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BUFFALO RENAISSANCE: THE NORTHERN PLAINS TRIBES' PATH TO SELF-
DETERMINATION

By

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ABSTRACT

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Buffalo Renaissance: The Northern Plains Tribes' Path to Self-Determination

Chairperson: Jason Begay

This long-form journalistic story and photo essay is about the Blackfoot Tribes in the United States and Canada and their efforts to restore bison to their land, their diet, and their culture. In 2014, ten tribes from the United States and Canada came together at Blackfeet Nation in Browning, Montana to sign the Buffalo Treaty, a commitment to bringing wild buffalo back to parts of their historical range. The Treaty signing marked the first time in more than 150 years that a diverse group of tribes, some historical enemies, came together in the name of restoring the animal they evolved with for millennia.

In Blackfeet country, bison are at the heart of a movement that has manifested from this Treaty, in which Tribes are beginning to assert power and sovereignty over their landscapes, culture and communities. The return of bison is helping the Blackfoot people emerge from a dark past, and begin to heal traumas that have plagued tribes for more than two centuries.

Since the 1990s, Ervin Carlson, a sixty-year-old Blackfeet native, has been in charge of the Blackfeet Tribe's herd of roughly 400 buffalo. But since the signing of the Buffalo Treaty in 2014, this buffalo herd has played a more integral role in the culture and society of the Tribe. On the Blackfeet Reservation buffalo are promoting economic development, restoring a nutritional food source, rekindling cultural identity and revitalizing native spirit for Blackfoot Tribes. But Carlson and the Blackfoot Confederacy Tribes in northern Montana and southern Alberta have united with tribes from across the Rocky Mountain West around a grander vision, a movement that has emerged from the Buffalo Treaty: for buffalo to be wild and free roaming on fragments of their historical range, rather than fenced in on a reservation. The near extinction of wild buffalo in the late 19th century was an integral piece of the orchestrated genocide of Native people. The slaughter removed this keystone species – which is fundamental to the health of the vast grasslands of the Northern Great Plains – and compromised the spiritual heart of the Native people. My project, as a photographic essay, illuminates the efforts of Carlson, and others, to bring buffalo back to the wild, an animal whose tragic story, as Carlson says, is emblematic of the Native American struggle.

On a blustery October Saturday at the Wolf Crow Bison Ranch, Dan Fox and his ranch hand, Man Black Plume, try to wrestle fence panels into place in a 60-mile-an-hour wind. Tomorrow is weaning day - and the fence needs to be rock solid so the bison calves can be separated from their mothers. But the wind, a near constant presence on the Blood Reserve in the southern Alberta foothills this time of year, is making the task difficult. They brace their bodies against the planks so they can nail the panels to the posts, but the 12-foot-high fence bucks and heaves in the wind like a giant wooden flag.

Undaunted, Fox fires up his John Deere tractor and Black Plume jumps in the bucket. Fox lifts the bucket into the air and Black Plume guides the tractor, close enough for the two of them to nail the panel into place. Then on down the line, panel after panel, section after section.

Watching from the opposite side of the pasture, 30 bison stand huddled together in the corner, un-phased by the commotion. Fox's bison herd is the first to live back on this sliver of northern Great Plains in 150 years. The 1,500-pound mammals, the largest on the continent, have a well-known troubled history in North America, through which they were nearly wiped to extinction.

What is not as well told is the story of the tribes that relied on the bison. With the beasts went a food source and intangible connections to history, land, religion and identity.

Now, upon entering a new decade, American Indian self-determination is taking on new forms, and bison restoration is a powerful example. A resurgence of traditional food systems, cultural identity, ecologically intact landscapes and ceremonial life, all characterize an effort by tribes in the U.S. and Canada to return from cultural genocide and choose their own path forward for their people.

A 62-year-old Blackfoot Indian, Fox believes these animals may have saved his life. He was diagnosed with stomach cancer 22 years ago. At the suggestion of a Blackfoot healer and naturopath, Fox changed his diet rather than enduring the institutional process of chemotherapy. He eschewed processed food for bison meat and other indigenous food and for a year he cleansed his body. Two years later, his medical doctor declared the cancer in Fox's stomach in remission, where it has remained since.

The food itself might not be a miracle cure, but the changes Fox had to adapt to included lifestyle and even philosophical changes that Fox believes boosted his health.

