Author Todd Wilkinson

A New Way to Look at Bison

Bob Jackson, Yellowstone backcountry ranger and Iowa bison producer

Comment By Bill O'Connell, 9-20-07 *I know Wilkinson's interview with Bob Jackson is fascinating stuff, and I think he nails it.*

Comment By Monty, 9-25-07 *Bob Jackson should write a book about his years in the Yellowstone back country. I would love to learn more about the Pelican bison as I have always thought that in the winter the herd was only composed of bulls.*

Comment By Colonel Bain, 9-21-07 Wonderful article here!! Someone send this article to BIA Artrum (the White Indian) Thumbs-UP here Todd from de Colonel! :)

Comment By Glenn Hockett, 9-21-07 Todd & Bob: This really is an inspiring article. It is both amazing and sad that Bob had to buy bison and "raise" them to work on restoring their culture and herd/family structure. Good work gentlemen. Bob is onto something here.

Comment By Stephanie, 9-21-07 *The past two interviews with Bob Jackson were great, and bring much needed attention to the fact that science and man intervene with the Yellowstone Bison beyond what is understood or comprehended by man. Thank-you, Bob, for bringing to attention the fact that man does not know-- or dominate-- nature.*

Comment By Amelia Tucker, 9-28-07 *Brilliant article. I look forward to reading more. Mr. Jackson's train of thought overlaps both sides of the ranching/environmentalists arguments with regard to the buffalo and their future. I will be sharing this on my blog and email lists.*

Thanks for the interesting and enlightening read!

Comment By George, 9-22-07 *Bob Jackson brings a welcome and refreshing viewpoint to the issues of humans and wildlife. Thanks to Todd for bringing this interview to light and thanks to Bob for his thoughtful and respectful insights of wildlife.*

Comment By Lance Olsen, 9-23-07 *That some Christians place humans above other species is a fact. That they feel justified in doing it is mystery, because, for example, the Bible (King James version) explicitly says "Man is not above the beast, for all is vanity."*

Comment By Craig Moore, 9-27-07 *I can't remember when I've enjoyed a column so much or had such a vicarious experience seeing through my mind's eye Bob Jackson's experience. In my opinion, this material is worthy of a book (hint!).*

I believe animals are blended, sentient beings that have both atavistic, genetic responses, and learned knowledge that determines their behavior. It doesn't surprise me one bit that bison would forget how to be bison when their experiential knowledge was removed from their social structure. We see this in humans too.
It's not just bison who are endangered in the attitude reflected by the academics that Bob throws darts at.

Comment By Pit Horn, 9-27-07 *Most of my people have been laughed at, smiled about and idolized because we consider animals as natural beings akin to us. Bob Jackson has put his observations in terms we should all understand. What academia needs is imperical studies of bison using the same methods Bob Jackson did. Live with and study a bison family year after year. Of course with the destruction and disruption going on in the name of game management a study group would be hard to find. That should tell you something.*

Comment By bearbait, 9-27-07 *I have to agree that academia can be the most hostile environment on earth to dissenting ideas. Brave are those who are wont to leave the beaten path of the University. They have to go make a living in the real world.*

Comment By Bill O'Connell, 10-05-07 *I can't pass up congratulations to Todd and Bob on this series, though, and have to comment on Bob's stewardship. To say it stands the conventional wisdom on its ear doesn't even come close. You're right, though.*
Aldo Leopold was onto something with the "matrix", and Bob Jackson is onto it too. Both on public and private lands, it's time for a new look.

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The Voice of the Rocky Mountains

NEWWESTERNERS: INTERVIEW WITH BOB 'ACTION' JACKSON

Former Controversial Yellowstone Ranger Becomes Bison Rancher

By Todd Wilkinson, 9-19-07

Bob Jackson knows that viewed from any angle, he is a living, breathing enigma. During his three decades of civil service as a seasonal backcountry ranger in Yellowstone National Park, Jackson cultivated a mystique—and generated controversy—for his maverick approach to confronting big game poachers in the remote Thorofare section of the park and for allegedly treating his living quarters there as a personal fiefdom. His vigilant stewardship earned him rousing praise from regional conservation groups. His outspoken opinions netted him scorn from superiors in the National Park Service, which imposed a gag order on him, preventing him from talking with the press.

No matter what one thinks of Jackson, any Westerner who has ever met him quickly realizes they are staring into the eyes of an American original.

Following his high-profile exploits and departure from Yellowstone, Jackson has been active as a bison rancher in his native Iowa and yet still spends a lot of time in the Rocky Mountain West. He strongly believes that if bison herds, both domestic and wild, were managed with a focus on keeping family units together, there would be more harmony and less conflict on the landscape. Jackson's provocative ideas have earned him meetings with everyone from bison managers for Ted Turner and Tom Brokaw to animal rights activists, Indian tribes, and federal biologists in Yellowstone. Among Jackson's other theories is that there remains a distinct subherd of Yellowstone bison living in the Pelican Creek drainage in the middle of the national park that have maintained their original behavioral characteristics. Last summer, Jackson gave a presentation of his philosophy as a bison rancher at the International Bison Conference in Rapid City, South Dakota.

Not long ago, Jackson sat down for an interview. His responses to five questions will appear at NewWest.Net over the next few days. They are certain to both inspire and rile the sensibilities of readers. —Todd Wilkinson

NEW WEST: Bob, you are best known for your legendary role as Yellowstone National Park ranger Bob "Action" Jackson who combated poachers and manned the cabin in the remote

Thorofare region of the park. But the fact is that you've also been a bison rancher back in Iowa for many years. What is the nexus between your years as a ranger and your observations about animals that were once the most populous large mammal on the Great Plains?

BOB JACKSON: My dual career in bison and backcountry rangering happened because of one defining incident early on. I saw my retiring district ranger boss, at the acknowledged pinnacle of rangerdom, steal a big box of toilet paper as his very last official act in Yellowstone. This was a sturdy, tall, deep-voiced and well measured man, the type of ranger tourists imagined. He had spent his life as a ranger at the envied Big Five of Western national parks and it was the life I strived for upon coming to Yellowstone. As I watched this empty shell of a man struggle to get his long arms around the taxpayers' 128 rolls of wipe so he could put it in the back of his station wagon, I knew then and there I didn't want a career that ended on a toilet seat.

This incident happened about the same time my star was rising in Yellowstone. I was catching poachers where none had been caught before and folks there wanted me to go permanent [as opposed to remaining a seasonal ranger]. On further assessing my choices, I couldn't remember a ranger retiring as anything other than bitter, frustrated or apathetic … or, in this case, pathetic. I asked myself, "Why would they want me to join them at a desk, or still more important, why would I want to join THEM at a desk?" I decided I didn't want this career, one where the best I could hope for was playing a role for the public based on the illusion of what a park ranger once was.

What was I to do? I had a Fish and Wildlife degree and a farm boy's life-long desire to have a life in the outdoors? I knew I didn't want to look at fish scales under a microscope like my first bosses did all winter at Yellowstone's Bureau of Sport Fisheries.

Should I stay a seasonal ranger and spend the winters on the beaches of Mexico or slopes of the ski areas?

I was already doing that, and though fun, I was ready to put some meat to my life. There was always the family farm in Iowa. I loved parts of it but life there would be fairly static.

That is why I began thinking of "raising" buffalo. They were said to be an animal that could take care of themselves. I thought, "Yes, I'll spend summer and fall living a prehistory lifestyle in Yellowstone's backcountry catching present day poachers and then the rest of the year I could be farming with exciting animals." The only trouble was, I found out bison ranchers had lots of caretaking chores to do, the same as my dad did with his cattle. There had to be a better way. I had spent a lot months at a time living in and riding the backcountry of Yellowstone, learning about and using animal behavior to lead me to poachers. But I knew I had to learn a lot more about this animal if I was to raise them without giving them the bottle all the time.

What I learned was that efficiency and environmental compatibility in nature for large grazing animals was based on the support systems that unmanaged "herds" used for their very survival as a species. It had all to do with infrastructure, the same infrastructure companies strive for to be successful.

As individuals, each bison has distinctive roles in the herd and this herd consists of families, extended families, bands, clans and tribes, the same as all indigenous peoples. Families also meant they have to have homes and homes meant they, as extended family groups, had territories to live in and defend. I found out they did not make these homes in areas disruptive to family life development, i.e. watering holes, travel routes and mineral licks used as common ground by all extended families. Environmentally, this meant these herd animals did not overgraze and negatively impact sensitive riparian areas like panicked dysfunctional animals with no home. Functional herds also grazed close together because they wanted to be close together. Range Science's perpetual degradation (of) range problem of domestic cattle, bison and sheep spreading out and "grazing the best and leaving the rest", and science's labor intensive solutions such as Management Intensive Grazing, were being carried out by Yellowstone's bison without the fences.

Plus, what I saw in Yellowstone was bison with a vibrant and complex life, something I never saw in domestic or managed public herds. The life of these non-managed herds was full of emotion and play. They had Culture!! And the herd with the most culture was the Mirror Plateau- Pelican Creek bison herd. Their core herd couldn't care less about the bison in Hayden or Lamar valleys and they led exciting lives with only 200 members.

