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**Buffalo Soldiers:
Inside a Season of Activism with the Buffalo Field Campaign
A Photographic Documentary**

By

John M. Ericson

B.A. Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut 1994

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

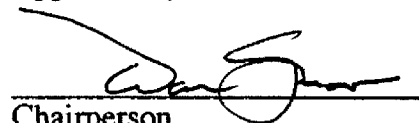
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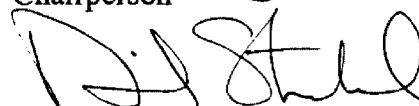
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Buffalo Soldiers: Inside a Season of Activism with the Buffalo Field Campaign
A Photographic Documentary

Director: Don Snow



Brucellosis is a bacterial disease that causes pregnant buffalo and cows to abort their first fetus. The state of Montana took more than 30 years and \$33 million to eradicate the disease from the livestock industry. Since 1985, the state has officially been brucellosis-free, and according to the Department of Livestock, the return of brucellosis could cost the livestock industry billions of dollars. Buffalo can carry brucellosis, and they migrate. In the cold winter months, they move out of the snow-covered higher elevations of Yellowstone in search of food. This path takes them across protective park borders and into Montana rangeland. As a result, in the winter of 1996-'97 the state Department of Livestock slaughtered 1,083 bison that had wandered outside Yellowstone's border into Montana, more than one quarter of the entire herd. The objective: to prevent the possible transmission of Brucellosis from buffalo to cattle. The irony: There has never been a case of the disease being transmitted from bison to cattle in the field. The events of that winter sparked the formation of an organization called Buffalo Nations, later to be known as the Buffalo Field Campaign (BFC). Armed only with video cameras and a commitment to their mission, this loose-knit ensemble of activists in 1997 began to monitor buffalo and Department of Livestock agents alike around the clock. Today the BFC operates on a budget of \$150,000 annually. Throughout their years they have saved the lives of hundreds, if not thousands, of buffalo. They have also created a home and thriving community at their headquarters in West Yellowstone, Montana. The activists of the BFC live in some of the harshest weather conditions in the United States and they sacrifice many creature comforts in the name of their cause. As a direct action campaign they exist on the fringe of the environmental movement and, as a result, their message frequently lacks legitimacy.

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****Note: For complete book, including text and photographs, please see
enclosed CD-ROM.***

introduction

Over the next 15 years, taxpayers will spend approximately \$40 million to make sure that the last remaining herd of non-captive buffalo in the United States grows to no more than 3,000 head. Why? On the surface, there is a simple answer: cows.

But the controversy that surrounds the management of buffalo in Yellowstone National Park—more specifically, the management of bison when they leave the park and enter Montana—is indeed a complicated one. To begin to truly grasp the depth of this controversy, it is necessary to understand how and why buffalo call Yellowstone home.

Although it will never be known exactly how many buffalo once inhabited North America, estimates range from 25 to 75 million in the early 19th century. The most agreed upon estimate puts the number at 60 million. With the European settlement of the west came the slaughter of the buffalo. Partly for their meat and hides, but also in an effort to destroy the culture, sustenance, and way of life of Native Americans. To this day the buffalo is synonymous with many Native American cultures. The image of the frontiersman standing on top of a ten story high pile of buffalo bones is common in historical texts, and is emblematic of the gratuitous slaughter that occurred. At the beginning of the 20th century, the number of wild buffalo remaining was 22. Concurrently, in 1865 there were approximately three or four million cows in the west. By 1885, that number was 26 million.

The few buffalo that survived did so by remaining in the remote backcountry of what became Yellowstone. In an effort to maintain that herd, the federal government, in 1902, purchased 21 buffalo from private herds in Montana and Texas and released them into the park. That group of 43 eventually grew to approximately 4000. Its' descendants,

from the original 43 Yellowstone buffalo, have come to represent the last herd of wild buffalo in the lower 48 states to some. To others, however, they are livestock and should be managed as such.

To understand where a controversy may exist, you have to understand brucellosis. A bacterial disease that causes undulant fever in humans, it also causes pregnant buffalo and cows to abort their first fetus. The disease was first brought to the United States by European cattle. In 1934 the United States Department of Agriculture began a national brucellosis eradication effort. The national campaign was created, in fact, not to ensure the health of livestock, but to protect the public's health from the disease. The program in Montana to eradicate brucellosis from livestock began in 1952. For decades, if a single cow in a herd tested positive for the disease, the entire herd was destroyed. It took more than 30 years and \$33 million to eradicate the disease from the livestock industry in Big Sky Country. Throughout the nation, it is estimated that nearly \$10 billion was spent between the federal government and private ranchers to eradicate the disease. Since 1985, Montana has officially been brucellosis-free, not a single cow carries the disease, and according to the Department of Livestock (DOL) the return of brucellosis could cost the livestock industry billions of dollars.

The problem is, bison can carry brucellosis, and they migrate. In the cold winter months, they move out of the snow-covered higher elevations of Yellowstone in search of food. This path takes them across protective park borders and into Montana rangeland where the state takes control of their management. The objective: to prevent the possible transmission of brucellosis from buffalo to cattle. The irony: There has never been a case of the disease being transmitted from bison to cattle in the field.