What's more important, he says, is that the bison began to teach him about his culture and show him what it means to be a Blackfoot Indian. So, in the early 2000s, after his cancer diagnosis, he turned his cattle ranch into a bison ranch, part of a movement across the North American west to return bison to parts of their historic range for the collective well being of various Indigenous nations in Canada and the United States.

"The elders from back in the day predicted that the only way the Native people are going to start gaining ground again, their ways of life, is when the bison come back," Fox said.

Through Fox, the Blood have joined a growing number of indigenous people – the Blackfoot Nation in Montana, Fort Peck’s Assiniboine, Fort Belknap’s A’aninin, the Wind River Reservation’s Eastern Shoshone and Arapaho, and the Crow in south-central Montana – trying to restore not only bison, but their strength and their pride and their culture, an antidote to centuries of colonization.

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About 80 miles south of Fox’s ranch in Alberta, Helen Augare Carlson sits in her home in Browning, Montana, reflecting on stories of her great-grandfather, who participated in his tribe’s last buffalo hunt in the late 1800s. She sits on the couch looking out the window into a degenerating neighborhood, her long black hair neatly braided and hanging over her shoulder.

“I imagine this herd, which was once so strong on the east side [of the Rocky Mountains], being pushed into the mountains and diminishing as they were killing them off. And then they just disappeared,” she said.

Bison-reliant societies like Fox’s and Carlson’s were once among the richest in North America. The Blackfoot Confederacy, made up of three tribes in Canada -- the Kainai on Blood Reserve, the Siksika, the northern Piikani -- and one tribe in the U.S., Montana’s Amskapipikuni Blackfoot tribes, call bison ‘buffalo,’ or in Blackfoot, *iinnii*. For centuries before westward expansion, they roamed across the entire North American Great Plains where the Blackfoot lived, and they were the Blackfoot’s lifeblood – with thriving economies dependent on the buffalo, used for trade with other tribes, and supplies for their own people.

It is often cited that tribal people used every part of the buffalo. But what is not as evident is how ingrained the animal became: the meat and fat for sustenance, hides for shelter and clothing, bones for tools, bone broth for curing illnesses, the bladder for water carriers, buffalo fat for paint, and parts such as the head, heart, tongue and hooves as icons in ceremonies. Beyond the daily essentials, the buffalo was also deeply embedded in Blackfoot cosmology and religion.

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, westward expansion had nearly annihilated both Native Americans and the buffalo. Estimates vary, but research suggests there were between two and 18 million Native American people and 20 to 40 million buffalo in North America in 1492. Four hundred years later, approximately 237,000 Native Americans and roughly 1,000 buffalo remained, a result of government policies that encouraged killing off the buffalo to defeat the indigenous inhabitants and force them onto reservations. Against these staggering odds, Native Americans and First Nations across the continent have held on to their ancient rituals and customs, a testament to their resilience, which some Blackfoot people say they have learned from animals like the buffalo.

According to a recent study, “The Slaughter of the Bison and the Reversal of Fortunes on the Great Plains,” published in 2018 by researchers in the Department of Economics at the University of Victoria, formerly bison-reliant societies have 20-40% less income per capita than the average Native American nation. When the resource that underpins an entire society is completely destroyed, particularly in a short period of time, people are left starving and physically and economically powerless. That historical trauma is still alive today for many North American Plains Tribes, and the lasting disparities are manifested in high suicide rates, poor health outcomes and civil unrest.

Though the Blackfeet lost the buffalo, the religious and cultural connections were not lost, but they weren’t openly expressed due to years of oppressive government policies. Now, those connections are beginning to surface as buffalo return in an era of Self-Determination for Indian tribes.

“They’re coming home,” Helen Carlson recalls with a smile the day in 2016 when 90 buffalo arrived on the Blackfeet Reservation from Alberta’s Elk Island National Park, descendants of the same herds her great-grandfather had hunted. “They’re family we haven’t seen,” she said. “Now we can say that our children will never know life without buffalo.”