If they could do it with those numbers, I realized, I could do it on a farm. I could raise this number of bison developing this CULTURE. I realized I didn't need the millions of acres biologists said was needed to make bison populations vital again.

Thirty years later, after a life of saving Yellowstone's animals from poachers, I have 400 buffalo in five fully functioning family groups on our Iowa farm. I wouldn't trade any of it for a desk job and 128 rolls of toilet paper. I no longer work in Yellowstone but I have not forgotten its bison.

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NEWWESTERNERS: INTERVIEW 'ACTION' JACKSON, PART II

Bob Jackson on “Bison Culture” And Traditional Ag

By Todd Wilkinson, 9-20-07

Do wild animal populations have their own “culture”? In the first part of NewWest.Net’s interview with Bob Jackson, the former Yellowstone ranger turned private bison rancher said there is far more to an animal’s relationship with the landscape than meets the human eye. Look closer at bison, he suggests, and one not only sees culture, but matriarchal and patriarchal roles, not unlike those which existed among native American tribes on the western plains. In this, the second part of a continuing conversation with Jackson, the blunt-talking former civil servant suggests that wildlife biologists, including those working in Yellowstone, need to broaden their perspective and let go of biases, instilled in their thinking by academics, about how wildlife herds actually live. When Jackson suggests that among bison family groups there are grandpa and grandmas, parents and subadults, mentors and students, all carrying out specific functions, is he guilty of anthropomorphising? -Todd Wilkinson

Caption: ABOVE: Bob Jackson at his bison ranch on Iowa's tallgrass prairie.

MIDDLE: Jackson says it has taken 15 years and four bison generations to reach the point where Bison Culture is yielding ecological and economic efficiency at his ranch in Iowa.

BOTTOM: Bison in Yellowstone's Hayden Valley come to the edge of the Yellowstone River to drink. Jackson claims that only one of the national park's bison herds, the Mirror Plateau-Pelican Creek herd, maintains an ancient Bison Culture that is in imminent peril of dissolving and further threatened by calls to depopulate Yellowstone of its bison in order to eradicate the disease brucellosis, regarded as a threat to the cattle industry outside the park.

Photos courtesy of Bob Jackson

NEW WEST: Bob, you mention seeing certain things in Yellowstone bison herds and also in your own herd which you raise for profit, to achieve a healthy landscape, and promote better health for human meat eaters. When did you first start noticing “Bison Culture”? How did you identify it and study it and then apply what you learned to your own ranch? I know you realize that many of these things are difficult for scientists, old guard cattle ranchers and even your colleagues in the bison industry to believe. Your critics say that you are eccentric and that’s a nice way of putting it.

BOB JACKSON: Noticing Bison Culture, or any animal culture, started with my own attitude adjustment. I had to respect them—bison as creatures of higher being—before I could “see” it.

Working and living in natural surroundings, in a life where I roamed the Yellowstone backcountry for five months each year with minimal human contact, allowed me to start interacting with my surroundings. I had the Park Service's infrastructure and support system to keep me sane. But I could also become a part of my environment, not just look at or conquer it.

It always took a minimum of three weeks in the Thorofare at the beginning of the season to get into this groove. [NOTE TO READERS: The Thorofare district in the southeast corner of Yellowstone National Park is considered one of the remotest places in the Lower 48 states]. I was lousy at catching the poachers who were professional hunters, outfitters and guides until I was in this frame of mind. It was the same for studying animals.

I also had a lot of bias to overcome to finally see all life on this earth as equal to mine. My brothers and I grew up as big game hunters in the Midwest. Looking back, the way we hunted was an embryonic child-arrested attempt to connect with that world. We all got degrees in fish & wildlife biology and wanted to "manage" wildlife.

My religious background also confirmed the same thing my science professors implied, which was that: "We have dominion over everything in this world". In hindsight, it was an elitist attitude that didn't allow me to see that we humans' ability as omnivores to eat both plants and animals doesn't mean we have superiority over them. Every one of those plants and animals will do the same to me after I die.

Earlier, I said "allowed to interact" because being surrounded by nature did not mean I had the inside track to attain knowledge about nature. At each gradual step away from a superior attitude, new worlds were opening up. I soon realized most agricultural and biological science, as I knew it, was a product of our country's exploitive and abusive past. That is why those who should see it could not see what was before their eyes. Even biologists in Yellowstone, those who were "closest to nature", were speaking of "population densities" and "herds" in vague terms. They didn't and still don't know what makes components in any herd tick. If they did, the brucellosis problem would have been solved before it even became an issue.

Lastly, I wanted very badly to find out how herd animals lived if I was to "raise" them on my own private land. I wanted true sustainability, not the kind of "sustainability" that is considered hip today. The old notion of sustainability is how my dad farmed 50 years ago. It wasn't sustainable then and it isn't today. His world just had fewer chemicals while he mined the soil. Iowa State University's Tilth Lab states Iowa soils, once some of the most fertile on the planet, have lost 40 percent of their productive capacity since white man started farming its soil.

I had to relearn that if I was to raise bison, the function of a natural system was not only efficient environmentally but economically. I found out it all hinges on herd animals' need for social order and infrastructure.

Culture is an outcome of long term social infrastructure. My herd, after 30 years of social order development, as well as Yellowstone's introduced Plains bison into the Hayden and Lamar herds, is still embryonic compared to what you find in Yellowstone's Mirror Plateau-Pelican bison herd. This herd has been there for thousands of years—uninterrupted. Family members of that herd have passed on behavioral knowledge, enriching each generation until the behaviors were hard wired and distinct to the herd.

I knew early on in my Yellowstone career as a ranger, contrary to what scientists wrote and said, that bison lived as families. I could readily see the matriarchal part on the female side. It was a no brainer. But it took me years to see the patriarchal side.

Every male, whether he was young or old, whether he stayed with the herd or not, was an important part of that principal or extended family infrastructure. In the end, I found a pure system based on equality of the sexes and ages. Cow herds would visit the grandfathers and fathers who could no longer keep up with them. Young bulls had an emotionally perplexing time of deciding whether they should stay primarily with daddy or momma. If I startled them while they were with their new found bull heroes, they would often run a mile or more back to mamma and her herd.

Ultimately, my study of bison was the study of indigenous peoples. There was little for me in the biological science, range science or ag books. All they studied were symptoms. And even those few researchers willing to stick their necks out and write in vague acknowledgement of social structure, knew nothing of what it meant. If I wanted to know how spin-off satellite herds started, I'd read how Native American tribes spun-off, pre-white man. Then the next year, in the park I'd look for smaller groups of buffalo anywhere in the vicinity of larger groups. I soon realized the groups I originally thought were separate herds (up to two miles away) were actually dependent spin-off groups.

They followed the core group. If they just recently formed up, they came back for extended visits. If they were close to achieving the infrastructure necessary for independence, the spin-off group would graze near and then bed down close to the main power group. A few grandmas and grandpas then would leave their own "herd" to lay down with them (visit) for a couple of hours. Once the visit was over the spin-off group would take off at a brisk trot and the elders would walk the quarter mile to rejoin the core group. Soon I could predict most actions and movements depending on the situation. The makeup of these satellite groups was the same, down to the "T" as the spin-off Native American satellite groups I read about. All I had to do was take out superior "science" and put in the emotion of individuals and groups. This was the vitally and life of nature and what also made my herd so different than other private producers.

We started our Tall Grass Bison herd with three dysfunctional baby bison. We knew enough to not start out with more and older animals from dysfunctional herds. Mature screwed up animals don't make for good parents. My college psychology professor's statement, that families need three to four generations to obtain loving and caring families after they recognized abuse as a problem, came to mind. There was no way to acquire Yellowstone family groups and everything else out there was based on individuals.

Bison refuges and parks, the ones we would think have natural wild herds, were and are managed as multiples of individuals rather than families. It shows in their auctions. Sale bills look just like the original slave auction sale bills, with listings as numbers of individuals, by their sex and ages, without consideration to their familial ties.

Our management at Tall Grass Bison, the ranch I own, consists of improving the blood infrastructure for roles needed in our herd. We sell spin-off families. We also give no thought of the number of bulls per breeding cows, nor selection for fast growth to get animals to butchering age faster as other private producers do. They may be able to have faster return on their investment but the quality of product, both live animals and meat, is greatly diminished. Of course without family order they have no option for butchering mature animals. They have to strive for fast growth because young animals have less time to build up the stress so prevalent in dysfunctional herds. Chronic stress means tough meat.

Our economic savings is based on things we don't have to do. In our herd bison relatives take care of last year's calf and dependents while mommy concentrates her attention on her new born baby. She gets more time to eat, can better feed her baby, is in better shape to conceive again and her dependents don't get all stressed out with mommy gone. This means naturally weaned offspring don't have to be given shots and creep-fed like those in dysfunctional herds.

It took us four generations and 15 years to get basic family structure. It may seem like a long time but in reality it is no longer than it takes a pure bred beef producer to establish his specific line of herd identity. Each year our herd improves its culture and has the advantage over dysfunctional herds of not only learning things passed down from their immediate family, but also from all the other members of that herd and their ancestors. They learn what species of plants they can eat and when. By putting this knowledge literally on the ground, social order herds knock the socks off of dysfunctional animals in grazing efficiency.

