. The feds wanted one thing and the state wanted something different.”

Finally, says Wallen, after lawsuits and impartial mediation, enough common ground was found during the following year. And while the result may not be a management panacea, he says, it is always improving.

Still, some things, at least as long as brucellosis persists in wildlife around Yellowstone, may never be resolved, like aligning five agencies with such distinct missions.

“When there is a high population in the park, we are comfortable,” says Wallen of the park service. “When there is a low population in the park, though the livestock industry may be comfortable, we are uncomfortable.”

Likewise, says Al Nash, who also works with the park service, what may be beneficial to livestock interests may inherently conflict with an agency in the business of conservation, wildlife and recreation.

“Our decision to open a capture facility is not without a great deal of discussion and revision of circumstances,” says Nash. “I don’t even know how to describe how difficult it is for our field staff to recommend to the [park] superintendent and how difficult it is for her to send them to slaughter. It is certainly not the type of situation we expected to find ourselves in when we came to work for the park service in Yellowstone.”

This year especially, says Nash, was challenging. Not only was it the first time a bison hunt was held in Montana in 15 years, but because of the herd's growing population and limited forage within the park, more bison than usual migrated out.

“We captured 939 bison this year and sent 849 to slaughter,” Nash said earlier this spring. By April, the total number of bison killed in the hunt, slaughtered or lethally removed by managers had risen to nearly 950, the most bison killed in one season since the 1996/1997 winter when a deep and heavy snow pack inside the park forced thousands of bison to migrate to lower elevations and caused more than 1,000 bison deaths; the total number of bison captured and held by the park service topped 1,200. Additionally, the 2005/2006 season was the first year of the interagency bison quarantine program. Before summer, agencies hope to have 100 healthy calves in isolated pastures outside of the park, which after three years and assuming the animals remain disease free, will be bred to create wild bison herds around the country. And while proponents applaud the program for restoring bison in historic habitat across the Great Plains, critics worry it will domesticate wild bison and their offspring.

Meanwhile, managers advise patience. Mel Frost with Montana FWP says that while she respects a broad range of views on bison management, critics should understand that bison management strives to help, not hurt bison—as each progressive goal is met, more public land will be open to more bison.

“Everything we can do is trying to make a place for wild bison in the state of Montana,” she said.

Article Three

The Campaign, *From the Outside Looking In*

The first time I saw a bison up close I was struck by its presence—by its stature, but also its features. There was something ancient, even prehistoric about him, and, honestly, something quite scary. I was working and living outside of Yellowstone National Park, and between me and my tent stood an enormous bull bison. I remember replaying co-workers’ warnings in my head — *give those animals plenty of space; they may appear docile, even friendly, but are unpredictable and can be dangerous.* I backed up slowly and circled widely off the trail, and for weeks gave that bull room. When we did pass, I spoke gently, hoping that my voice would keep his placid, penetrating stare from turning aggressive. And it seemed to work. By August, I proudly announced that the bison and I peacefully coexisted. To some, I even said that we were friends.

The first time I heard about “the harassment and slaughter of Yellowstone bison” was at a farmers’ market in Missoula, Montana. Two Buffalo Field Campaign activists stood behind a table crowded with pamphlets and newsletters and pictures of bison. I listened as the activists talked about Montana’s intolerance — about how each time the shaggy, brown animals tried to enter the state the Montana Department of Livestock chased or captured or shot them. Later, at one of several BFC presentations that I attended, I watched video clips of bison goring themselves and each other in frantic attempts to escape the narrow metal walls of capture pens. I was affected and angry and signed petitions in support of their cause.

In the years since, I have heard a lot about Yellowstone bison and the campaign. I have heard the activists described as “self-proclaimed buffalo hippies,” “professional enviro-meddler[s],” or animal-rights activists who hunt. I have read accounts labeling their tone “righteous” or “nightmarish,” and likening their cabin to a military camp, as

well as those deeming the campaign “innovative” and BFC volunteers “responsible members of the communities where they live.” And now, years after that summer with the bison and of first learning about the BFC, I wonder about the two: I wonder how well these people protect the Yellowstone bison that I care so much about, the animals that these activists have helped me care so much about.

Ultimately, the campaign seeks change from the legislators and bureaucrats and wildlife biologists in Washington and Helena. Before shifting policy, however, they must shift perceptions. As individuals, neighbors or as a campaign, their ability to open minds to themselves and about their work is fundamental to their greater success; people’s willingness to think differently of the Buffalo Field Campaign hints at a willingness to think differently about bison management. How and what those who live near them, work with them, or shape bison policy, even skeptics and supporters, even me, think about the campaign, then becomes paramount.

I ask, then, *what do we think?*

And I, for one, answer *I don’t know*. I waver between respect for the group that Bozeman, Montana, reporter Todd Wilkinson has called one of the longest continuous environmental protests in the nation, and chagrin at the public fervor, at their highly emotional and confrontational style. If their intensity—both their adoration of buffalo and loathing of the Montana Department of Livestock— makes me, an open-minded 27-year-old woman with a pro-bison disposition shift in my seat, I wonder about the ranchers, retirees and families that live near them.