During the late 80's and early 90's, the state of Montana had a sanctioned hunting season for buffalo. When buffalo left the park, licensed hunters would harvest them. During this period approximately 400 buffalo were killed each year. Beginning in 1995 state and federal agencies ended the hunting season and began management of buffalo outside the park themselves.

In the winter of 1996-'97 the state Department of Livestock slaughtered 1,083 bison that had wandered outside Yellowstone's border into Montana, more than one quarter of the entire herd. The majority of the killing was done with shotguns on private property, often times without permission of the landowner.

The high number of buffalo slaughtered and the high profile of the Department of Livestock operations that winter drew the attention of a number of environmental activists and Native Americans. They began to organize around the issue, attempting to draw public attention to the slaughter, and subsequently formed an organization called Buffalo Nations. One activist, Mike Mease, had an extensive background in documentary film production and he began to record the DOL's slaughter of the buffalo. Others joined in the filming and in an effort to more clearly refine their purpose, they changed their name to the Buffalo Field Campaign (BFC). Armed only with video cameras and a commitment to their mission, this loose-knit ensemble of activists in 1997 began to monitor buffalo and DOL agents around the clock. They also began to lay the groundwork for a structured campaign to protect Yellowstone's buffalo. A cabin was rented on the shores of Hebgen Lake in West Yellowstone, Montana to serve as headquarters. They established a logistics office as well as a media office. Funding sources were sought out and the group filed for and receive 501(c)3 (non-profit) status.

Originally intended to be an organization whose lone focus was to serve as documentarians, their scope of activism grew. From organizing rallies and protests to deliberately breaking the law by obstructing the actions of the Department of Livestock, the BFC fights its battles on many fronts. Throughout it all, however, they remain steadfast to their commitment to remain non-violent.

From dawn to dusk of every winter day, these activists are in the field maintaining watch. For the rest of the year, based out of their rustic West Yellowstone home and offices, the Campaign pursues a combination of direct action, publicity, and research. Beyond West Yellowstone, they are supported in the policy arena by Cold Mountains, Cold Rivers and The Ecology Center in Missoula, Montana. It is from these locales that broader political and legal battles are fought.

Today the Buffalo Field Campaign operates on a budget of nearly \$150,000 annually. And there is little disputing that their efforts in the field have been successful. After the harsh winter of 1996-'97, when more than 1,000 buffalo were slaughtered, only 11 were killed the following year. In 1998-'99, 96 buffalo were sent to slaughter, and 22 BFC activists were arrested in efforts to protect them. During the winter of 1999-2000, no buffalo were killed. But in the winter of 2001, the DOL and cooperating agencies have been out in record numbers.

Armed with the new Interagency Bison Management Plan (IBMP), the DOL is joined by the U.S. Forest Service, the National Park Service, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks in their management of Yellowstone buffalo. The document, made law in December, 2000, authorizes government agents to take "measures to maintain temporal and spatial

separations between bison and cattle” and sought to “establish population targets [of 3,000] for the bison herd.” It also authorizes the agencies to ‘haze’ buffalo back into the park boundaries. Using helicopters, All Terrain Vehicles (ATV’s), snowmobiles, and horses, officials chase and scare the buffalo back inside the park.

Despite the new plan and the significant increase in budget appropriated to the government agencies, just five buffalo were sent to slaughter throughout the winter of 2000-2001. During the season, 21 activists from the Buffalo Field Campaign were arrested. And long into the warmer months of the year, these activists continued to fight their own battles in the courtroom.

For the buffalo, their self-appointed protectors, and the government agents, the future seems to hold more of the same.

background

It was 4:45 a.m. when a long bearded man I knew only as ‘Chipmunk’ shook me awake. The zipper-pull thermometer on my down jacket read 11 degrees above zero. I was inside. Later in the day I would find out that the nickname for the room I slept in was, appropriately, Siberia. It would take me five months to learn Chipmunk’s real name.

Around me I heard the rumblings of seven groggy souls who slept in the bunks scattered haphazardly throughout the room. Between us all stood shelves, crates, and piles of canned foods and bulk supplies. I saw one of the morning cooks retrieve a gallon tub of what must have been very frozen peanut butter. I hesitantly crawled out of my

sleeping bag, threw on my parka, and reached for my camera. So began my first full day with the Buffalo Field Campaign (BFC).

The outside thermometer read 15 below zero and in the early morning twilight about fifteen volunteers, activists better yet, were scrambling to prepare for the day. They gathered ski equipment, prepared and ate breakfast, stuffed backpacks with warm clothes, and heated up cars.

In the three cabins, four teepees, and one army surplus tent that make up the campaign's home, approximately 25 activists still slept. Later in the day they would take over in the field, relieving the morning patrols, as well as assuming other positions including cook, mechanic, media liaison, wood cutter, and videographer. They all wore wool, and lots of it. Occasionally fleece. None had showered, in weeks. For an organization that at times had upwards of 60 volunteers in their camp at one time, there was one shower, and it barely worked. In fact, in the eight months that I spent time with the campaign, I saw it used three times.

It was next to impossible to distinguish between the volunteers who had been there for days and those who had been there months. There was no apparent hierarchy and at times I wondered who, if anyone, was making any decisions. They came from all walks of life. From college students looking to do something meaningful on their spring break to lifetime activists who told stories of being arrested decades earlier for any and every type of cause.