In 2014, for the first time in more than 150 years, both Fox and Carlson were involved in a coalescing of tribes from both sides of the U.S. – Canada border that came together on Montana’s Blackfeet reservation to sign an historic document, the Buffalo Treaty. A manifestation of decades-long efforts by the Blackfoot tribes and the Wildlife Conservation Society, among others, the treaty is a commitment to recognizing the spiritual, cultural and ecological importance of bison, and affirms the desire to restore them first to their reservations, and over the long term to large landscapes where they may live as truly wild free-roaming wildlife. Each year since then, a ceremony is held where new tribes sign on to the treaty.

“We can’t move backwards on executive orders, but we’ll use that agreement to put those animals back on the landscape,” said Terry Tatsey, vice chairman of the Blackfeet Tribal Business Council.

“Federal Indian Policy has always been implemented to look at termination or oppressive policies that remove us from our knowledge base,” Tatsey said. “So I said, ‘Why don’t we reverse that?’”

Tatsey, who grew up with a family deeply connected to hunting, is convinced that having the animals back on the landscape can teach people the kind of respect for the land, the animals, and the stories he heard about as a young boy. Today, as a leader of the tribe, he sees an opportunity with bison, but he says the greatest benefit will come generations down the line, for his grandchildren and their grandchildren.

“That’s where I talk from,” Tatsey said. “Because you’ve got to have a longer term vision that goes way beyond yourself and that will benefit generations – maybe our

grandchildren or maybe those generations we will never meet – but at some point in time I really want to see that herd supporting our people in various ways as it did historically.”

He said that now the bison are an opportunity for many Blackfeet youth to engage with their culture. Tatsey, a former professor of cultural studies at the Blackfeet Community College, regularly sent his students out to observe the herd. Over and over again he saw students lives’ transformed by experiences of being in the presence the bison.

“Because they’ve seen that animal that is part of our history and it helped us establish ourselves. It [restoration] could be that hope for bringing back spirituality, the hope for reestablishing the relationships with place, Earth,” Tatsey said.

Sixteen-year-old Jazelyn Wells is one of those youth who has been influenced by the buffalo. Wells was raised by her grandparents on a piece of land outside of Browning along the Two Medicine River, in the heart of prime buffalo country.

“I grew up in traditional family – my grandma telling me about the buffalo jumps and her family, and how they would engage with the land, and have to do everything on their own,” said Wells.

In Wells’ view, the presence of bison on the reservation gives people an opportunity to see outside themselves. Everyday when she drives to school she notices the bison. This morning when she was driving to school at Browning High School, on a particularly windy morning, she could see them all running across the field.

“I was thinking wow, when it was getting cold they would all run to get shelter, and bunch up against each other. And that’s what they were doing this morning from the wind,” Wells said.

Seeing them reminds her of her ancestors and what they had to do in order to get food and supplies, make clothing, build homes, and hold onto stories, and that the bison gave them all of this.

The relationship between bison and hunter, nature and humanity begins in Blackfoot cosmology -- which is at the core of the Blackfoot spirituality -- and one cannot fully exist without the other.

Consider the Sun Dance, a ceremony of prayer and personal sacrifice that was outlawed by both the Canadian and American governments as part of their attempts to assimilate Native Americans and First Nations into the dominant white culture. Rosalyn LaPier, a Native American scholar of Blackfeet descent and professor at the University of Montana, said tribes are still recovering from that. She said the Sundance is one of several religious ceremonies that cannot be performed without bison parts: the bison skull is the central component of the ceremony. As she explained, there are certain prayers and rituals surrounding hunting the bison, and then there are ceremonies that require parts of the bison in order to practice that particular ritual. LaPier compares it to a Christian



baptism. Water is an essential element in baptisms; without it the ceremony cannot be performed. It is the same with part of the buffalo; they are sacred. “A lot of things that are important in Blackfoot culture – whether its something people eat, something they use for religious practice, there’s always a very long myth connected to it,” she said.

LaPier stressed that these rituals and the songs and stories that went with them were never lost. The older generation of Blackfeet held onto those beliefs, even if some of them went dormant. In 1978 the American Indian Religious Freedom Act granted Native Americans their right to again perform ceremonies, but it did not guarantee that the resources they needed, the bison being central, would also be restored. But now, she said, “With the reintroduction of bison what it does is it allows a space for those songs, stories and ceremonies to be acted. Again it’s not that they were gone. There just wasn’t a space for the animal to allow that to occur.”