So I ask them, *what are your impressions?*

Jo Anne Stovall is a petite, mostly-blind woman in her 80s who adores the campaign that affectionately calls her “Grandma.” “Mike and his crew have been one of the best things that have happened to his place,” says Stovall of BFC co-founder Mike Mease. “I’ve never seen a group of kids so sincere in my life.”

Stovall’s log home sits on five of the 160 acres her parents homesteaded more than 100 years ago. She and her late husband built the house in 1963, when, she says, “we still had the joy of animals” on Horse Butte, the narrow peninsula west of Yellowstone National Park sandwiched between Hebgen Lake to the north and the Madison River to the south. Stovall loves the bison, always has, and she is grateful to the campaign for defending them.

“A lot of people in town look down on them as hippies, but what do they expect?” she asks. “Do they expect farmers to come in and shower before getting their smokes in town? Come on people, let’s wake up.” Sure, she admits, some are a little odd, maybe even disreputable looking. “I told one guy to take the bone out of his nose or go down to Africa,” she says, adding that for the most part, though, they are “good-natured kids” just doing what makes them tick. She instead saves judgment for neighbors that don’t want bison or the BFC around. “If you can’t adjust to the wildlife,” she says, “well then you better move on.”

Less than half a mile from Stovall in the Yellowstone Village subdivision, a yellow sign with “Bison Safe Zone” written in black hangs from **Kerrie Taggart’s** front porch. Taggart formed Horse Butte Neighbors of Bison in 2003 to protest the Department of Livestock’s chasing of buffalo off the butte. And while most of her “conservative” neighbors support her cause, disliking hazing is not the same as liking the field campaign.

One local man even warned her not to align too much with the BFC. People might start to talk, he said. “A lot of people called them misfits—a bunch of hippies that don’t know what they’re doing,” she says. “A lot of people are turned off because they dress and live differently. But I learned early on not to judge a book by its cover and decided ‘OK, those are people I need to get to know.’”

One day when Mike Mease called her up to thank her for a protest petition she had sent the governor, Taggart asked if she could come over for a visit.

“I was surprised at how organized the cabin and their operations were,” she says. She felt very uncomfortable at first—“I stuck out like a sore thumb”—but, after a while, forgot about the different clothes, the dreadlocks and the smell of incense. “I started to realize all we shared in common, [and that] there are a lot of misconceptions about them.”

Like, for instance, that the activists are uneducated.

“A lot of them have college degrees, and some even master’s degrees. I have seen Josh blow away so many guys at meetings,” says Taggart of the campaign’s policy coordinator Josh Osher. “It’s cheap entertainment for me. They have a good thing going on over there.”

“It’s a good place for kids, a good learning experience, especially for kids who are cocky. It gives them a sense of purpose and confidence,” she says. “I wanted to send some of the kids from West Yellowstone over there but the parents said no way.”

“This community is very conservative and [the campaign] has to use extreme measures to get people to pay attention,” she says.

In downtown West Yellowstone, at the retail store Madison Crossing, clerks **Roberta Kehl** and **Liz Watt** think the campaign can be *too* radical. “Like chaining themselves to DOL vehicles and sitting in a fire tower,” says Watt. “I’ve even heard they’ve made threats to federal employees.” Though neither woman knows any of the activists, they hear that the group is a bunch of new-age hippies with trust funds. Whatever or whoever they really are, both women agree, the campaign could work “in a more intelligent way” and not “try to stand out so much.” They recall the time the Olympic torch came through town in 2002 and protestors wearing cardboard bison masks interrupted what the woman called a touching moment a local pastor was having on stage with the torch and his family. “They stopped right in the middle of it, trying to get their 15 minutes of fame,” says Watt shaking her head. “That really upset a lot of people.” Nodding, Kehl figures they probably turn off tourists, which isn’t good in a tourist town.

Across the way librarian **Mary Girard** thinks “those kids” are all right. They are part of the community, she says, and from what she understands, though she doesn’t know any of them, they are passionate and do a good job. Personal hygiene is another thing, she says as she leans back and plugs her nose with one hand and uses the other to vigorously fan the air around her.

Down the street and around the corner at Wild West Pizzeria, owner **Aaron Hecht** says he likes the activists and is friends with some. Their constant hostility, though, is frustrating. “This is a pretty conservative community, and I think people are pretty tired of seeing the BFC out there protesting anything they don’t 100 percent agree with,” he says. Instead of always being so confrontational, Hecht wishes the campaign would put aside its insistence upon always being right and open their minds to

compromise. Some sacrifices, like wearing a suit and tie and some deodorant when they meet with the governor, he adds, would not only be courteous, but helpful to their cause.

Montana Gov. Brian Schweitzer has met with the advocacy group three times since he took office a year and a half ago to discuss bison management and the BFC's opposition to Montana's first bison hunt in 15 years. The group's opposition to the hunt wasn't about hunting—many of the activists hunt deer and elk— but habitat, and in protest, the group pledged to document as much of the three-month season as they could. And while they promised not to interfere, filming says Aaron Hecht and some hunters, is interference enough.