Upon arriving at the campaign the afternoon before, I was greeted with enthusiasm by some and hesitancy by others. I was introduced to the group as not only the good friend of one of the long term volunteers, Dan Brister, but more significantly, a

photographer for the Missoula Independent here to do a story. My friendship with Dan had allowed me never-before-achieved access, but I knew that it was up to me to develop the trust of the group. It was the leaders, if you can call them that, who encouraged me, as a member of the press, to tell their story. There were others, however, who cowered at the thought of a camera pointed at them.

During my first day, as with the many to follow, I was constantly on the move, bouncing from patrol to patrol and back to the campaign office trying to keep tabs on the movements of buffalo and Montana state employees alike. It was also the beginning of my never-ending effort to develop and maintain the campaign's trust. For many the thought of having their picture taken, let alone run in the newspaper, was unnerving. There were even a few who refused to have their picture taken at all, because, as I would discover, they were afraid the authorities would find them. Shrouded in the uneasiness of being a photographic subject, however, was an underlying understanding that public awareness of the situation was a powerful tool in their campaign. My ever-changing relationship with the many activists would prove to be one of the greatest challenges of this project.

One thing was certain throughout, however, I felt welcome from the moment I arrived. By simply showing up and agreeing to live in what most would consider marginal conditions, I became an instant part of their community. I joined their tribe. Certainly there was awkwardness, some caused by my camera and some originating in the underlying social uneasiness felt by many of the activists. But for myself, and for every person who arrived after me, there was nothing but open arms.

His name is Marcus, but he prefers Chipmunk.

cutlines

13 *(corresponding page number in book on CD)*

“This bison herd is as important to this country as Old Faithful, as the Statue of Liberty, as the Grand Canyon. This particular bison herd is the most genetically pure bison herd we have in America today. They’ve not been interbred with cattle, they are exactly the way they were a thousand years ago.”

Don Barry, Former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Interior, 1997

15

Home of the Buffalo Field Campaign. The West Yellowstone area is one of the coldest places in the lower 48 states. In winter, temperatures can reach 40 below zero. They have only wood burning stoves for heat. Despite these conditions, BFC volunteers are out before the sun rises each morning to watch for buffalo that may have wandered outside the park or near its boundary.

Dan Brister has spent four winters with the buffalo. “The buffalo need our help right now,” he says. “When your neighbor needs your help you lend a hand. I have been so dedicated to the Campaign because it provides the most effective means of protecting America’s last wild bison.”

“The day began with a stunning, rosy red sunrise; ice crystals glistening in the cold, still morning air. The power of the bison transcends time and space as they graze; huge, frost covered humps swaying back and forth in the snow. Onlookers felt that they were part of the tremendous beauty that enveloped them. They too, shared the strength that rippled through the necks and shoulders of these magnificent creatures. The patience of the bison was a message that could not be ignored. Here they were again, foraging for last summer’s grass. Out in the harsh winter 24-7; surviving, thriving like no other can. They know not the boundaries of civilization, fences are but a nuisance. Their boldness is part of what scares people. The other wildlife hide in the trees, but the bison graze and chew their cud out in the open. Afraid of nothing living, bison represent something we wish we were. The last of the wild bison continue to do the hard work. They survive and reproduce in one of the harshest environments on the continent. They keep up attempts to regain their lands. Slowly, they continue into the storm, head down, grazing as they go. We work to welcome them home.”

Pete Leusch, BFC

On Horse Butte, Eric received word by radio that the DOL was heading his direction. In an effort to keep the buffalo hidden he attempts to keep them in the woods. Shepherding, as the BFC calls it, is a tactic it reluctantly uses for fear of harassing the buffalo.

18

Although the day was sunny, the car radio reported the temperature to be at ten below zero, without wind chill.

19

Pink dawn, snow, wind

gray dusk, dark snow, wind

first light, brisk, misty golden sunrise, glorious blue

fire set, lavender, cold, crystal star glow stillness, cold, cold, colder.

The power is down in the meadow enveloped in the

morning's misty

swirl wrapped in beauty.

up and feeding now

they wait out the endless winter

on brown grass, sedge and willow

as death rolls in with every storm.

they teach us patience.

by Feet, BFC

20

Every night the entire group meets to discuss the events of the day as well as to determine strategy and deal with issues related to running the campaign. Decision making can at times be tedious with such a large, ever-changing group. Therefore the Campaign has

established certain committees and positions to deal with specific responsibilities. These include media relations, volunteer coordination, and direct action strategy.

22

From his position on a Forest Service road, Cookie monitors the property of Dale Koelzer. The Department of Livestock, based out of Helena, Montana, rents Koelzer's basement as a home base for their operations in West Yellowstone. They also maintain a buffalo capture facility on his property. Koelzer illegally poached a buffalo on his property in 1999. Its head and genitalia were found in his garage. At first Koelzer told the Fish and Game warden he didn't do it. Then in newspaper interviews he admitted he "just got mad" so he "shot the buffalo...behind the ear" to prevent it from harassing his truck. Whenever the DOL is active, Cookie relays what he sees to the other patrols.

23

I have walked the long and winding path
To see the beauty unseen on the well-worn way
Over cold streams and under green pine trees
I stare in amazement at the giant mountains, Shaped long before our time.
I watch with wondering eyes, the small pieces of life
That make up the land under my feet.
I am the pupil, and the earth my teacher.
The lessons I've learned can be used this
And every coming day.