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Ervin Carlson (not related to Helen Carlson), the director of the Blackfeet Buffalo Program, drives his truck through the Blackfeet Nation’s buffalo herd as they graze on the prairie that stretches off the Rocky Mountain Front.

Carlson, a tall, heavy set man, said that sometimes when he is having a hard day he drives to the herd of buffalo, and he sits with them, watching and listening. When he watches the bison, he says he sees in them himself and his people.

“We’re bringing back a big part of our culture. And the people are realizing that we’re one and the same with buffalo. Our lives are the same.”

The Blackfeet Tribe’s bison herd first arrived in 1974. The herd started off small and there was very little engagement from the community. In the 1990s Carlson worked in the agriculture department of the tribe, and the Blackfeet Buffalo Program was put under his supervision. Around that same time, in 1992, the Intertribal Buffalo Council (ITBC) was established, a cooperative of over 60 tribes organized as a federally chartered Indian Organization, that helps tribes across the U.S. acquire buffalo and manage them for economic and cultural development. Today, Carlson is the president of the ITBC, and the Blackfeet herd is funded by grants from ITBC and through the sale of calves. There are now two herds on the Blackfeet reservation managed by the Blackfeet Buffalo program on 16,000 acres of tribal land across the reservation. This herd of 600 animals is used for commercial purposes, such as sales and harvests. The meat harvested is given to elders with diabetes on the reservation.

There is a second herd on the reservation, called the ‘Elk Island’ herd (mentioned above by Helen Carlson) which consists of 90 animals that were brought back in 2016. These animals are the genetic descendants of the dwindling herd that roamed Blackfoot territory prior to their extirpation in the late 19th century. The last of that herd was conserved in the early 1900s and eventually sold to the Canadian government where they have resided at Elk Island National Park over the last century. The vision for this herd is to be free

roaming on a section of land abutting the east side of Glacier National Park and the west side of the Blackfeet reservation.

The third component of the buffalo program on the Blackfeet reservation is the Linnii Initiative, a non-profit founded in 2009 with partnerships from the Wildlife Conservation Society, the ITBC, the Blackfeet Community College and leaders from the Blackfoot Confederacy. The group is dedicated to connecting tribal members throughout Blackfoot territory with “buffalo culture” through events that get youth out on the land and educating them about the Blackfoot’s historical and modern day relationship with bison and the land.

For nearly 20 years Carlson and other members of the Intertribal Buffalo Council have been lobbying in Washington, D.C. for an Act that would assist tribes in buffalo restoration and management. In February 2020, Carlson and other tribal representatives gained some ground with federal legislation proposed to Congress for an Indian Buffalo Management Act. The act would create a program within the Bureau of Indian Affairs specifically dedicated to authorizing annual appropriations for bison restoration to tribal lands. For the Blackfeet herd specifically, the Act would help fund infrastructure for fencing, corrals and handling facilities, jobs, and herd management expenses so they can grow the herd, then market and sell the meat product on and off the reservation to generate income for the tribe.

The road to bison restoration is long and multi-faceted. Even in Blackfeet Nation there are concerns from tribal members about bison impacting a fragile economy that is dependent on the pasture and grazing resources available. A lack of financial resources and a reliable workforce for the Blackfeet Buffalo Program add stress to the issue, yet are key for the program to be able to operate successfully and coexist with the modern-day cattle ranching on the reservation.

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Today there are roughly 500,000 bison in North America, occupying less than one percent of their historical range, and all but a few herds -- such as the Yellowstone herd, Utah’s Henry Mountains herd and Alberta’s Banff National Park -- live within the confines of fences.

Bison are an important component for the Blackfeet to restore and gain control over the health of their lands. Rosalyn LaPier said this next generation is thinking more broadly about how to create healthy landscapes and environments, and how to transition out of prioritizing natural resource extraction. Part of that younger generation, she said, is educated and has grown up in the last five to ten years seeing significant environmental activism.

“They’re not just thinking of bison, but they’re also thinking how do we feed the bison, what grasses do they eat? How do we re-create a landscape that looks like the landscape

that was previously here before cows, before farming and ranching, before settlement,” LaPier said.

One of those visionaries in the next generation is 32-year-old Blackfeet tribal member Brandon Fish, a graduate student in the Environmental Studies department at the University of Montana. “Why not proclaim these conservation areas [on Blackfeet land] as a living being. The caretakers of the land would be the bison. They manage the land naturally. All we have to do is let them do it,” Fish said.