“There is a tragic side of hunting,” says the restaurateur, who hunts deer and elk locally. Often, when animals are in a group and one is shot, the others will surround the dying animal. What appears like a grieving circle, says Hecht, can be difficult to watch. Plus, it can take a long time for an animal to die. Hecht felt bad for the 17 year-old kid who shot the first bison of the season with BFC volunteers and other news cameras flanking him. “If someone was over my shoulder when I was hunting, that would make me pretty nervous,” he says.

Local impressions are based on local talk, or on seeing the activists at the one grocery store in West Yellowstone, or driving by BFC volunteers standing on the side of Highway 191 between Horse Butte and downtown holding yellow and black buffalo crossing signs. These impressions matter—they trickle up and out and inform friends and family elsewhere. This fall, for better or worse, they also informed hunters.

So I ask Montana bison hunters, *what are your impressions of the BFC?*

I got a list of tag holders, dug up as many numbers as I could, and starting dialing. **Darryld Pepprock** of Stevensville, Montana, was one of two who called back. Pepprock wasn't surprised by the BFC presence and media circus revolving around the hunt, though he doubted that the initial buzz— the Billings Gazette reported 14 journalists in Gardiner on the first day— would be sustained. He wasn't surprised at the 20-minute discrepancy between the press' and the campaign's account of the teenager's first shot and the wounded animal's death, either. They have an agenda, he says. What upset him were the false perceptions people had of hunters stemming from the left-leaning opposition. "[T]here are a lot of misconceptions about us as bloodthirsty Neanderthals waiting at the park boundary with a beer in one hand and a bazooka in the other," says Pepprock. He, like hunter **Charles Clough** from Choteau, Montana, a former Montana FWP employee and the other bison tag-holder who returned my call, value wildlife and hope that the hunt secures more habitat for bison. Both men say they respect the BFC's position, but are wary of their presence.

"Hunting is one of those things," says Clough. "It is private, and I enjoy doing it by myself. I don't appreciate the cameras." Cameras make him nervous, he says, and could even lead to a bad shot.

Disparaging stereotypes weren't just swirling around hunters this fall. One hunter told BFC volunteer Kim Achelon that he was surprised to see the activist unarmed. Apparently protestors of the state's last bison hunt in 1991 assaulted hunters with ski poles.

Beyond Yellowstone National Park and the echo of those who live locally or who hunt bison, pervasive regional and national impressions of the campaign take more than

hearsay. They hinge on media coverage. For those of us in Missoula, 280 miles and a four-hour drive from Gardiner or West Yellowstone, or for those in Portland, Oregon, or my family back East, we need newspaper profiles, syndicated editorials, National Public Radio blurbs. It is likely that I, as a college student studying wildlife and practicing animal-rights activism nine years ago, didn't hear about the "hard winter" or the campaign because either the national news didn't cover it or because the Internet wasn't much more than a real good idea. In fact, according to BFC news archives, coverage hasn't always been what it is now: between 1999 and 2000, sixteen articles are listed on the BFC's website as relevant, and only eight and six for 2001 and 2002 respectively. Between 2003 and 2004, the number of relevant articles jumped from 60 to 128, and since last September, more than 180 articles or other instances of news coverage have mentioned the campaign or some facet of Yellowstone's bison controversy. Stories have appeared in the Salt Lake Tribune, the Washington Post and the Canton Daily Ledger in Illinois, as well as the Wichita Eagle in Kansas, the Tribune in Ames, Iowa, and the Idaho Statesman. KGNU Independent Radio in Denver, Montana Public Radio and NPR's World Talk Radio have all mentioned the campaign. On Oct. 17, 2005, my mother called to tell me that she read about the Buffalo Field Campaign in the New York Times.

Depiction of the campaign by the press as advocates, activists or "meddlers," of course, hinges on the press' perception of the campaign—do the activists know what they're talking about? Is the Buffalo Field Campaign a credible source? And to some extent, do they like or dread contacting them?

So I ask reporters, *what are your impressions of the campaign?*

Scott McMillion has covered the Buffalo Field Campaign for the Bozeman Daily Chronicle since the group's inception. Over the years, the campaign has professionalized, he says. "There used to be a lot of weeping, literally, women down on their knees raising their hands to the high heavens wailing for the buffalo." Now, they understand the complexity of the issue, have a good website, and get their PR out faster than the government, he says. "If the government rounds up bison in the morning, by two or three or even sooner, the BFC has a press release out and the bureaucrats are still wandering around trying to figure out what happened," he says. Some volunteers are still "starry eyed," while others are "completely divorced from reality," but, he acknowledges, on the whole, the group and the individuals they attract have matured.

Reporter **Jennifer McKee** agrees that the group has grown up, though it can be hard to tell by just looking at them. "I can understand why [their appearances] bother some neighbors," she says. "Nowhere are passions more inflamed than there, outside the park, and to have these folks come and do nothing to fit into the community ... I can see why they take it personally."