The meaning of life has been laid before me
But with cataracts it is hard to see.
I see pieces of truth through a gorgeous haze
What I see coming are wonderful days.
It feels like a dream, a completely perfect age.
But real life today is put in a cage.
We have a lot to learn to reach our peak.
A long struggle to bear, when justice is what we seek.
Standing on the river bank, I feel a light breeze.
It's coming ever faster
A helicopter from over those trees.
The swans begin to scatter.
The eagles fly away.
The squirrels start to chatter.
The bison are in for a terrible day.
by Cookie, BFC, left

25

The BFC feels strongly in the power of documentation. Each group on patrol carries with it a video and still camera, as well as radio equipment for communication among patrols. In one instance during the summer where buffalo had wandered across the state boarder into Idaho, the BFC followed them with their video cameras.

“They would have killed them if we weren’t out here this morning,” said BFC volunteer Valerie Coulter. “Idaho didn’t want to be thrust into the bison slaughter spotlight with our video footage of them killing four bulls.”

The BFC feels that ultimately their best chance at reversing the current management plan is through public sentiment and pressure.

26

If I could cry

I would right now

I’d lay down and cry

all day long just to catch up

I’d cry for friends and lovers lost

I’d cry for 60 million buffalo

and for the six they shot

for 70 trapped, tortured and slaughtered and 7, today, on that same spot.

For some, the tears flow freely

but my eyes just well up a bit

and never more than one small drop

will fall down my face

I was a good learner

big boys don’t cry

I’ve spent the time to unlearn, though

so many of the other lies

and soon I will shed the rest
if I could cry
by Feet, BFC

27

On patrol above the Madison River. The river acts as the park border in this area of Yellowstone.

28

Grant shepherds a bull bison on Horse Butte.

29

“One day on patrol, one large bull, out of many I had seen that day, stood and looked straight at me. He was about 60 feet away and he looked right through me. I was humbled and honored, as the tears ran down my face, that a buffalo said to me in a silent language with his eyes, ‘We are One.’ Spoken language has no words for that sacred experience.” Indigo, a 65 year old BFC volunteer from Pennsylvania.

30

The DOL hazes a single bull towards the park as snowmobilers, which number in the thousands around West Yellowstone, pass by.

31

“We are here as volunteers giving our time and attention to the preservation of all life. We are not against cattle ranchers. We are not here to make people angry or to cause confrontation. Rather we are here for the buffalo, and to witness and document the actions of the DOL.”

Jason Johnson, BFC

33

A German camera crew spent one week with the campaign filming for a documentary to be shown on European television. Many of the leaders on the BFC have had extensive dealings with media and as a result they are very effective at using them to spread their message.

34

Volunteers peel garlic on the living/meeting room floor of the main cabin. The campaign’s kitchen is approximately 200 square feet, and at times they have up to sixty people to feed.

35

Chipmunk fishes for trout in Hebgen Lake.

36

Seeds of Peace is a non-profit organization devoted to feeding direct action campaigns around the country. They have fed tens of thousands of activists from the World Trade Organization protests in Seattle to the Republican National Convention in Philadelphia. For three years they have been feeding the Buffalo Field Campaign.

“Seeds of Peace has just started cooking for us and we could not be happier. The crew that’s here make our family complete. It is easy to focus on all of the negative things and I often do, but this morning at sunrise nothing could bring me down and no matter how hard it gets, we still will stand strong and proud to be members of the buffalo family.”

Mike Mease, BFC

37

“Seeds of Peace averages 33 cents per meal/volunteer and we are talking about high quality, calorie laden food that keeps a person going in below freezing temps.”

Mike Mease, BFC

Volunteers are constantly brainstorming on ways to conserve fuel and resources. \$36 keeps a volunteer in the field for a week.

38

Dakota, left, and volunteers in the main room.

Volunteers have ranged in age from two to eighty five.

39

Anna puts away food supplies in 'Siberia.' Food and supplies are donated by businesses and organizations from around the country. With such limited space, volunteers and food stuffs have been known to share bunks.

40

Mike Mease, a founder of the BFC, in his teepee.

41

"The 5:00 am wake up call comes with crusty eyes. As you put on your 3rd layer of clothes and down a hot cup of tea you are ready to face the 15-below-zero weather outside. We arrive on site an hour before sunrise by skis, snowshoes or auto and position ourselves near the buffalo. Most days are happy ones where we watch and learn from these gifts from the heavens. They teach us about community, surviving as a group and taking care of one another. They teach that we are all in this together and everyone is just as important as the other. When one needs help they are all there, without question. We all could stand to learn lessons from their ways. We are lucky to share in being a part of their family. Friendships are made between us and the buffalo, spending day after day together in their home. Being a member of this buffalo family is an honor we will all take to the grave."

Mike Mease, BFC

42

Ahmini and Tyler sleep in their car while supporting volunteers, who had been jailed after a blockade in West Yellowstone, in Bozeman.

44

A late night jam session in the media office. Besides the main cabin, there are two smaller log cabins at the BFC compound. One acts as the main office where business matters and day to day operations are coordinated. The other, pictured above, is dedicated to film editing and media relations and efforts. Because of the computers used in the offices, both require a volunteer to sleep in them at night and maintain a fire in the stove so the cold does not damage the computers.