With bison comes a restoration of the Blackfeet’s ancient relationship with land and place, and bison are a cornerstone species that brings life to the land.

As conservation biologist and former bison specialist for the Wildlife Conservation Society, Keith Aune said, a lot of science has been done over the last century that reveals bison as ecological miracle workers on the grasslands: the patterns in which they grazed and the way their hooves penetrated the soil enhanced grassland productivity; their dung produced vast quantities of organic matter for different insects that other animals feed on; their woolly hair provided nesting material for birds; their wallowing behavior created temporary depressions that stored water and allowed certain amphibians to reproduce. All of these attributes, unique to bison, enhance biodiversity, and played a role in shaping North America’s vast grasslands for 400,000 years.

Over the last decade, new research has attempted to compare the effects of bison and cattle, the animal that has largely replaced bison on North America’s grasslands. While there are certain things cattle can mimic, the two species are not equal nor on par. For example, Aune said, they can’t produce the woolly hair that bison do, they don’t shuffle their hooves in the same way on the land. “There are small, nuanced differences that have great implications. We know now that they’re [cattle] are not a full surrogate,” Aune said.

“It depends on what you want to create. If you want to create a monoculture with maximum pounds of grass, grazing the way they [cattle] do, using cattle would produce that outcome.”

“But if you’re looking for complex ecosystems with resilience and the ability to survive climate change and adapt to significant dynamics schemes that are playing out in our world, you would not graze cattle, and certainly not *only* cattle,” Aune said.

Conservation groups throughout the U.S. have fought for a long time to return bison to parts of their native range, beginning with Teddy Roosevelt’s creation of the American Bison Society. A notable effort underway is in central Montana by American Prairie Reserve (APR). APR is a non-profit in Montana with an ambitious and controversial mission that aims to replace cattle with bison, remove the fences and piece together fragments of private and public land to restore the native prairie ecosystem. APR already has a herd of 10,000 bison on the land they have acquired thus far, but they could make significant headway with the state of Montana’s Fish, Wildlife and Parks newly released Environmental Impact Statement which establishes a process for groups and individuals

to develop buffalo restoration proposals. This is a win for many conservation groups, and for tribal members who want to see free-roaming herds of bison, but many ranchers see it as a serious threat to their livelihoods and way of life.

In Glacier County, home of the Blackfeet reservation, ranching drives the local economy.

Book St. Goddard, a Blackfeet tribal member and fifth-generation rancher, takes a firm stance on the issue. “I honestly don’t think we should have buffalo,” he said.

“They’re wiping out fences and its up to you [the rancher] to put the fences back up.”

On top of that, he said, the Blackfeet tribe does not seem to be in support of ranchers the way they used to be, and now they’re taking away more tribal land for the buffalo, instead of leasing it to the cattle ranchers who need to make a living.

He is also skeptical of how much the tribe spends on the buffalo program. “Are we financing something that is helpful to the tribe?” he wonders. He admits that there’s a lot he doesn’t know about the tribe’s bison herd, but he said the lack of communication and transparency from the Buffalo Program does not help.

“And we’re the main people they [the Buffalo Program] should be sharing [their plan] with, but they haven’t shared it,” he said.

Better management would mean better fences, better communication from the Buffalo Program about their goals and intentions, and perhaps a smaller herd so that the bison aren’t eating themselves out of house and home before they can be driven to summer pasture.

Blackfeet rancher and leader of the Blackfeet Nation Stock Grower’s Association, 35-year-old Kristen Kipp sees bison as a positive influence for her culture. Like St. Goddard, she also sees a very real struggle for land and natural resources for those in her community who ranch in one of the coldest and most active carnivore landscapes in the west. Adding buffalo on top of that, she said, could be the tipping point for to throw those ranchers whose sole income is derived from cattle completely out of business. Coupled with the potential for bison to carry brucellosis, the vision for free roaming bison has many ranchers resistant to reintroduction efforts. Fencing buffalo pastures could ease some of these tensions, but Kipp is also concerned about how those fences affect other animals, such as the elk herd, which many tribal members harvest to feed their families for an entire year.

“For it to be successful,” Kipp said, “It needs to be done in a way that everyone is taken care of.”