McKee covers politics in Helena for Lee Enterprises, which owns five Montana dailies including the Missoulian and Billings Gazette. "Their appearance is very jarring as opposed to the button-up dress code of the Legislature," she says. "You kind of have to play that game in Helena. It is government and a formal process, and they are very informal. In 2003, when Republicans were in charge, that look was counterproductive. The delivery and what they say was very professional, it was just that their attire was so off-putting. A lot of people won't say anything, but you can tell that they weren't taken very seriously because they looked like a bunch of crazy hippies."

“I mean the patchouli is out of control,” she adds. “That just isn’t done. You don’t wear patchouli to the Legislature.”

Being media savvy means more than garnering coverage. It also means guiding that coverage, and sometimes it means deciding the time and place and terms of that coverage.

In December 2005, a month into the bison hunt, BFC coordinators Stephanie Seay and Dan Brister gathered alongside four other pro-bison speakers beneath the capitol’s rotunda. Brister’s long, scraggly hair was tied back and his plaid flannel shirt was tucked neatly into khakis. He wore Birkenstock sandals. Seay wore an all-black pant suit and her thin brown hair fell neatly across her shoulders. As both McMillion and McKee had generally remarked, the activists appeared professional. Compared even to the first time I heard Seay speak in Missoula a year ago, her voice seemed stronger, less on the verge of tears. The fragrance of patchouli, though there, was faint. As legislators milled between meetings or scurried from one long hall to another, the speakers took turns at the podium behind which images of bison hazing and hunting flashed on a pull-down screen. Many people stopped and watched and left, but few stuck around. Among those who did was Representative **Mike Jopeck**, a Democrat from Whitefish.

So I ask him, *what is your impression?*

The footage was disturbing, he said, but clearly pushing an agenda. “I just hope this hunt isn’t so sensationalized by [the BFC] that it will affect the tourist economy,” he says. Jopeck acknowledged the group’s passion, saying that the advocates’ presence in the capitol and role in politics in general is important. “You need extremes to moderate

folks,” he says. “Activists, whether animals rights or tax lobbyists to the far right, bring issues to the table. Without them, these issues wouldn’t be on our radar.”

In 1995, the Montana Legislature shifted Yellowstone bison management from the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks to the state’s Department of Livestock. In 2000, the Interagency Bison Management Plan was passed and shifted control again. Now, in addition to the Montana DOL and FWP, the National Park Service, the USDA’s Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, and the U.S. Forest Service manage Yellowstone bison. To varying degrees, employees from these agencies are on the ground with bison, charting bison administration and fielding queries or criticism from the BFC.

So I ask them, *what are their impressions of the campaign?*

Montana FWP spokeswoman **Mel Frost** says that while the BFC is certainly one of many valid voices in the bison controversy — “there is value to a full spectrum of views” — managers are tied to the plan, and the plan isn’t changing anytime soon. Of one of the campaign’s chief complaints — that a livestock agency has a hand in bison management — Frost says that isn’t budging anytime soon either.

“The authority is brucellosis. If the bison didn’t have the disease, the DOL wouldn’t be involved,” says Frost. And while the plan may not be perfect, she says, it is the result of more than 10 years of debate, lawsuits, and mediation.

Al Nash, chief of public affairs for Yellowstone National Park, agrees. However, because the bison plan is adaptable, the campaign’s protest can and *is* playing a role in management, he says. At the end of each season, he says, all of the agencies involved come together and discuss ways to improve the following year’s strategies.

“Robust discussion of this complex issue has a great value,” he says.

“Opportunities exist for us to look for ways to find a better way.”

Also, the campaign and other interests groups contribute to what Nash calls “the debate on bigger issues.” Like, for instance, if bison, being the fast, powerful, wild animals they are, even have a place outside a national park: Could a truly feral, free-roaming herd safely co-exist with people and domestic animals in Montana?

Dr. Tom Linfield is Montana’s state veterinarian and a DOL employee. Linfield says BFC’s “routine interference” has been bothersome over the years. “They have done a lot to disrupt management and sometimes it makes it hard to do my job,” he says of having to “cherry pick some kid out of a tripod” or deal with a road block that the campaign has been set up. “There has been less stuff like that in last couple of years. Now they just tend to be everywhere filming. Certainly anywhere that there are bison you have the BFC, and also erroneous reporting of some of the details.”

Clearly, in matters of policy, what legislators like Mike Jopeck think makes a difference. Clearly, in matters of wildlife management and disease control, what Frost and Nash and Linfield think makes a difference. In matters of Yellowstone bison policy, though, which straddles state and federal politics and is convoluted in hundreds of pages of bureaucratic text, what the governor thinks may make the most difference.

So I ask Gov. Schweitzer, *what is your impression?*

“I gotta tell you, I respect their passion,” **Gov. Brian Schweitzer** says. He calls the bison activists cordial and his relationship with them professional. As far as their untraditional dress, it doesn’t bother him one bit.

“Well look, I am the last governor to criticize anyone that is working in a way that’s not the status quo. My office doesn’t,” he says referring to the blue jeans and cowboy hat he wears to work, and his ever-present black and white border collie.