45

An early morning viewing of the X-Men. This room, a part of the main cabin, serves mainly as sleeping quarters but there is also an old television and VCR and a computer for the volunteers to use. As it used to serve as the main office for the campaign it is referred to as the Post Office.

47

Chess in the Main room, waiting for dinner.

“The amount of sorrow is most confusing. The direction towards violence has left those days of our struggles towards peace throughout our lives, small in contrast. We look to our family the buffalo for answers. They have seen their numbers reduced in similar ways of terrorism. We believe they have the answers to our search for peace. We ask the buffalo to watch over those families in fear. We ask them to guide those in the military to be safe. We ask the buffalo to protect those of our volunteers that are young enough to draft, and we ask the buffalo to give strength to the mothers of our sons and daughters, husbands, and fathers. We ask the buffalo to walk with us in this time for we know so little of peace between ourselves.”

Aho.

Scott Frazier, Ehnamani Sundance Church

September 16 2001

Previous and this page: A prayer ceremony held on Horse Butte during an organized week of action. “In many ways, the issue we are dealing with is a spiritual one as much as it is anything else.”

Dan Brister, BFC

“Blessings Family, I’ve just returned here to our cabin now that my long suspended sentence is over. Many “welcome homes” and big hugs greeted me, and I give thanks.

My travels have been good, spreading awareness and shedding light on the buffalo slaughter with lots of prayer and circling. My time in jail was inspirational. I thank you all very much for your kind support, comforting words and colorful cards. I never felt separated from the Great Goodness. I was constantly connected with the healing love that will end all pain and violence. Receiving letters every day helped a lot. So please keep up the good works. The buffalo will guide us through. Peace and Love.”

Corey Sundog, BFC

53

Outside the main office, Pete and Meghan embrace after a long day that saw the capture of five bison. “The fact that DOL only concentrates on bison shows that the brucellosis issue is a lie. The truth is the DOL really wants to control wildlife in our National Parks in the service of the livestock industry. They think our remaining wild country is an oversized petting zoo.”

Peter Leusch, BFC, left

55

Spring Camp

56

Above the Madison River during a springtime patrol. The warmth and sun come as a great relief to the volunteers. Besides the obvious relief from the cold, it also represents

the beginning of the buffalo migration to higher elevations and into the safety of Yellowstone.

57

Once the month of April arrives the numbers of volunteers diminishes greatly.

59

Summer in Missoula.

60

As part of the outreach campaign, volunteers prepare 30,000 newsletters to be sent out worldwide.

61

The 2001 newsletters, sorted and ready to be sent.

63

At Old Faithful in Yellowstone, volunteers pass out an average of 450+ newsletters and talk to at least 75 people daily. In an average summer they talk to approximately 5,000 visitors and distribute over 12,000 newsletters.

“Although the occasional ignorant tourist walks by, the majority of the people really want to know what is happening to the buffalo.”

Felixa, BFC

“ The so-called random shooting at the Montana borders is actually eliminating or depleting entire maternal lineages, therefore this action will cause an irreversible crippling of the gene pool. Continued removal of genetic lineages will change the genetic makeup of the herd, thus it will not represent the animal of 1910 or earlier. It would be a travesty to have people look back and say we were “idiots” for not understanding the gene pool.” Bison have developed a natural resistance genetically as long as they have enough to eat, limited stress and are not consumed by other disease. There is no magic bullet in wildlife disease, Therefore management is important. Vaccines are one management tool and one component, but genetic structure is necessary for future management. Every animal which is removed from the breeding population can no longer contribute to the genetic variability of the herd.” Remarks made by Dr. Joe Templeton, Texas A& M University, Dept. of Veterinary Pathobiology, to the GYIBC on May 21, 1998. Source, BFC.

Flo Gardipee, medical lab technician certified by the American Society of Clinical Pathologists, works to educate the public on cultural and scientific issues related to bison. Flo is a member of the Eastern Band Cherokee and BFC board of directors. “The genetic impact of continually reducing the population of the herd can be devastating,” she says. “In fact, a lot of the things that are in the [IB MP] management plan contradict the studies that are listed in its bibliography.”

66

An information table at the University of Montana. Volunteers work year-round at outreach to education students and the general public about Montana buffalo issues.

67

In the Summer, Mike Mease and other BFC members tour the country showing video footage from the winter and explaining the issue to people outside the region.

69

Buffalo are herded towards the Yellowstone boundary. Because of the extreme winters in Yellowstone, buffalo must conserve their energy, focusing on finding food. By using helicopters, snowmobiles, and ATV's to run buffalo back into the park—or “hazing” them—the Department of Livestock regularly depletes the animals of crucial energy reserves. Numerous hazing efforts have failed because exhausted buffalo would lie down, unable to continue.

“It may not be what people believe, but we want to keep bison in the park. We are simply taking steps mandated by the management plan.”