However as proud we are of what our herd has done, it is nothing compared to the thousands of years Yellowstone's bison have learned from their ancestors.

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NEWWESTERNERS: INTERVIEW WITH BOB 'ACTION' JACKSON, PART III

In Animal Kingdom, Are Bison Equal In ‘Value’ To Humans?

By Todd Wilkinson, 9-21-07

In the big picture of earthly existence, are the lives of bison and other animals equal in value to humans? Bob Jackson doesn't think of himself as an animal rights activist, nor as a philosopher nor an intellectual who is immune to personal hypocrisy. In fact, he admits in plainspoken, opinionated, homespun English that at times his command of proper grammar is sorely lacking. But he is no Neanderthal. As a consumer and capitalist, he raises bison for sale to provide meat on the dinner table for hundreds of human families who are his customers.

Caption: Former Yellowstone backcountry ranger Bob 'Action' Jackson navigates the tallgrass at his Iowa bison ranch and the prickly questions surrounding whether animals possess the same kind of emotions as humans.

Nonetheless, he relates to bison as sentient creatures that possess their own range of emotions and sense of belonging to one another. Is there a contradiction here? This kind of paradox in Jackson has not only attracted responses of incredulity from members of the scientific community, who have pegged him with a "Dr. Doolittle" label, but it has left Jackson staking out contentious terrain, for it challenges our own value system. In this, the third part of NewWest.Net's continuing conversation with 'Action' Jackson, the topic moves from a discussion of Bison Culture to the relationship humans have with bison and other species. --Todd Wilkinson

NEWWEST.NET: Bob, what do you say to people who accuse you of reading your own human emotions and perspective into what you're witnessing with bison herds? Wildlife biologists say that you're speculating with conjecture and staking out a subjective position rather than an objective one that is based on the gathering of peer-reviewed empirical evidence. And some in the religious community argue that equating the value of humans to animals is heresy. If you want your paradigm shift to be taken seriously by public land managers and private property owners, how do you prove what your gut is telling you?

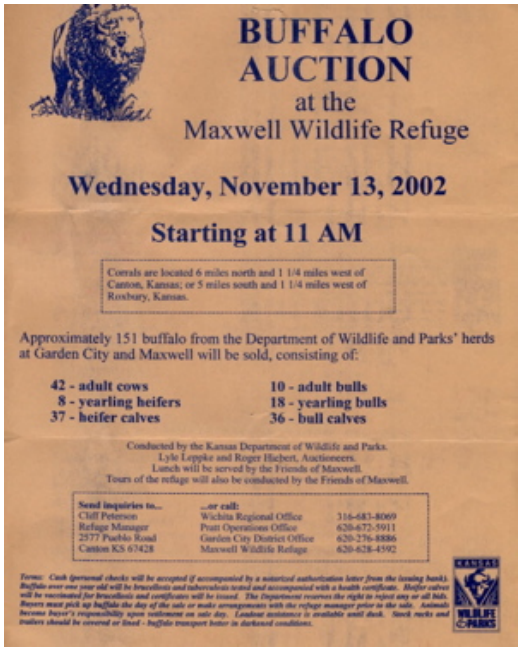
BOB JACKSON: How many times have you heard people say: "Hey, those animals are behaving and playing just like us?" If humans looked at life from a perspective of trying to relate to animals, then we’d have a better understanding of why science categorizes us as part of the animal kingdom. But to do so means pondering equality with other species, something most humans can’t consider.

To my knowledge, anthropomorphize means “to attribute human form or personality to things not human”. But there is no opposite term in Webster’s Dictionary. If there is, I have never heard it used in scientific circles. Without the opposite view being presented or identified, I have to attribute the origins of the term, anthropomorphism, to the bias of superiority humans assert over everything else in the world.

Scholastically, I grew up with the teachings that there are “lower” and “higher" forms of life. Science delineated and assigned these different levels and yet the survival of higher life forms depends on the organisms considered of lesser value or relevance.

Superiority is a “Catch-22” in the biological science world. We assign life judged against our own, but this bias keeps us from actually seeing what life is. Anthropomorphism, and its resulting sense of superiority, doesn’t stop at animal vs. human comparisons. To conquer and kill, people have to justify their actions. Thus we get the words “sub humans”, savages, slaves, Aryan Race and Holocaust.

More subtle and insidious is what this attitude creates when we manage, domesticate or control other living things. In my farming community, I hear of farm kids throwing young pigs against the walls for “fun”. In Yellowstone, on various occasions I have had to stop park horse operations employees from kicking my horse’s groins, smashing a horse’s head against trees, and repeatedly ripping out flesh from a horse’s back with the claw end of shoeing hammers. I have seen biologists and vets throw pieces of the bison calves they had just killed and dissected, at the mothers who were inching too close. To these people, all their actions were justified. But would these same biologists throw human baby parts at human mothers to keep them away?



BUFFALO AUCTION
at the
Maxwell Wildlife Refuge

Wednesday, November 13, 2002

Starting at 11 AM

Corrals are located 6 miles north and 1 1/4 miles west of Canton, Kansas; or 5 miles south and 1 1/4 miles west of Roxbury, Kansas.

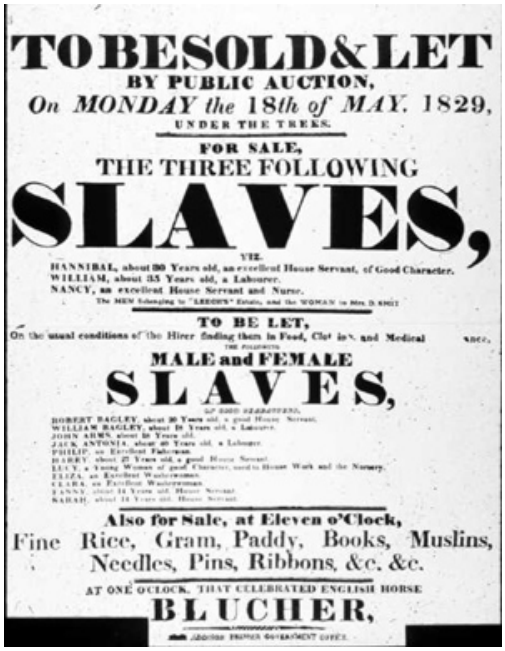
Approximately 151 buffalo from the Department of Wildlife and Parks' herds at Garden City and Maxwell will be sold, consisting of:

42 - adult cows	10 - adult bulls
8 - yearling heifers	18 - yearling bulls
37 - heifer calves	36 - bull calves

Conducted by the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks
Lyle Leppke and Roger Hiebert, Auctioneers.
Lunch will be served by the Friends of Maxwell.
Tours of the refuge will also be conducted by the Friends of Maxwell.

Send inquiries to...	...or call:	
Cliff Peterson	Wichita Regional Office	316-683-8069
Refuge Manager	Pratt Operations Office	620-672-5911
2577 Pueblo Road	Garden City District Office	620-276-8886
Canton KS 67428	Maxwell Wildlife Refuge	620-628-4592

Terms: Cash (personal checks will be accepted if accompanied by a notarized authorization letter from the issuing bank). Buffalo over one year old will be brucellosis tested and accompanied with a health certificate. Heifer calves will be vaccinated for brucellosis and certificates will be issued. The Department reserves the right to reject any or all bids. Buyers must pick up buffalo the day of the sale or make arrangements with the refuge manager prior to the sale. Animals become buyer's responsibility upon settlement on sale day. Loadout assistance is available until dark. Stock racks and trailers should be covered or lined - buffalo transport better in darkened conditions.



TO BE SOLD & LET
BY PUBLIC AUCTION,
On MONDAY the 18th of MAY, 1829,
UNDER THE TREES.

FOR SALE,
THE THREE FOLLOWING
SLAVES,

VIZ.
HANNIBAL, about 30 Years old, an excellent House Servant, of Good Character.
WILLIAM, about 35 Years old, a Labourer.
NANCY, an excellent House Servant and Nurse.

TO BE LET,
On the usual conditions of the Hirer finding them in Food, Cloathing and Medical

MALE and FEMALE
SLAVES,

Also for Sale, at Eleven o'Clock,
Fine Rice, Gram, Paddy, Books, Muslins,
Needles, Pins, Ribbons, &c. &c.

AT ONE O'CLOCK, THAT CELEBRATED ENGLISH HORSE
BLUCHER,

Can a parallel be drawn between the auction sale of livestock and people? Bob Jackson draws the analogy but it has left him alienated from other livestock producers.

Superiority of race or species is needed to justify abuse, whether it is war against people or treatment of animals. Thus, we get a bit closer as to why “anthropo” is such as dirty word in behavioral science circles. The word is merely an extension of who we are and our prejudices.

Yet our prejudices persist and scientists continue on with the same bias because to admit otherwise invalidates everything they did and believed before. In biological sciences I see no attitude of a “brother’s keeper”. The fact that the very people who study and “manage” animals, are prone to abuse them without even knowing why, says why we as a “modern” civilization, will not learn from other animals.