Regarding Yellowstone bison management, Schweitzer wishes public and private land owners would allow the animals more tolerance. He understands why they don’t, though, repeating their well-known fear that brucellosis will spread from bison to cattle. He respects that, he says, just as he respects the campaign, which he has shown more respect towards than his predecessors. “The previous administration refused to meet with them,” says Schweitzer. “Within the first week we were meeting in my office, and I have met with them several times since.”

In fact, within days of that first meeting last January and Schweitzer’s publicized misgivings about a trial bison hunt slated to start less than a week later, Montana’s Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission cancelled the month-long season. And again just a few months ago, Schweitzer took a turn at bison management by forbidding Montana officials to transport bison from the Yellowstone’s Stephens Creek bison capture facility to the slaughterhouse.

“I told the park that we are not going to ship bison caught in Yellowstone National Park to slaughter. The appropriate agency for that is federal,” he says. “‘You figure it out,’ I told them.”

Schweitzer says he hears all sides of an issue before making a decision, and in terms of Yellowstone bison, the governor has done more than just listen to the BFC. He has heard them.

Article Four

Confrontation

As I pictured it, he typed in the dark, before dawn as the other activists slept, or at night, after a long day monitoring bison at the edge of Yellowstone National Park. I imagined heavy sighs as he flipped through the articles stacked beside his computer, each bearing my byline, each of my transgressions scrawled over in red.

“I finally got to read some of your work,” Mike Mease wrote to me in January, “and I am wondering what you are trying to do. I think discrediting us is in your vision and I would like to talk about it before your next visit.”

Now, months later, the words have lost their charge. They are accusing, but not harsh — not how they felt when I first read them, or repeated them over and over in my head during the four-and-a-half hour drive from Missoula to the Buffalo Field Campaign’s satellite office in a trailer north of Gardiner, Montana. It was no wonder that by the time I pulled into the dirt driveway I had chewed all the fingernail tips off my right hand.

To my relief, no cars were out front. No one must be home, I thought (and hoped) until I opened the car door and heard the muffled base of a stereo. Still, I was pretty sure that no one had seen me and that if I closed the door quietly enough I could sneak away without anyone knowing I had been there at all. I needed the extra time with the campaign, though, which I was profiling for my master’s thesis in journalism. Besides, I had received a voice mail from Mease the day before saying it was “water under the bridge” and that I could come and stay with them if I still wanted. But as I walked up to the narrow porch and stood in front of the door, I felt as if I was in middle school being prodded by my mother’s words—“you made your bed, now you have to lie in it”— into

homeroom to face my girlfriends who, over a late-night conference call the night before, had decided that something I said or did was bitchy and were now mad at me.

The man who opened the door looked in his mid-twenties and very much like most of the BFC activists I had met in the last few months: shoulder-length hair, leather boots, Carhartts, and delighted at the prospect of another volunteer. I told him I was there as a journalist, not an activist, and that Mike Mease had invited me. Mease was in Bozeman, he said, but I was more than welcome to tag along with the other volunteers this afternoon, which I did, and spent the next four hours watching bison graze along the Yellowstone River. Most of the brown, shaggy animals, however, were not quite the vision of wildness one might expect of a free roaming bison herd. In fact, about 200 were not “free” at all; they were confined to the tall metal gates and chain linked fences of the Stephens Creek Capture Facility just inside the park. They had been corralled after migrating onto private property and being too close to cattle, which was forbidden on account of the bacterial disease brucellosis that was considered prevalent in Yellowstone bison. Though the disease has never spread from bison to cattle in the wild, if bison and cattle mingle and cattle get sick, Montana’s livestock industry would suffer.

The volunteers told me that the bison behind the fences would be shipped to slaughter soon. The others, they said, the ones grazing farther south in the park, would probably be captured and killed as well. I remember thinking their fatalism a bit dramatic. Now I know it wasn’t; it was just true. By the end of the spring, almost 850 bison were captured in that facility and trucked to slaughter.

We drove back to the trailer around dusk, and while someone made dinner, the rest of us stood around the kitchen talking and listening to music. One of the volunteers

took out his laptop and showed me pictures of “Grandpa,” an old bull bison he thought exemplified the species’ majesty and wildness and would help me see why the campaign activists did what they did for the last nine years—why they patrolled from sun-up to sun-down, nine months out of the year, video-documenting the chasing and capturing of Yellowstone bison. I took notes as he clicked on image after image of bison running or playing, unaware that I was thinking “*WOW!*” until I heard myself say it. Then he clicked on a photo and paused. It was taken from above a capture pen and looked down onto the rounded brown backs of more than a dozen bison crammed between tall wooden sideboards. When he zoomed in, I could see a bleeding laceration on one bull’s shoulder and another across his side. It was from another bison, the volunteer told me, from the two ramming into each other as they tried to escape. When I leaned closer, I could see into the bull’s eyes, strained open from behind a thick metal crossbar. This time, aware of my thoughts, I bit my lip to keep from gasping “*Holy Shit!*” and “*These are wild animals?!*” Just as he was finishing, headlights cast a glare across the screen and immediately threw me back into the visceral throes of grade-school anxiety.