Karen Cooper, public information officer for the
Department of Livestock

The State of Montana spent between \$340 - \$575 + per hour to use helicopters to haze buffalo. In fiscal year 1999 the Montana Department of Livestock alone spent \$329,952 on bison management activities primarily on lands that border the western boundary of Yellowstone National Park. (1999 Montana Central Services Division figures). In June 1999, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (APHIS) provided \$200,000 to the Montana Department of Livestock to construct and operate a bison capture facility on Horse Butte. Approximately 357 cow/calf pairs graze on public allotments and private lands on the western boundary of Yellowstone National Park, primarily on Horse Butte. The Munns Brothers run 142 cow/calf pairs on the Horse Butte (Gallatin National Forest) grazing allotment and graze an additional 215 cow/calf pairs on private lands nearby. The Munns Brothers paid \$750.60 to the US Treasury for the Horse Butte allotment (1997 Forest Service figures). The Formal Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) states:

“Accordingly, there are more cost-effective ways of achieving similar reductions in risk, such as modification of national forest grazing allotments.” (Volume I, page 533).

“I don’t like to see them shoot the buffalo but I don’t like them out here either. I would like to see them kept wherever they belong, wherever that is.”

Horse Butte rancher Delas Munns

“While thousands of brucellosis infected elk migrate into Montana every winter, DOL is out harassing a group of bull bison who pose absolutely no risk. A bunch of cowboys run

wildlife on snow machines and the American taxpayer gets to foot the bill. They call this a management plan?”

Erin Cleere, BFC wildlife biologist

72

“Today, the DOL successfully managed to trespass and anger locals, injure and exhaust newborn calves, put pregnant cows at high risk of aborting, and disturb sensitive Bald Eagle habitat, just to move a group of bison who ended the day five miles out of the park boundary. I just don’t get it.”

Pete Thorson, an observer of the days events.

73

“Repeated hazing in early winter may produce weight loss and poor body condition, which decreases the animals’ ability to endure the remaining winter.” Federal Environmental Impact Statement: (Volume I, page 762)

74

The Gallatin Forest Plan dictates that the Madison River arm is to be managed to “maintain and/or enhance big game habitat” and that “recreation activities may be restricted to reduce stress on big game.” The plan also states that “motorized vehicle use will not be permitted during the period December 1 through May 1, except on designated routes,” p. III-44. “Snowmobiles were consistently used off of groomed trails along the tributaries and riparian areas of the Madison River during today’s operation. The

helicopter flew just above the Madison River for over two hours and at one point during the operation touched down in a meadow adjacent to the river. Law enforcement agents blatantly disregard the Forest Service mandates each time they haze and capture bison. They stray even further from the stated priorities by seriously disturbing all wildlife, including elk and moose, with the excessive use of the helicopter in sensitive areas.”

Summer Nelson, BFC spokesperson

“Every bison management operation not only puts the bison in jeopardy, but kills the other wildlife as well. The agencies are squandering our tax dollars, terrorizing our wildlife and placing the entire Yellowstone ecosystem at risk.”

Peter Leusch, BFC

76

After a day of hazing a herd of 30 buffalo back into Yellowstone, Department of Livestock agents head back to Dale Keolzer’s property where they will spend the night.

77

“I call it prejudice by proxy. It is not legal to kill and harass Indians anymore, but you can still go kill, shoot, and harass buffalo and think you are a cowboy. Most real cowboys now wouldn’t be involved with that.”

Flo Gardipee, BFC

78

A DOL agent attempts to haze a mother and her 6 day old calf seven miles to the Yellowstone boundary.

81

“The grazing allotments on the Horse Butte Peninsula bring in under \$800 a year to the US Treasury, yet taxpayers are paying at least \$2.5 million annually to keep these non-native cows separated from the native buffalo. Who does the math for our government? The same guy who spends \$500 for toilet seats?”

Dan Brister, BFC

82

Mike Mease and a DOL agent during a springtime hazing operation.

83

“Unfortunately, all days are not this peaceful. In fact the tension here at times is all too tangible and the fear that comes with being a voice of reason these days is a constant knot in the chest. We face a barrage of slanderous rumors, at times spread directly by the officials involved. Whenever the agents come to town, they bring their law-enforcement powers and liberally enforce broad boundaries around all operations. When we try to assert our first amendment rights to document we are met with complete resistance. In addition, already this winter, they have asked for ID’s, taken multiple pictures and run license plates. They aggressively searched and questioned a volunteer, claiming he

resembled the ID of a homicide suspect. When we investigated further, we found the suspects' description to be quite different than our volunteers. Lastly, the DOL have been using our names and explaining that they know who we are because they have our pictures on file. Although the agencies, led by the DOL, try desperately to legitimate their policies as humane and wise practices, it only takes a day in the field to see the error in their ways and the disrespect in their eyes. Despite the challenge, it is a good time and place to make a stand for the buffalo and we are doing so in a good way."

Mike Mease, BFC

84

"Bison have the same right as other wildlife to use public lands outside of Yellowstone. Thousands of elk, which also carry brucellosis, leave the park every winter unmolested. But DOL knows that if they mess with elk, they'll have the entire hunting lobby on their backs."

Mike Mease, BFC

85

Since its inception, the BFC has had more than 900 volunteers, with as many as 65 at one time working in West Yellowstone. Mike Mease coordinates activities in the field, including daily patrols. Although certain members are assigned specific responsibilities in the management of the campaign, there is no established hierarchy, and staffers express themselves as they see fit.

86

BFC and the Gallatin County police will at times work together. BFC volunteer Grant provides the officer with the license plate number of a car carrying three local West Yellowstone teenagers who were suspects in the theft of a BFC car the night before.