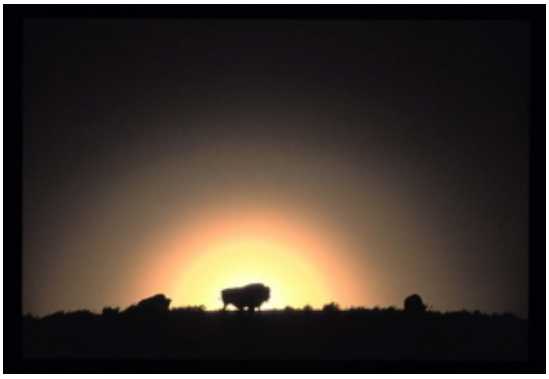
Those indigenous peoples who believed in equality of all life, were not totally immune to this superiority either. There are numerous historical accounts of camp dogs, the animals they used to pack gear, being beaten by their “masters”. The more control, the bigger the problem. The industrialized world we live in assumes a lot of control over others on this planet.

In my life as a ranger, I lived with, traveled and packed horses 60,000 to 70,000 miles. I had to redefine my relationship with them as a brother’s keeper. Otherwise, it would have eaten me up emotionally and turned me into a lesser person. It also was essential for my own safety.

To have the attitude that I needed to teach my horses "manners” or to be its “master” or “boss” meant they could not help me. They needed to act independent of my “commands” when they recognized a danger before me, whether it was a grizzly or poacher. I never got hurt by a horse or sored my stock for the 30 years I rode the mountains. I was proud of this accomplishment but it wasn’t because of diligence or technique. Rather it was because of my attitude toward that animal.

Likewise, science can learn a lot about animals if those studying animals “adjust” their view of life. Life has emotion whether we are human or “higher” or “lower” forms of that life. I believe this and wouldn’t care if anyone else did if it wasn’t for what humans adversely do to animals.

Science thinks of “peer review” so I guess this has to be “proved”. Proof is in results. I can take anyone to Yellowstone’s Hayden Valley during the rut and accurately narrate, in a non stop manner, as much as any “expert” I know or read about of what herds or individuals in that herd are going to do next. Emotion in those herds is the key to asking questions and receiving answers and the emotions in those animals are exactly the same as what humans have.



With humans asserting their own place at the top of the animal kingdom pyramid, does that make us "superior" to bison? Jackson questions the rationale. Here, Yellowstone bison roam the Hayden Valley at sundown. Photo by Jeff Henry.

I’d like to see any recognized “authority” who does not believe this watch a herd and not only PREDICT, but then continue on and say WHY each individual is going to act and move the way they do within that herd. They couldn’t predict it even one

percent of the time unless they acknowledged emotion. All one would get is the standard "pecking order" answers because that is all they would see. Without this needed knowledge there is no way they can assess the uniqueness of herds or take action to preserve those herds.

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NEWWESTERNERS: INTERVIEW WITH BOB 'ACTION' JACKSON, PART IV

What Does Bison Restoration Look Like? One Rancher's View

By Todd Wilkinson, 9-24-07

Caption: Photo by Todd Wilkinson.

In autumn 2006, the Wildlife Conservation Society held a landmark conference in Denver on the future of North American bison. Among the questions being pondered by the large gathering of conservationists, scientists, wildlife officials from the U.S., Canada and Mexico, and representatives from the commercial bison industry was this: Should bison be listed as a federally-protected species in the U.S. and moreover, do they warrant placement on the IUCN's Red List as an imperiled animal in need of global focus?

While no one in attendance disagreed with the fact that bison, when numbering in the tens of millions, were once keystone species on the Great Plains, shaping the health and structure of plant, animal, and human communities, there is a divergence of opinion about whether buffalo can ever be restored to such large numbers that they again fulfill their historic role.

Is the Buffalo Commons achievable or is it a post-pleistocene pipe dream? Would listing of bison enhance the goals of bison recovery or would it alienate private ranchers who far and away are responsible for stewarding most of the bison in the world? In part four of NewWest.Net's ongoing conversation with bison rancher Bob "Action" Jackson, the former Yellowstone Park ranger says bison recovery is less about numbers, pure genetics or legal classification and more about examining their functional role on the landscape which stems from understanding the nature of the beast. Do you agree with Jackson? *— Todd Wilkinson*

Click on the links below to read previous installments of the conversation with Bob Jackson.

- Part I: Controversial Yellowstone Ranger Becomes Bison Rancher
- Part II: Bob Jackson on "Bison Culture" And Traditional Ag
- Part III: In Animal Kingdom, Are Bison Equal In 'Value' To Humans?

NEWWEST.NET: As you imagine it, what does recovery of the American bison look like and what is necessary for it to succeed? Some environmentalists like to put down bison ranchers, but I've met a lot of well-intentioned, conservation-minded producers and the fact is that most of the 500,000 bison in existence today are found on private farms and ranches. The counter criticism that gets leveled from those who raise bison for a living is that some in the conservation

community seem to have this utopian vision of millions of free-ranging buffalo again rumbling across the Great Plains, yet they have no pragmatic game plan for how to get there in a way that is rooted in reality. Moreover, producers say they feel resented by environmental organizations and that activists have no understanding or appreciation of the economic challenges that bison ranchers face.

BOB JACKSON: The supposed state of recovery in bison might best be assessed by a quote from Colonel Dodge. In his book, Thirty Three Years Among the Wild Indians, he states, "In May, 1871, I drove in a buggy from old Ft. Zara to Ft. Larned, on the Arkansas River. The distance was thirty four miles. At least twenty five miles of that distance was through an immense herd. The whole country appeared one mass of buffalo, moving slowly to the northward, and it was only when actually among them that it could be ascertained that the apparently solid mass was an agglomeration of from fifty to two hundred animals, separated from the surrounding herds by greater or lesser space, but still separated".

The main point of this observation is that no matter what the overall size of the herd, the separate extended family units made up the herd. Compare this to today where any number or mass of individuals constitutes a "herd". So, it comes down to whether one believes there is any more to a buffalo than what one sees in the masses of individuals now under present public and private management. In other words are they functional and sustainable as this species once lived? I do not believe they are.

Outside of Yellowstone and the indigenous woods bison herd in Canada's Northwest Territories, most of what I see on government and private lands is a species whose depth of being is only skin deep. They would make horrible candidates for restoration. These animals aren't allowed to form up into functional family groups and thus don't possess the drive and emotions needed for the vitality of life or learning acquired from their ancestors. Social organization not only helps animals live effectively but it is also the key to genetic diversity, and symbiotic interaction with their landscape. Social organization is also what humans had to use for millions of years to make themselves into the species we see today. Families and its extensions are the $E=MC^2$ of life for humans and herd animals.

With buffalo not being allowed to form up and maintain these groups there is no real restoration. This is important for humans because bison and other herd animals are major sources of food for us. Lack of social order means stress and the stress built up in today's animals because they are dysfunctional translates into the inability of these animals to develop the nutrient value within their bodies which they are capable of.

To repeat, we need to consider that any herd animal which depended on social structure for eons for its very survival as a species is inherently and therefore chronically stressed without this order. What pre-white natives ate for meat in this country is not the same animal as that of todays stressed dysfunctional animals (wild or domestic). I know because I have tracked and then sampled a fair amount of elk meat from the scout bulls that on occasion left the few non-migratory herds in Yellowstone only to be shot by outfitters.

Also, today the ability of a dysfunctional animal to pass on desirable genes is severely limited without social order. With nature's multi-generational related females, choosing a singular male for breeding the females in that extended family for the two-three year period he is competitive (six to eight years old), means the herd chooses the genetics for their extended family …for better or worse when it comes to competition with other extended families. There is no downside compared with the pure bred line breeding of domestic agriculture with its accompanying inbreeding problems. It is also the only system I know of where an animal doesn't need to have offspring to pass on its beneficial genes. This all means social order herds have control of their destiny and today's managed herds don't.

Thus the only possibility a "managed" herd animal has for "improvement" is the genetic choice of chance. Biologists keep telling us about bottlenecks, where huge numbers in diverse locations are needed but all one needs to start genetic diversity is two extended family herds with each having their own territories to defend. It's the same principle where the girl or guy from the neighboring school looks more exciting and attractive than the girl or guy from their own school. The indicators scientists use to prove these bottlenecks can not measure the emotions every one of us and all other animals use to maintain viable populations. Yes, I believe there are serious genetic bottlenecks out there but most are happening because we, as wildlife managers, do not understand social structure, whether it is Florida panthers or bison-bison.

Today's dysfunctional bison are not compatible with their environment either. This is because without a family there is no home and home is all important for any species distribution and grazing patterns. Does one think all those millions of bison Colonel Dodge witnessed just haphazardly formed up and then dispersed in a haphazard way at the end of each movement? It would have been chaos.

Colonel Dodge's herd had the structure of a military movement. The older bulls were two weeks in the front, the young bulls were flankers and the rear guard followed the whole herd. Accounts said the groups all melted away till there was no more herd. To do so in such a non descript way means they peeled off to their homes the same as humans do when masses congregate and then disperse at sporting events or pilgrimages. It is the same as I saw each year in Yellowstone where the elk migration from Jackson started with a huge trail but got smaller with each family exiting at their drainage.