I looked up and with a big, hopeful smile, said hello to Mike Mease. He passed behind me, his arms full of groceries, his eyes avoiding my gaze, and quietly said hi. After three or four more trips from the car, Mease asked everyone to meet in the living room. The trailer was small—two main rooms partially divided by a wall with three small bedrooms and a bathroom jutting from either end—so it didn’t take more than a few minutes for everyone to gather. Mease asked that I explain exactly why I was there. I said that I already had that afternoon, and could feel my voice shrink against his, which seemed louder and more abrasive than I remembered it. He said he for one wanted to hear

it again, as there had been some confusion. As I glanced around the room, I knew the afternoon's casual ease was gone. The volunteers' confused stares felt accusing. Perhaps they were thinking about what they had told me, thinking they shouldn't have said so much, or maybe that they wouldn't have if they had known.

This was my third stay with the campaign, I said, but my first trip to Gardiner. I unfolded my legs so that my feet touched the floor and my back was erect as I spoke. I came, I said, because I wanted to see how the activists and hunters would interact tomorrow when the second bison hunting season started. I talked about my thesis, the articles I had written for two local publications, and my interest in the campaign, which was inspired years ago when I lived with a former volunteer. When I finished the room was quiet, so I told them how impressed I was by their dedication, by the years spent working so hard, by the ability to cope with such loss. I said I didn't think I could do it and was interested in writing and thinking about those who could.

Mease sat in a chair to my left facing the opposite wall. He told the others what he had written to me and that the rest of the coordinators in West Yellowstone felt the same way. And because no one in the room had actually read what I wrote, he gave a couple examples, like when I wrote that there were only two reporters at a press conference that the BFC held in Helena last month, or that I only chose to include criticism from an interview I had with a friend of his. It wasn't fair, Mease said, that after a hard day in the field he had to come home and worry about being under "the scrutiny of the pen." His work demanded too much from him as it was, he said. He needed a place where he could just be.

I looked down into the open notebook on my lap and awkwardly wedged it between the dog-hair covered armrest and the worn cushion beneath me. I nodded because I understood, but mostly because I couldn't speak. I was too afraid that my voice would waiver under the pressure rising in my chest. I managed a muffled apology, not for what I wrote, but for his perception. I didn't mean to do anything wrong, I said, and was sorry he felt betrayed. And I was, I meant what I said, but I was also sorry and angry that he had said I could come here, and then, on his turf and his terms, denounced my work and intentions. I was also humiliated at the tears streaming down my cheeks. Then he told me that I had already taken too much of the group's energy away from the buffalo and that it would be best if I didn't stay with them that night.

A phone call for Mease interrupted the heavy silence that followed. As Mease left, the volunteers started talking about the next day: who would patrol where and what to expect for those who hadn't yet seen a bison shot. I walked to the bathroom to blow my nose and splash water over my eyes. I could still hear Mease on the phone when I came out, and hoping to leave before he was finished, quickly grabbed my stuff. As I left I asked the volunteers if I could still shadow them in the morning, and each one immediately, perhaps empathetically, nodded yes. I said I'd be there at 6 a.m. and ducked out the door.

I cried as I drove to the motel. *Why didn't I just wait to publish anything until I was done reporting?! Why did I come down here?! Why did I have to cry?!!* I swore I would never write about the environment or activism again. From now, I would stick to stuff I cared less about, or that was at least less controversial.

A week later I wrote a story about water quality in Missoula for the online magazine *New West*. I couldn't help it. I still can't. I write about the environment because it's what I think about it; it's what I care about; it's what I want to impassion others about. But journalism is supposed to be unbiased, objective, or at least that's what I've always heard and assumed. And if so, does objectivity preclude my professional inclination towards the natural world? Must I really steer clear of this and other issues close to my heart?

Frank Allen, a former reporter for the *Wall Street Journal* and the current director of the Missoula-based Institute for Journalism and Natural Resources, says absolutely not. It is precisely where personal and professional passion intersect that good writing comes. It is important to write about the things you love, he says, just be prepared. Be honest about the pressures you will face, the fires you may stoke, and with activist groups like the Buffalo Field Campaign that tend towards "zealous righteousness," expect manipulation.

Manipulation, of course, takes many forms. It can be broad and obvious or pointed and subtle. It can come through criticism or praise or guilt, as well as under the pretext of friendship.

Last spring the campaign's media coordinator Stephany Seay wrote a letter to the *Missoula Independent* titled "Bison Good, Journalism Bad." It criticized a recently published article written by reporter Chad Harder that said "reporting about Yellowstone's bison can feel remarkably like beating, um, a dead horse." Maybe to some journalists, responded Seay, but not to *good* journalists. Good journalists, she wrote, invest time and energy into an issue; they dig deep, and when they write about

Yellowstone bison, “come to West Yellowstone and demand answers from the law enforcement officers, government officials and livestock inspectors who are trying to domesticate the last wild buffalo.” She called Harder apathetic and charged him with skirting the real facts and work of investigating the issue. She offered leads, examples of atrocities, and hoped and prayed that “SOME media organization will actually tell the story that set the buffalo free.” To end, she quoted fellow activist and her boyfriend, Dan Brister: “You can look back on your life and say, what was I doing in Missoula when they were killing the last wild buffalo? Or you can come to West Yellowstone and stand in their defense.”