87

Outside the federal courthouse in Missoula.

89

In the midst of a Department of Livestock operation to capture a single bull buffalo, activist Meghan Gill attempted to shepherd the animal into the woods, putting it out of reach of agents. She was arrested and charged with obstruction of a government operation.

“I feel it is important to assert my rights as a citizen on behalf of what I believe,” Gill said. The buffalo was eventually captured, tested for brucellosis, and sent to slaughter.

91

During an operation in which seven buffalo were captured, activist Megan Fishback argues with an unresponsive Montana Highway Patrol officer.

93

As a direct-action campaign, the BFC says it will do almost anything non-violent to protect the buffalo. This includes suspending themselves 35 feet above the ground on a

tripod made of pine trees. Used as a delay tactic, the tripod was assembled over Forest Service Road 610 in West Yellowstone, which is used to access the government's buffalo capture facility. On March 22, authorities spent four hours using a cherry picker to remove the activist from the tripod. No buffalo were captured that afternoon.

94

"The health of bison and cattle is what is most important to us, and that is where all of our efforts are concentrated. In a perfect world, there would be no brucellosis."

DOL official Karen Cooper

95

"The DOL is clearly demonstrating its intention to slaughter as many buffalo as it can. This causes great concern as the spring months are approaching and major migration of the mixed herds is imminent."

Jennifer Schneider, BFC

96

"I have tried writing and talking with the DOL about the bison/brucellosis issue. They don't care what I have to say. They have lied to me and disregarded my concerns. All I have left is my body and my convictions and I feel deeply compelled to take nonviolent action to prevent the bison slaughter."

Julia Piaskowski, BFC

97

“The DOL has consistently shown that they will not obey the rules they helped to write and they refuse to be honest with the public about their actions. I am fed up. These are the last wild buffalo in America and if the government won’t do its duty to protect the buffalo, then I believe we have a moral obligation to act on their behalf.”

Emily Kodama, BFC

98

Previous and right: A protest, where the BFC dressed as wild animals found in Yellowstone, outside the National Forest office in West Yellowstone.

99

After a rally outside the Gallatin National Forest offices in West Yellowstone, two BFC activists and some graffiti remain.

The U.S. Forest Service plays a vital role in policy decisions that influence bison management, such as permitting construction of a second capture facility in the Gallatin National Forest and authorizing grazing allotments in the area.

During the winter, when buffalo leave the park, there is not a single cow within an estimated 20 miles. Cattle are not moved from lower elevations to their grazing area in West Yellowstone until June 15. “We are all members of the buffalo family and it is our job to make it end. As I watch yet another one of my family die, I will not give up. I will stand on top of the highest mountain and yell until it stops.”

Molly, BFC, on sign

100

Less than 15 minutes after being sworn in, Judy Martz experienced the first protest of her administration while giving her inaugural speech in the rotunda of the Capitol Building in Helena Tuesday morning. Standing on a balcony above her (upper right), activists attempted to lower a banner encouraging Martz to reconsider Montana's current bison policy. Before their banner could be displayed, the protesters were swiftly detained by police.

"Our new governor has the opportunity to reconsider the policy and we want to know what her stance is going to be. It was not our intention to have people arrested."

Mike Mease, BFC

101

Two BFC members were arrested at the Capitol immediately following Governor Martz's inaugural speech. They were charged with disorderly conduct.

103

A hunger strike being held by Amanee Hays and Marcus "Chipmunk" Baker outside the Gallatin County Detention Center.

"We're not leaving, or eating, until everyone is released. It is essential that we show our solidarity inside and outside the detention center."

Chipmunk, BFC

104

“The kids from the BFC say, let the bison go where they want to. I say, let’s pack up a few and send them home with these kids back to California and New York. Let’s see how many rich parents would like that. Maybe the BFC should use the trust fund checks that Mom sends (to keep them out of her hair) to feed the bison on park land.”

Patricia Koelzer, daughter of Dale Koelzer 105 “To be in the company of these bison beings, to observe and learn from them, is to witness an awesome force of nature alive, wild, and free. Perhaps it is that spirit of uncontrollable wildness and defiant freedom about the bison that the authorities cannot handle. In many ways the wild bison is a living mockery of our hypocritical American ideals of unbounded freedom, adventure, and opportunity sacrificed for the lonely dullness of material wealth, security, and control.”

Tim Gannon, BFC Volunteer

106

Forest Service road 610 after a tri-pod that had blocked the road was destroyed.

107

“Powerful livestock interests are robbing our treasury with one hand while they slaughter America’s last wild herd of buffalo with the other. Today’s actions demonstrate our commitment to bring the unnecessary slaughter to a stop.”

Dan Brister, BFC

The Madison River, border of Yellowstone National Park.

"The buffalo so near fills the landscape. There is no frame around him of the sort a camera makes. He is not to be captured; not to become a memory, an object of study Framed by the earth, he makes a picture so big, it can only be seen with the heart."