Compatibility with land happens for several reasons in social order herds. Think family and apply it to any environmental or range science problem and we can solve it when it comes to herd animals. Mothers and grandmothers, in order to teach, need to keep offspring away from disruptions and distractions. Thus, a benefit is no overgrazing in sensitive riparian areas in the summer. Families of any species will not make a home in areas used by many others…i.e., all families needing to come to the same water source to drink. (Think of a human family that finally attained everything it wanted. A nice house on the golf course, a progressive school for the kids, and a house that had all the things mother ever desired. Then add to this scenario strangers walking through the house at any or all hours of the day and night to get a drink of water. This family would be gone pronto).

Homes also meant family herds were intimate with their surroundings and best knew what to eat and when. They had the uninterrupted learning from thousands of related ancestors. Thus all those broad leafs and "weeds" in the uplands that today's managed grazers don't know are edible are selected by natures herds. Management Intensive Grazing was also here long before modern man came up with his "new" idea of expensive and labor intensive paddocks. Families accomplish this because they WANT to stay close to each other. Thus, we have another way nature answers range sciences dilemma of "eating the best and leaving the rest".

One can go on for pages and find the answers to most all agriculture's husbandry and environmental problems. But in the end we need to know if we can change today's dysfunctional management, a system created by man when he started domesticating animals for emergency food, and which he went on to arrogantly apply to all animals, wild and domestic.

Yes we can change it, and the "well intended bison producers" in your question are the ones who are best equipped to do so. Some are doing it by default and some are because economic consideration means speedier implementation. There are people in the bison business today with the deep conviction that "there has to be a better way" than the model invented by the cattle industry.

From what I read in the early interviews on why he wanted to raise bison, I think Ted Turner highlights the producer rising above conventional agriculture to find this "better way". He also happens to be the one in the best position to carry this out and he has hired great people to wrestle with the big questions. But he confronts, as all of us do, a problem of implementation because the system and the market do not immediately reward those who want to make positive changes. He knows that any long lasting ecological sustainability in the way the lands are managed and cared for is dependent upon having economic sustainability. That's just a fact.

In today's world of production agriculture, there are huge obstacles and resistance from outside forces to melding economic and environmental goals succinctly. In many cases, the academics in range science, those who market sustainable food products, the conscientious consumer, and the agricultural support communities are too far removed from reality on the ground to be of much help. We need to think differently about how we grow food in this country. Believe it or not, the National Bison Association is trying to advance this cause but it is going to take all of us thinking about the choices we make every day as consumers.

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NEWWESTERNERS: INTERVIEW WITH BOB 'ACTION' JACKSON, PART V

A Bare-Knuckled Poke At Public Bison Herds In the West

By Todd Wilkinson, 9-26-07

As NewWest.Net's conversation with Bob 'Action' Jackson continues, the former Yellowstone Park backcountry ranger-turned-bison-rancher ignites rhetorical fireworks by offering a blunt assessment of public land management agencies overseeing bison populations across the West. He also takes aim at academics conducting research and teaching students in land grant universities. Jackson's scathing critique reminds many why he was such a divisive figure while working for the National Park Service. But does challenging the status quo make him wrong? —Todd Wilkinson

Caption: While working in the saddle as a backcountry ranger in Yellowstone, Bob Jackson tried to outwit poachers and cultivated both a mystique and unique understanding of the remote Thorofare region. He was controversial then for speaking his mind and remains so today.

Click on the links below to read previous installments of the conversation with Bob Jackson.

- Part I: Controversial Yellowstone Ranger Becomes Bison Rancher
- Part II: Bob Jackson on “Bison Culture” And Traditional Ag
- Part III: In Animal Kingdom, Are Bison Equal In ‘Value’ To Humans?
- Part IV: What Does Bison Restoration Look Like? One Rancher’s View

NEWWEST.NET: You have a harsh assessment of how public bison are managed in the West. Your opinions have attracted the ire of those working for public land management agencies. Frankly, it would be perilous for NewWest.Net to even try and paraphrase your thoughts. Would you share your no-hold's barred comments again?

BOB JACKSON: I have a lot of friends who still work for the land and wildlife agencies. They have told me that unless someone steps forward and speaks up, nothing is going to change. I have nothing to lose. Let me begin by rephrasing your question. Why can't we turn to our public herds if we want to restore the kind of family infrastructure that I've been talking about? Especially when government agencies and public lands like Yellowstone, Wind Cave, the National Bison Range, the National Elk Refuge, and other preserves seem to be ideal for providing the kind of long-term time frame needed?

Your readers need to know some background. It takes three to four generations and 12 to 15 years to develop rudimentary functional families in bison, which actually is no longer than it

takes a purebred beef producer to establish his own line. In my opinion, the reason we can't rely on famous bison parks like Yellowstone is because the people running the wildlife “shows” have a professional bias that stymies the very change that is needed. They have their hands tied even more than private producers do.

For the people who have chosen to work for public agencies, it is their very training and education that locks them into an attitude of superiority over animals that is very difficult to overcome when managing them. They are what I call "the defaulters". All one has to do is look at our refuges, parks and state hunting grounds for proof.

Let me begin by talking about Custer State Park in South Dakota. From what I saw two to three years ago, Custer, which next to Yellowstone holds the other premier public bison herd, is about as far from “restoration” as can be. Their managers, like those of most other public herds, feel the obsessive need to “improve” the herd. Custer’s total budget comes from selling bison and the established way to do this is to think in terms of individual animals, rather than taking stock of the whole herd and then extrapolating out how much they can net per bison on the open market.

The procedure for selling their animals is no different than how slave owners ripped apart human families by selling individuals at auction. To this end, Custer rounds up its bison each fall and divides individuals by age for sale. The round up is a whoop and holler tourist affair that nets the park a lot of money from sale and spectators (think of the Roman Coliseum, the elite, the lions, the gladiators and those who died in the end). There is no thought of the need to identify infrastructure of bison herds or to keep family units together. It's all about the show but it comes at the expense of the animals.

Jackson on the porch of the Thorofare ranger cabin where he spent long stretches refining his attitudes about the relationship between people and wildlife. Today, he believes that in many cases management of public bison herds is missing the mark.

These buffalo don’t even have a chance to start social order because they are never managed as part of distinct families or satellite groups. Some bulls are simply looked upon as candidates for trophy hunts once they reach five years of age, but their functional role as patriarchs and teachers of younger bulls in the herd is ignored.

In Yellowstone, bulls don’t even start to breed at this age unless they are the ones allowed to tag along with their prime age hero bulls that are much older. This means Custer’s managed herd is missing most of the male role model components except for the few lucky mature bulls allowed to live to fill the viewfinders of tourist cameras.

As for cow bison, most females in Custer, as well as female bison in public herds across the rest

of this country, are sold by year 6 so they can fetch more money at these sales as breeding animals. In the wild, bison cows live and reproduce up to thirty years of age. The final “cull” of all females at Custer, however, is 11 years of age. There are none older. Mature mothers, who would otherwise have a lot of knowledge to pass on to their offspring, do not exist. Imagine a human community like that.

Looking at our own species, we see most all training, learning and order comes from mature adults, not the teenagers. But what you have at Custer are teenagers teaching the kids how to live. Eliminating older bison mentors leaves the herd incredibly dysfunctional compared to what it should be. In the end, Custer justifies its actions because, like all other state and federal agencies, it has a perceived need to “improve” its herd by, in this case, constantly selling off animals. Maybe now with relatively low market prices for bison, Custer will reconsider and slow down its culling program. I hope it does.

Next, let me mention the National Bison Range in Montana, the refuge that got its start with America’s original need to “restore” America’s bison after the slaughter that occurred in the 19th century. I know I may rile some feathers for saying this but their focus today is seeding all other refuges with what I consider purebred “Aryan” bison. They are oblivious to what this constant exporting of bison does to their own herd structure and to the landscape.

Refuges across the nation are replacing “mixed blood” herds, meaning bison with cattle genes mixed in, with what I call "the master race" buffalo from the Bison Range. Neal Smith Refuge in Iowa sent their mixed-blood herd which they built up over 15 years to slaughter via Indian donation so they could get some of the Bison Range’s Hitler youth.

NEWWEST.NET: But Bob, why is it a bad thing to aspire to preserve pure genetic lines? Part of what makes a species a species is its genetic distinction. In many cases, genes confer advantages for survival and many have said that it was genetics in bison that gave them resistance to many of the diseases that came across the Atlantic with Europeans and exacted a deadly toll on humans, wildlife, and livestock.

BOB JACKSON: I'm not saying that preserving genetic lines isn't important. It is. What I'm saying is that there's more to a bison being a bison than whether it has 100 percent bison genes or 98 percent bison genes with cattle blood from the distant past mixed in. Achieving genetic purity in all of the bison herds out there will never happen, especially if the goal is to rapidly grow bison numbers and get more bison out there to serve as tools for achieving healthy landscapes. Bison, with a little bit of cattle genes in them, still behave like bison if you let them.

The genetic cleansing that is taking place, using animals from the Bison Range, is the equivalent of researchers and managers saying we need to go to all reservations and weed out all Native Americans with any DNA markers in them from white settlers. Otherwise, there is no validity to them being Indians. That, of course, is absurd. Native Americans are unique because of their culture, traditions, languages, and knowledge of having lived closely with the land over untold generations. Having genetic purity in bison is less important than nurturing healthy natural bison behavior. Bison are healthiest when they interact in family groups because the animals are less stressed.