If you attend a BFC public presentation or visit the campaign in West Yellowstone or Gardiner, you will see some of Seay’s contentions — “cruel and inhumane treatment, scientific experiments conducted on baby buffalo, hazing pregnant buffalo mothers, destruction of buffalo families, the cowboy mafia, rape and domestication of the wild” — in video clips that the campaign has compiled over the years. You may even witness Montana Department of Livestock agents chasing bison by helicopter or ATV or on horseback. It is an emotional issue and for those who have spent months or years following it, talking about it, living it, their passion is deep and honest, if not contagious, and as a journalist, something to be extremely conscious of.

“Groups like this are dangerous, and I use dangerous loosely, because you can very quickly find yourself in the echo chamber,” says Christine Tatum, a business reporter for the Denver Post and president-elect of the Society for Professional Journalists, a 10,000-member organization of journalists from around the country. “It’s

like checking your brain at the door. They don't challenge you. It is amazing to what degree people get sucked in."

The longer we spend in the chamber, the more times we hear their message, and the more we hear — "we are journalists, but are human beings first," she says — the more we may decide we like our sources. And the more we like them, she suggests, the closer our position edges towards bias.

Indeed, friendship can be tricky and manipulative, especially if it imposes the guise of trust.

I met Mike Mease in Missoula last fall while he was in town for the campaign's West Coast road show — the group's annual outreach event that visits college campuses and coffee shops from Arizona to Oregon. He was excited about my project and more than willing to help. Almost immediately he said I could come down and stay with the campaign once the season started, which after a month or so, I did, and was welcomed with a warm hug and big smile. He spent hours with me during that first trip, talking about his life, his family, his love of buffalo. He even took me on a tour of the area and offered his teepee as a retreat if I needed a place to write when he wasn't there. His trust was flattering, and like all the other activists' willingness to have me along, appreciated. I liked Mease and still do. He is kind, passionate and smart, and it is no surprise that so many volunteers look to him for leadership, if not as an icon for the cause.

If the Buffalo Field Campaign had a leader — it doesn't because it is non-hierarchical—Mease, its co-founder, would be it. As such, his disapproval felt like everyone's, as if every person that had spent time with me, that had shared their stories, also felt betrayed. As a journalist, it cast doubt on my professionalism; as a person, it

hurt; as a sympathizer, someone used to being on their side, it rattled me. You see, before journalism, I had worked for an environmental lawyer, and for a wilderness-advocacy group, and for a group called “Wildlands Center for Preventing Roads.” In college I studied environmental science. In many ways, I *am* one of them, and now was suddenly being cast to the other side. Shunned and termed a traitor. Perhaps INJR’s Frank Allen was right: with groups like the BFC, “you are either with them or against them, and if you’re against them, then you’re part of the problem.”

Who, just as much as *what* is being written about, then, must guide how a journalist approaches a story. The Buffalo Field Campaign is in the business of making converts (after all, as Tatum pointed out, “someone talked them *out* of doing something and *into* joining” the campaign). Reporting on them, then, must consider this, as well as what Chad Harder, in his criticized article, wrote last spring: “it can be difficult not to come across as shrill or biased” when quoting the BFC or relying on them for information. Having this awareness, this inner-transparency, is essential to successfully balancing biases while covering controversy.

Jennifer McKee and Scott McMillion are Montana-based reporters who have covered the BFC. The campaign is media savvy, they agree, but mostly because it has to be. “Groups like that don’t exist without the media,” says McMillion. “That is their real authority; it is what keeps their legs under them.” Indeed, in terms of influencing Yellowstone bison management, which involves two federal and three state agencies, regional – if not national – coverage is essential. Both McMillion and McKee say that the campaign’s tactics can be aggressive, but that they aren’t much different than any other interest group. Part of working the press, says McKee, is getting them to spin it your

way. “There is a common technique, using a combination of guilt and shame to get us to write about [the campaign],” says McKee. “I can’t say they invented it, but they are using it.”

Perhaps Mike Mease’s no-questions-asked attitude, his trusting warmth, his teepee invite was not a part of that, and nothing more than genuine hospitality. Or perhaps it was calculated. By opening their doors to journalists, the BFC may hope for something more than a thank you, something more like sympathetic coverage. But like friendship, manipulation goes both ways: just as activists sway journalists, journalists — whether they intend to or not — may accept, even seek friendship for disclosure. And once such manipulation becomes calculated, says Christine Tatum, deceit easily wiggles in, and it is likely time to retreat.