Ruth Rudner, BFC

conclusion

In October, 2001 I sat in the log home of Pat Mulrooney and Steve Hughes on the banks of the Madison River, approximately 30 miles from the Buffalo Field Campaign. Actually, it was Pat and Steve's second and third home, respectively. Pat, a doctor, and Steve, a wine broker, both from Modesto, California, were joined by four friends. All from California and in their 50's, or beyond, they had gathered for a week of fly fishing. Each was familiar with the BFC and the related issues, and had encountered volunteers in and out of Yellowstone over the last three years. "Why can't they just take a fucking shower already!" exclaimed Pat, "I mean, I know what they are saying and I can see where they might even have a point, but I don't want to be near a single one of them." The rest agreed.

In many ways, because of their constant activism and at times high profile, the Buffalo Field Campaign has become synonymous with the Yellowstone buffalo. For people who are not from the region, or who only have a peripheral knowledge of the

issues, oftentimes the only information they receive about the buffalo comes from the BFC. For that matter, typically any story that involves the Yellowstone buffalo includes news about BFC activism. As an organizational and fundraising tool, this can be effective if they are reaching people who are sympathetic to the cause of the buffalo or supportive of the work of the BFC. Unfortunately, not everyone disagrees with what is happening to the buffalo. Many also have a hard time with the actions of the BFC, especially when it comes to breaking the law. So if someone is turned off by the BFC, even if it is for something as trivial as appearance, as in the case of Mulrooney, the buffalo are the ultimate losers. The direct-action, almost fringe nature of their campaign makes it more difficult for the general public to relate to and subsequently support the cause of the BFC.

This is not meant to imply that the BFC would have more success if its members would take a shower, shave and put on some nicer clothes. On the contrary, who they are and how they appear is a direct result of the conditions they live in and the work they do. However, when it comes to interacting with the general public, or with the DOL and various government agencies, it is apparent that they, and subsequently the buffalo, could benefit from a more mainstream image.

Virtually every written correspondence the BFC releases begins or ends with the sentence, "Buffalo Field Campaign is the only group in the field with the last wild, free roaming buffalo 365 days a year!" There is no denying that the formation and continued presence of the BFC in the West Yellowstone area has saved the lives of hundreds, possibly thousands of buffalo. The numbers are clear and support it. One need only to look at how the number of buffalo slaughtered went from 1,083 to 11 in the first year the

campaign was active on a daily basis. Their problem, it would seem, is that they measure their successes in the field and not in the political realm. They are losing the battle at the negotiating table, where monumental decisions about policy are made. The creation and implementation of the Inter-Agency Bison Management Plan in 2000 is indisputable evidence of this. If it is as wrong as the BFC says it is, in its science, logic, and economics, then how did it ever come about? And the possibility of reversing or waiting for it to expire is virtually impossible. The plan is based on a 15-year timeframe. It is something that we all have to live with for a long time, but when I raised the subject with volunteers, I usually got nothing more than a shrug of the shoulders and a sigh. Those who are well-versed in the language of the plan, of which I believe there are too few, point to their legal challenges of certain DOL behaviors. The thrust of many of these arguments is the disruption of other wildlife. Suits have been filed, but the plan is still in action and buffalo continue to be hazed, captured, tested, and slaughtered.

There also seems to be a lack of consensus in regards to what the BFC considers an optimal solution to the plight of the buffalo. When I asked activists to consider what would be an ideal situation for buffalo in Yellowstone, I heard everything from opening up the range and bringing back 60 million to allowing them to graze on Horse Butte. This lack of a shared vision, in my opinion, hampers their ability to be concise and persuasive with their arguments. In general, I felt they tended to be unrealistic in their hopes for change.

I have nothing but the utmost respect and admiration for the Buffalo Field Campaign. They welcomed me, along with every volunteer that walked in the door, with love, acceptance and compassion. They are very, very good at what they do in the field.

There is no questioning their commitment and passion, as well as their knowledge of the issues. But in the end, regardless of how much they believe in what they are fighting for, and love the buffalo and each other, their ultimate goal is to no longer be needed in West Yellowstone.

afterward

May 20, 2002

The winter of 2001-2002 was again a very active and trying time for the Buffalo Field Campaign. Bolstered by a budget windfall of one and a half million additional dollars supplied through federal budget appropriations, the Montana Department of Livestock and cooperating agencies were in the field in high numbers. In all, 233 buffalo were captured in the West Yellowstone area at the Horse Butte and Duck Creek capture facilities. Of the 233, 169 were sent to slaughter and two were shot in the field. One of the two was actually shot within the capture facility after it had been injured during the capture process.

In April, the DOL, following the management plan that states the herd should be at 3000 head, killing buffalo without testing them for brucellosis. This was done to 72 buffalo. A February aerial count of the herd placed the number at just over 3300 animals and thus the DOL was within its authority to slaughter without testing.

The BFC continued its nonviolent protest and five activists were arrested in various attempts to obstruct the government operations. They have also continued

working to better operate their organization. As a result they have created more paid positions within the campaign, where responsibilities are more clearly defined.

There have also been developments with the test for brucellosis and the possible transmission from wild animals. In February the DOL began using a new test that quickly proved to be less accurate. The BFC as well as a number of agencies called for the test to be discontinued because it was showing a significantly higher positive result.

And, in Idaho, cattle that had shared grazing areas with elk tested positive for brucellosis. They remained isolated and thus Idaho did not lose its brucellosis free status, but if confirmed, this could be the first case of the disease being spread in the wild. Montana politicians, including Governor Judy Martz, have used this potential transmission to reaffirm the state's policy of managing bison. She did not address elk in Montana.