NEWWEST.NET: You know, don't you, that what you're saying is controversial and is certain to attract a fair share of detractors. Aside from those concerns, what else do you see as you look at public bison herds across the West?

BOB JACKSON: Let's discuss the hallowed National Park Service, my former employer. And let's look to the neighbor of Custer State Park, Wind Cave National Park. It has what I consider a "crack whore" herd with just as much damage if not more being done than in Custer's and the Bison Range herd. The bison there are a mirror image of Yellowstone's former roadside bears. Except the bison addiction at Wind Cave is salt, not human garbage.

It started with 150 years of humans removing ungulate bones from the land which has produced mineral deficiencies that Wind Cave managers, in their quest for "natural herds" don't see or want to correct. Animals need minerals such as natural salts. A drive through the park reveals mature cows and bulls coming up to and surrounding any stopped or slow moving vehicle looking for salty handouts. They snort at radiators dripping anti-freeze and lick the ground in the spill spots so much at pull outs that holes three feet wide and a foot deep have been formed. Scared calves stand back 50 yards, quietly pleading for mommy to come back from the artificial salt licks.

Further inspection at Wind Cave reveals small herds staying far away from all these red light district happenings. These groups are generally made up of one or two harried cows struggling to form up some semblance of order with 10 to 15 calves and yearlings under the most difficult of living conditions. It's like a day care with too many kids and not enough teachers. Of course, Wind Cave's perpetual need for herd reduction means they also get to jump on the same Aryan race band wagon with the recent discovery they have also have the "chosen ones", meaning their own pure genetic strain.

So Wind Cave ends up with the same scenario as Custer, where they round up and ship out "excess" animals. The "mixed races" are designated for Indian donation (slaughter to feed people) and the master race calves and yearlings go to the non profit conservation organizations, whose decision makers orchestrate flawed restoration because they view themselves from the elevated position of having never once considered the fact that despite humans possessing big brains it does not mean Homo sapiens itself has itself achieved superior species status. These groups are restoring purebred bison but they aren't putting back bison behavior on the landscape.

And then there is Yellowstone, in a league all by itself.

Among the things that have made Jackson a critic of the test and slaughter program for Yellowstone bison, meant to placate cattle ranchers concerned about brucellosis transmission, are the capture facilities where animals are kept in tight quarters, adding to stress levels, and leading to fights in which some bison get gored and fatally injured. Yellowstone National Park Photo

With at least 10 years of brucellosis reductions carried out at Yellowstone's Draconian corrals (they have the worst designed and managed corrals I have ever seen), fractured families and chaos in Yellowstone's Lamar and Hayden herds is now the norm. During my last years of patroling the park backcountry, I could not ride in Hayden Valley without having remnant bison groups start running one half mile off and continue to do so for the 2 to 3 miles back to the safety of the woods. Why is that?

Every federal and state entity involved in the numerous well meaning brucellosis conferences deal only in terms of NUMBERS of animals Yellowstone can sustain. Yellowstone naturalists can write the words "social order" on their bison exhibits at the Canyon Village Visitor Center or Yellowstone biologists can be seen talking of "bison families" on the Discovery Channel but they might as well be discussing how cows on the moon make the cheese we used to see from earth.

Outside the park, "thoughtful" state biologists have been given very generous budgets to run brucellosis-free calf facilities that are really prisons. A lot of money with very fuzzy justifications is being spent all for the end goal of leaving Yellowstone gloriously freed of "diseased animals" and then replaced someday by animals that were lucky enough to test negative or other purebred animals brought in.

The thing is, we don't know the value of animals that might test positive for brucellosis and yet, at the same time, represent little risk of actually transmitting the disease. We don't know because we aren't interested. The other thing is, these prisons are for bison children that are not allowed to have visitors or any other contact with adult bison from the outside world. What is the park going to do, someday "soft release" them back in Yellowstone but with no behavioral knowledge?

They don't even know to employ the purebred German SS mothers of Hitler's era to train these "special" children. These calves will make for poor substitutes and cause ecological destruction if reintroduced into Yellowstone. Maybe the park can start up Lamar's old buffalo ranch and baby these animals through the winter with hay? Then what? Thinking only of replacement of numbers is elitist and ends up as perpetual symptom of bad management by park decision makers.

NEWWEST.NET: Wait a minute. Isn't it unfair to paint all public bison managers with broad negative brushstrokes? You seem to be condemning public servants and once upon a time you were one yourself. I've known many different bison managers and researchers over the years and most seemed well-intentioned and were committed to doing a good job.

BOB JACKSON: It isn't a problem of having bad individual managers, biologists and researchers. It is a problem of having a bad bureaucracy that doesn't allow narrowly-trained individuals to think outside the box and challenge the norms. The reason things can't change for the better is because of the politics and interference from Washington that is running the show in Yellowstone, Wind Cave, the Bison Range and Elk Refuge in Jackson Hole. At the field level,

people are not allowed to manage with a different set of insights. It's almost like the bureaucrats above them want to weed out the emotional side of them and turn them into cold analytical thinkers. There's a lot you miss when only one side of your brain is working.

Biologists, visiting me in the Thorofare so they could tell their grand children about being at the furthest point from a road in the lower 48, were outwardly anxious in their mannerisms because their cell phones wouldn't work. They rode fast to the tops of mountains to call Washington so they could get their stories straight on brucellosis issues for the press. Thus, priorities have been skewed.

Applicants for field biologist positions are considered more for their expertise in writing Environmental Impact Statements than their ability to make field observations. In the end I see studies of bison being approved that have a lot of the Marlin Perkins, Wild Kingdom flare in them but not a lot of substance.

Operations like netting fleeing bison from helicopters in Hayden or Lamar Valley might get a "paper biologist" on a show like Animal Planet but films don't show all the dead bison dying in one summer—exhausted and overheated animals suddenly not being able to move in the corrals which are out of public sight. Most any private producer operating a squeeze chute in warm weather knows not to leave a mature bison in the confined space very long.

As long as politics and top down management have the winning hand I do not see much help on the horizon for Yellowstone's bison. In a few short years, insensitivities to what has happened on the ground in its corrals and its "reductions" will have destroyed most of what it took Yellowstone's introduced inexperienced Plains buffalo a hundred years ago to build in family foundation.

Yellowstone has busted up families from the distinct Lamar and Hayden herds, chewed them up, spit them out and let them crawl away the best they could. Sometimes Yellowstone holds these scared, scraped up, crushed-ribbed remnants together for months in pens, and then releases them as a pack. The effect is those dependents of families most fractured from reductions subordinate themselves to any sort of bison organization or dominance left over after each year's cataclysmic round ups and hazing outside the park.

They follow the "leaders" to their temporary safe location in the park for the summer. It is not home, at least not theirs. Thus displaced adults are being continually bumped out of any turf they try to claim. The effect is big herds of milling animals in Lamar that never go to their normal summer haunts. In the midst of all this chaos, however, the wildlife cinematographers of Yellowstone tell me they are now getting a lot more footage of bulls in "real" fights. That's a sign of very stressed animals.

Yellowstone's latest gambit, the okay to trailer bison captured outside its West Entrance for release elsewhere in the park's northern herds is going to cause the problem of not only placing animals outside their homes but also tremendously taxing already stressed resident bison families.

The end result will be even more bison escaping Yellowstone in the winter. Even if the resident herds were left alone it would still take 12 to 15 years for these animals to sort it out and get themselves and the ecosystem back to functioning order. With Yellowstone administration capitulating at every turn to the whims of politics from the cattle industry it is even more urgent to save the only families left undisturbed. It is the last remnant of Bison Culture that still can be recognized and is barely holding on from the indigenous mountain bison that have evolved in Pelican Valley over the last 10,000 years.

NEWWEST.NET: What roles do the states have?

BOB JACKSON: Can we really rely on the state fish and game departments that are supposed to be dealing with wildlife on the ground every day outside of Yellowstone? I agree that they have a vested interest in keeping public herds healthy, don't they? But a look at management actions again shows decisions all based on individual animals, not what is in the best interest of bison populations. There is no thought given to bison families. What state fish and game agencies unwittingly promote in their big game management is akin to aliens coming to Earth yearly for a human hunt and killing off most of Earth's adult and sub adult male populations. I'd hate to say what kind of emotional and physical shape our human species would look like if we were treated and managed like the elk herds in the Rocky Mountain West.

NEWWEST.NET: Now that you've just angered the federal and state land management agencies and riled up the public, do you have any suggestions to bring a solution?

BOB JACKSON: The obvious answer would be for me to suggest that we, as appalled and newly-enlightened herd-friendly people, run to the local land grant university to seek salvation from the academics. It sounds logical because they are on the cutting edge, aren't they? But the reality of "peer review" means colleagues are the judges and they are a reflection of mainstream attitudes. Besides, most of the land grant universities in the West reward attitudes that are very cattle-centric with how they think about range health. It is colored by livestock models. But livestock are not managed with attention paid to family groups. And most of the successful bison ranchers I know realize that bison are very different than cattle.