“There have been many times I have wanted to crawl into people’s heads but have made a conscious decision to set a beginning and an end,” she says. “I’ll spend hours and hours with you, I’ll go into your home and find myself in the darndest of circumstances, but I guard the extent of my time and connection.”

Those reporters who don’t set limits, who get too close to their sources, says Tatum, eventually lose their readers’ and colleagues’ respect. Reporters can get as close as they need to and still maintain their credibility, she says, by taking precautions such as crafting their language. In my case, did I say I was “living” with the campaign, or just “staying with them to observe?” Did I regularly remind them that I was a journalist, not a volunteer? Did I thank them for their time and for allowing access? Tatum also suggests that instead of striving for 100 percent objectivity, which she deems impossible, journalists should shoot for fairness and accuracy: “Did I get it right? Did I listen? Was I

engaged in the conversation? If people focused more on fairness and accuracy, perhaps we would be more objective,” she says.

And when all else fails, Tatum advises, it is time to thicken your skin. “It’s unfortunate that they didn’t like your work,” she says. “But who cares? Move onto the next project.”

Still, if a journalist understands exactly what he or she is getting into, imperviousness becomes easier, which in the case of natural resource reporting is especially important.

In 2003, the Institute for Journalism and Natural Resources published “Matching the Scenery: Journalism’s Duty to the North American West.” Interviews of several hundred reporters from around the West concluded that more than any other beat, environmental reporting inflames passions, for not only are environmental issues complex, they implicate all aspects of our society. “At its best,” the report said, “reporting on this terrain challenges society’s most basic beliefs about science, capitalism, politics—and even our own chosen behaviors as human beings.” As such, those writers who focus on natural resources should expect ample criticism, like Los Angeles Times reporter Ken Weiss, who was quoted in the report’s chapter “Reporting and Bias”: “I’m challenged at every turn by crazed homeowners, recreational fishermen, whatever ... They get angry at the messenger.”

Also, because “reporters can easily become intoxicated with enthusiasm for the natural world,” the report says environmental reporters are especially prone to biases. But rather than avoiding biases, the report suggests, a good environmental reporter must manage them, which means much more than checking facts and disclosing from where,

when and how information was obtained. According to Carolyn Washburn, an editor at the Idaho Statesman quoted in the report, “the real challenge is to present the facts right. It’s about fully reflecting the issue.” It shouldn’t matter then if a writer appreciates clean water, clean air or open space, but that his or her writing exposes and scrutinizes all sides. Rather than drawing conclusions, credible journalists also present balanced and well-informed analyses from which their readers derive their own meaning.

Rocky Barker, a reporter at the Statesman, takes it one step farther. “I’m in this business to have an impact,” he told “Matching the Scenery” reporters. “I’m not some scribe sitting on the sidelines.” He says he cares about the environment and wants to make a difference, and to that end even considers himself “part of the environmental movement.” Still, his writing is credible, he says, because he is candid about his intentions. Transparency bolsters his reputation.

Tatum’s boundaries, therefore, must be shaped depending upon the writer and the writer’s intentions, as well as the subject matter and sources. Sometimes, instead of solid, those lines between bias and balance should be dotted, or curved instead of straight. Often times gray areas displace lines altogether, as was the case for Alex Kotlowitz, who wrote “There are No Children Here,” a book about two boys growing up in inner city Chicago. “I spent the summer ... playing with the kids, going to lunch with them, talking with their parents, and just hanging out. Over those weeks, I became good friends with [them] ...” he said of his initial reporting for a feature in the Wall Street Journal. To write adeptly about the lives of his sources, he befriended them.

And Jennifer Toast, who lived among the “mole people” in the tunnels beneath New York City’s subway system. For access and accuracy, she had to immerse. She only

knew when she had gone too far — when she crossed from the gray to black area — after they infiltrated her life and eventually threatened to kill her.

And Jay Ericson, who did a photo story of the Buffalo Field Campaign for his master's thesis in environmental studies, some of which was published in the Missoula Independent. "It's hard to separate yourself," he says. "I didn't avoid being friends with them. It's hard to be a fly on the wall in such a close space." If he could do it again, he would have rented a place in West Yellowstone. He would have set more boundaries.

"As a journalist, I wish I had had an escape. I knew I needed more separation," he says, partly because of the intensity of the people and the place, but partly because he agreed with the campaign. "So many of the facts back up what they say. If you break it down, you can't help but scratch your head and say *what the fuck is going on!*"

And me, who's still trying to sort it out. Immersion journalism requires immersing, but what is too deep and when is too long?

I chose to write about the Buffalo Field Campaign not to be against them or with them or part of the problem as Allen suggests they may have considered me, but to be part of the solution. Except — in a profession that hinges on professional boundaries and codes of ethics — I didn't know that I could be part of a solution, and instead of confidence, self-doubt and guilt sometimes snuck into my reporting and maybe even my writing. My instincts about how deep was too deep, about drawing lines, about being friends, were long gone. In the end it wasn't Mease's e-mail or his tone in the trailer that night that affected me so; it was the naiveté that I could please everyone and still please myself. It was the terror of not pleasing anyone.