The Blackfeet tribe’s Agriculture Resource Management Plan team has been working on a feasibility study to explore how the bison herd could play a more active role in the holistic health of people on the reservation. Currently there is no processing plant on the

reservation. The meat is harvested in a field ceremony, and much of this meat is given to elders and people with diabetes. One of the schools on the reservation serves bison meat, a program they would like to expand to schools across the reservation.

The tribe benefits from the herd economically through culling and selling animals, but eventually they would like to add meat sales and tourism. The Buffalo Program sells the meat to tribal members at a reduced cost, and for anyone else at market price. The Iinnii Initiative is working on developing a more robust tourism strategy for engaging visitors to Glacier National Park.

But putting together the pieces on a daily basis can be an undertaking. The Iinnii Initiative has struggled to maintain a consistent director, and the Blackfeet Buffalo Program has struggled to find people who are motivated to work the long, physically demanding hours required to maintain the tribal buffalo herd – hours bumping around uneven ground on four-wheelers to fix fences, and herding buffalo out of places where they’re not supposed to be, all the while working at the mercy of the Rocky Mountain Front’s severe, windy winter climate. In the last year-and-a-half at least four people have quit, some of them turning back to alcohol to cope.

The road to bison restoration has always been a difficult one, but Carlson hopes their legislative push in Congress can help pave the way.

“Tribes restore buffalo to counteract the near extinction that was similar to the tragic history of the American Indians,” said Carlson in his testimony to the House Committee on Natural Resources. “Now, we need this act for buffalo to again provide food and economic opportunities for Indian Tribes.”

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Back on the Blood Reserve, Dan Fox holds a ceremony every October in which three bison are harvested to feed elders and families in the community who are in need. Elders from the community come and give their blessings and teach younger members how to turn the bison into sustenance.

This experience had a profound effect on 39-year-old Amanda Weasalfat. In 2014 she tagged along with a friend to Fox’s harvest. Weasalfat, a shy, reserved young woman watched a group of old women huddle around the carcass and clean parts of the digestive tract. In Blackfoot culture, this is a job that only women do. Weasalfat worked up the courage to talk with the elders. At first they were reticent, but she began telling them stories about her grandparents, active leaders in the Blackfoot spiritual societies. Little did she know, one of those women turned out to be her relative.

The old women showed Amanda how to do the work. “They were so fast at it,” she recalled. First, they cut the bladder out, and they have to be careful because if its leaks then it could ruin the meat or the guts; then they cut the stomach and the tripe wash it out

with a bucket of water; then they wash the feces out of an area of the intestines they call the ‘bible,’ because of the multiple folds it contains.

Now that that Weasalfat has learned and practiced over the years with the elders, she is called on to come to harvests, as one who has the knowledge and honor to perform that role. “I feel like it connects me to my ancestors and gives me this sense of pride and sense of health, you know, that this is who I am and this is who my people are,” Weasalfat said.

Her parents were forced to attend Canada’s residential schools, government-sponsored religious schools that tore children away from their families to assimilate them into the dominant white culture. Like many, Weasalfat’s parents were traumatized and turned to alcohol to cope. Weasalfat herself has had her own struggles with addiction, but she said the bison, and learning about her culture, helped her choose a different, healthier path.

“If you know where you come from and have that connection, it makes you proud. Being in their presence – to think there used to be so many of them here and they used to sustain our lives. They were our life force. For me that’s a very humbling and powerful thing.”

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As another survivor of Canada’s residential schools, Dan Fox believes that the boarding school era is a major reason for personal and cultural identity crises amongst many Native people. The policies carried out by both the Canadian and U.S. governments left many Native people disconnected from their homelands, the places that guided how and where they lived and what they ate.

“I didn’t have the buffalo, I didn’t have this house – but once I went that spiritual way, I started to live that way of life. I understood why I should go out as a warrior and see new things and bring it back, so my community can see me as a leader to bring back some healthy ways of life on this reserve.”

Anytime Fox works with bison, it becomes a ceremony, an honoring of life, death and a giving back to the earth. Even though the calves standing in their pen resemble something very different from what his ancestors saw, they now represent a future where bison, and his people, can be free from the literal and cultural fences that have imprisoned them. Someday, he hopes, those fences will disappear forever.