Academia, in spite of its reputation for promoting free thinking, can actually be a setting where tolerance for opposing viewpoints isn't condoned. In fact, if you go too far out on the fringes and challenge what some professors are teaching kids in the classroom, you will discover people who aren't willing to be your friend any more. It's considered too threatening to their own cultural identity and the security of their paycheck. They are also the same academics our government uses on its committees to dole out taxpayer money for studies and they select the studies that supposedly have merit. Academia, as stated earlier in this discussion, is where the word, Anthropomorphism, is mentioned with a hand-over-the-mouth when tattling on another researcher who dares to question it.

So how can anyone objectively study animals, where realization of equality with humans must be considered if they are to come up with truly meaningful data? They can't, at least not yet in the Applied Science field. It is a knock out blow for any researcher trying to study the effect of herd families, and their emotions, on the environment, grass lands and economic viability for its ranchers, who are supposed to be served by knowledge discovered in the university environment. I wish there was hope in the short term, but I see little research in this arena happening until a researcher with enough colleagues supporting him runs with all the overwhelming "anecdotal" info and the same thing happens with others until it becomes undeniable, even to the ardent skeptics.

Who gets credit wouldn't be important if it meant animals were treated with more respect in the end. But the reality on the ground is this: How can any human researcher with big brain-itis and having the need to belong and have acceptance, objectively formulate study criteria, let alone accurately analyze his results when our culture subjugates other life forms on Earth to lesser meaning? Bad science is often worse than no science at all.

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NEWWESTERNERS: INTERVIEW WITH BOB 'ACTION' JACKSON, THE FINALE

The Hard Questions Of Raising Bison For Supper

By Todd Wilkinson, 10-01-07

Caption: Far away from his other life as a Yellowstone Park ranger, Bob Jackson worked as an Iowa farmer and bison rancher, refining ideas that challenge the conventions of modern animal husbandry.

Do you know where your meat comes from? Was the animal raised and killed with "compassion?" Do its survivors grieve? Bob Jackson says it all sounds so New Age, so Left of center, so radically alternative, so touchy feely, and yet many Americans are making a conscious shift in their diets and attitudes toward more healthful, natural foods. As the movement gains both cultural and economic momentum, consumers also are facing questions they never pondered before. One of the native edibles appearing increasingly on family dinner menus is bison. Over the last several days, NewWest.Net has carried on a conversation with "Action" Jackson, the bison rancher who first made headlines as an outspoken backcountry ranger who battled big game poachers in the wilds of Yellowstone. But every autumn when he went home to Iowa for the winter, Jackson's lesser-known parallel life took shape as he steadily grew his own bison herd. In this, the conclusion to our interview with Jackson, he takes readers metaphorically and physically into his own backyard where he has enlisted bison to become a better land steward and to tweak the sensibilities of our consumer, fast-food society. He even shares what he does when he takes the life of a bison. Observers say the kinds of ideas Jackson espouses have broad implications for the environment, the U.S. economy, the dietary health of citizens, the tourism industry, and for the way humans interact with the land and the animals they select to inhabit it. —Todd Wilkinson

NEWWEST.NET: Bob Jackson, we've covered a lot of ground. While you recognize how the identity of Americans is shaped by the presence of public lands and public wildlife like bison, you are skeptical about the ability of politics and politicians to craft viable solutions that deliver real models of sustainability that actually work on the ground. In particular, you note the clash that exists between short-term private economic interests as well as re-election cycles that trump long-term bio centric thinking essential to the protection of natural life support systems such as our air, water, soil and wildlife resources.

BOB JACKSON: To cut to the chase quickly, it comes back, for me, to the role of private producers who seek a better way and who are trying to steer the marketplace in a different direction. I want a marketplace that has a conscience.

NEW WEST.NET: Some are going to call you a hypocrite for raising animals that are destined for the very marketplace you want to change. How sensitive can you be to an animal that you are raising to be sold, killed, and eaten? How much sympathy do predators have for their prey?

BOB JACKSON: What I am talking about is attaining a sense of peace with the idea of consuming an animal that, in many ways, we are equal to and to a certain degree dependent upon. As one person, I cannot manipulate the market, but I can control my own small influence on it, which admittedly is only a small ripple. That means trying to apply what I know about bison to my own herd and assess the way my animals are living on the land. This is what we are trying to do at Tall Grass Bison. I get hundreds of people every year, from other ranchers to tourists, who are fascinated by bison. They want to come to a place where bison have a home on the land.

Sure, we raise animals that are ultimately killed and eaten. This is part of reality. We shouldn't run from it or pretend that it doesn't exist. We as a species live on other life forms whether we eat meat or are Vegans subsisting on plants or other organisms. As meat producers, we provide this food to others with monetary compensation in mind because that's how our economy works. But to do this sustainably and ethically, we need to remove superiority from the equation. Superiority of humans over the animals we produce. Superiority of one type of animal over another. Superiority of one cut of meat over another. Once this happens, the answers of how to be sustainable, ethical and profitable fall into place. It comes closer to a life of harmony.

NEWWEST.NET: At Tall Grass Bison, the name of your farm/ranch on the eastern Great Plains, you view your operation as a working laboratory where you are trying to practice what you preach, right?

BOB JACKSON: Before we talk about what I am doing at Tall Grass Bison, let's set the context: We as a nation have a long ways to go, and a lot of changes are needed to overcome the physical influences and ethical compromises/abuses that have been made during agriculture's Industrial Revolution. My father, who was a farmer, and his fellow neighbors knew their fathers raised better food than they did and they knew their fathers' fathers raised healthier food yet.

Among the stewardship tools that Jackson uses is igniting controlled burns that mimic wildfires which blazed across the prairie historically, nurturing biodiversity and making grasses more nutritious for his bison.

At each step in each subsequent generation, the elder could say how good his hams use to be and how raising hybrids instead of open pollinated corn meant supplements had to be fed to keep the pigs healthy. But each generation was faced with the same dilemma: "Value" of food shifted to become based on raw volume and weight. The more that was produced the better my recent ancestors could make a living on the farm. It created a different notion of prosperity but is it sustainable?

Really, how far back do we have to go to find out how Earth worked to provide for us? It doesn't take much research to bust today's agribusiness hype that young animals are best and all other ages are "marked down" as a food. Europeans, even after the Industrial Revolution only a few generations ago, preferred mature animals. I could go back further, and I could note how the ancient Greeks preferred five year old oxen. Or we can stay on this continent and talk about indigenous peoples. Mature caribou were preferred by the Eskimos and mature buffalo for Plains Indians.

We have a bias against older animals, just as we have a youth-oriented bias against older people. My search, which led me to a better understanding of equality between people and bison, leads me back to studying Native Americans. Fortunately these people were at the top of their game just prior to the arrival of white settlers and this coincided with bison having a very extensive family infrastructure. The information was recorded.

Colonel Dodge, quite the food connoisseur, noted the Plains Indians had over 500 hundred different ways of preparing bison. 500 different ways! Since they had no copies of Larousse Gastronomique, one had to assume the reason they had so many "recipes" was to utilize the nutritional components that bison and their extended families provide in sustaining them.

This nutritional knowledge was far more advanced than anything we know today. Meat from calves and yearlings, I found out, went to the very young in the tribe and the very old. These were the community members without good teeth and possessed compromised digestive systems (white explorers on the frontier scene had mistaken the preference by Indians for young animals because these animals were brought back to camp first. But it was to feed the young and older individuals).

For this part of the population maximum nutrition, given calories spent, wasn't as important. I found out male members of the tribe needed more intense nutrition than females, if those females didn't have the physical rigors of the men. For women, the milder meat of cows was preferred. The older segment of a bison herd, as long as they were in good health, again approached the "mild" level of nutrition. We had the whole herd now ethically accounted for and I then realized the buffalo jumps, the surrounds and the piskins were harvesting methods that honored all ages and classes of bison.

But what about the individual bison hunted by these indigenous hunter-gatherers? Again, it mirrored the same reductions the herd carried out on its own. Yellowstone's bison herds and our herd in Iowa places the "extra" animals on the fringes. They don't have to be unhealthy to be in this position. Maybe they just didn't fit in.

In the old times on the plains, these were the animals that were easiest to hunt by humans or predated on by wolves. Besides identifying these animals for harvesting we also knew we could harvest half the male population. In Yellowstone today, bulls are often the first to die from winter's effects. They die first because their competitive need to grow bodies fast means there have greater nutritional needs to maintain that body frame.

Jackson takes pride in opening his bison ranch to field trips for school children, helping them answer the question of where their food comes from.

At Tall Grass Bison, our selection of bulls for harvest will never be as good as nature's but by looking at behaviors in the herd we can, with some certainty, select the bull groups the females are shunning.

As for the satellite or other outlying groups, those in bison herds are the same as most any wildlife population in susceptibility to hunting mortality. Use waterfowl as an example. The spin off duck and geese flocks were well known in hunting circles for being easiest to shoot.

We have the option to sell starter herds or harvest the superior meat in order to keep numbers of animals within carrying capacity on our landscape. For us, this meant our herd of 400 bison maxes out the 1,000 fertile acres we have. It is a limiting factor to our business but doesn't have to be the limiting factor for herd vitality and ethical compatibility. Thus it is the same for any private or public herd. There was, and still is, a compatible way to utilize all components and still have true restoration of social order herds.

After finding equality in ages and sexes of animals in food production, we needed to address the cuts of meat we were offering. Modern meat industry elevates one over the other and price according to their divisions in "quality." To me, this degrades each animal. The Plains Indians' 500 ways of preparing bison had to include all cuts and parts of that animal. The search for better utilizing our animals was on.

NEWWEST.NET: And what did you learn?

BOB JACKSON: First, I found out that the meat industry's priority was placed on a relatively small area of animal anatomy—the hind quarters of cattle where all those steaks and tender roasts are located. But it did not match up with what the indigenous adult population needed for their maximum nutrition. These people gave the hinds to the camp dogs when meat was

plentiful. Hunter-gathers, I discovered, sought different parts of the animal's nutrition while modern meat industries went after a Holy Grail of uniformity and consistency. Of course, native peoples did not have vitamin pills to go along with Big Macs and filets like we do.

Industry had turned meat preferences completely around in the modern world and gave us an inferior product, a lot of burger and a lot of waste. It wasn't fair to the animals we eat. Industry's approach to feed the different ages, sex, and health conditions of our complex human population meant delivering very narrow slices of the pie not for the good of the consumers but because it was convenient for them to maximize their profit.

The seasonings of our chefs might mollify our palates but what the meat industry puts on our plate is a meat from basically one age of animal, the 15 to 24 month old juvenile. Industry's futile search for more profit will always be an exercise in compromise and its quest leads us further away from a basic understanding of nutrition.

More important yet, it also leaves a lot of mental table scraps in our heads. This "best animal" attitude, invented by industry, has created a prejudice and debasement among animal producers, as well as consumers, no different than the prejudices we form when we simplify the cultures of other peoples.

Old in our culture had become bad and youth was supreme. I should add that most livestock producers I know take pride in producing a whole animal, not one whose premium value is derived by focusing on only a few of its parts. Much of their hard work, including the grass that gets converted from sun energy into meat, is squandered once their animals leave the ranch and are trucked to feed lots and slaughter houses.

Actually, nutrition ain't what we think it is. Some parts of the animal body contain more nutrition than others. There was at least one war in North Africa fought because one tribe kept all the sheep tails for themselves. Tails move all the time and we now understand why other cultures even today relish oxtail soup.

The front half of an animal is used more than the hind because the front moves side to side as well as pushing forward. It may seem a bit morbid, but cannibals favored the forearms and fingers of their victims. But again unless we start to prejudice ourselves, all parts are considered equal in satisfying the needs of human populations.

Jackson's Tall Grass Bison Ranch has become a tourist attraction and a place where agrarians hoping to get into the bison business can go to learn.

In reality, appreciating all of the parts together make up for a better whole.

NEWWEST.NET: Are you suggesting that focusing on harvesting a single age class of meat animals doesn't work?

BOB JACKSON: Not if a top priority is delivering maximum nutrition to consumers. Nor does it show any respect for the nature of the animal. Nutrients can not concentrate as much in a young body that is growing. This is why mature animals were sought out by active human populations. Native people knew better. Not only do older animals have more flavor but this flavor is a result of nutrition. Mature animals also have what industry abhors, connective tissue and dense bones but this is where a lot of the nutrition comes from.

Our meat lockers hate us when we bring our field slaughtered bison in. They can only cut up three of our mature bison with their band saws before dulling the blade, while the same number of saws can go through 12 to 15 young beef. With industry assembly lines so dependent on speed this connective tissue and bone very much slows down production.

Nutrition also comes from the organ meats. Our six month old frozen liver from mature animals, in a study at Iowa State University, was found to have 19 times the amount of fat soluble vitamins as that obtained from fresh store bought beef liver. No wonder Indians ate the liver first.

Native Americans said buffalo was the only animal that could provide all their nutritional needs. If that's true, I'd have to guess it was because this animal had the best infrastructure of abundance and value on the Plains). They had to eat the whole animal to get nutrition, however.

The folly of modern industry's search for the Holy Grail can best be assessed by what we see in the display counters at supermarkets. The most expensive cut of meat, the filet, is often wrapped in bacon to give it flavor. You tell me what's wrong with that? We are what we eat and the quality of the food that our food source—in this case, bison— eats is totally responsible for the nutrition we obtain from that animal.

NEWWEST.NET: You are going to find a lot of resistance from the beef industry which has spent billions of dollars teaching consumers not only what kind of meat is good for us and how it should be presented on our plates, but the industry has told cattlemen and women what they need to do to achieve a better financial return for their product. The cattle industry regards bison producers as a tiny niche market that they can just ignore.

BOB JACKSON: Bison are hardier and better adapted to the Great Plains than cattle because this is where they evolved. That gives them a competitive advantage that many former cattle producers are recognizing and they are making the switch because they no longer believe the script that the beef industry keeps feeding them. Their biggest fear is educated consumers who have serious doubts about industrial agriculture.

In fact, we need to throw out the rigid book of husbandry that has been preached and practiced in the West these past 150 years which, when you think about it, isn't a very long period of time.

There is nothing truly sustainable, and never will be, with today's domestic agricultural practices that are geared to maximum production and don't take into account the toll of production that is

hurting the land. Producers need to think differently about their animals. Land grant universities need to at least invite fresh ideas that challenge the norm.

Husbandry has focused on individuals. This is the opposite of raising complex social order herds like those that make bison bison. The ability for herd families to manage themselves is directly proportionate to our knowledge of how not to mess them up, i.e. today's public bison herds.

NEWWEST.NET: How have you nurtured family structure with bison on your land?

BOB JACKSON: Anyone with enough area to support the roles provided by 30 multigenerational blood relatives can do it. We have core power groups of 60 to 70 matriarchal animals, 2 to 3 spin off groups within the herd, plus bull groups on the side for a total of 300 animals.

After that, territories and competition come into play. Colonel Dodge saw groups separated from each other within the larger herd. It is the same size and numbers of individuals for humans, elk, elephants, chimpanzees, and partridges in a pear tree. Big brains have nothing to do with it while emotion has everything to do with it. Families have to interpret emotions a LOT to be successful and there are limits.

A herd comprised of primary and extended bison families trails across Jackson's ranch.

So how do we raise herd animals without all the pitfalls of human frailty? At Tall Grass Bison, it is imperative that we keep the core infrastructure that has been building for the last 30 years. The spin off or satellite groups are the ones we nurture for sale to other producers looking to get a head start on managing for family social order. We think of these sales as franchises, fully functional companies created with the lessons learned by the mother company, but with owner independence. The more complex this infrastructure, the more options for the manager. That is why I said large bison ranchers have the most potential in utilizing herd infrastructure. They can produce the most extensive natural, environmentally sustainable corporations in the world with multiples of extended families all learning from their ancestors and competing with the other departments to obtain the best traits. But lest we let this power go to our heads, the key to success for any sized social order producer is to remember the herd is the COMPANY and we are the caretaker.

NEWWEST.NET: So let's get this straight. You grow bison in family units, you make family structure the core element of your herd, and when you harvest or sell animals, your focus is on satellite family units that are offshoots of the main herd? Even when you cull animals for harvest, you identify self-confined families and then remove all of the members together?

BOB JACKSON: That's pretty much right. It results in less chaos and actually creates more stability and less stress for most of the animals.

NEWWEST.NET: Does it bother you to be harvesting family groups. Isn't that traumatic for both the animals and for you?

BOB JACKSON: Let me get back to the ethics and morality of killing animals. How can we kill something that is like us, having the same families and emotions?

When I pull the trigger on any animal for slaughter I have to think of the surviving extended family members that wait for days at the final gate of life…. for a loved one I killed after leading this animal through that gate.

My herd visits the bones of their deceased family member every year the same as elephants do. A grown up daughter will stay with a dying mother for the last week of her life, leaving only when the mother has nothing left of life.

I've witnessed other kinds of interactions as well; things I couldn't have believed unless I saw them with my own eyes. Bison take care of each other. I've watched grandmothers retrieve wayward offspring that wouldn't, for some reason, cross our road to reach new pastures. The grandmother would first join the milling herd and then in minutes go back through the gate to look for those that were missing. An hour later she might have one to 10 young bison with her ready to join the rest of the herd. Not only did she assume this responsibility but the family trusted her to bring back the ones inadvertently left behind.

In dysfunctional herds, where animals were culled or sold off willy nilly, every mother would have left the herd to rush to their young. Our non producing grandmother, one that every private commercial producer out there looks upon as a drain to that herd, thus delivered a huge benefit to the whole herd's health and welfare.

With knowledge of these emotions in bison, how can I kill? It took a lot of reading and introspection to come to peace with myself. Killing isn't easy, at least it isn't easy for me. I think anyone who hunts or kills needs to doing a little reflecting.

Killing affects us in ways not always visible but it's important that we come to terms with our actions. I have read how impotence was a major problem among those human butchers working in the Chicago Stock Yards kill floors. I knew first hand how killing affected the locker plant guys to whom I took my animals for cutting up. They were numb to what they were doing and divorce rates were high in their profession. They internalized their emotions.

Soon I realized it was impossible not to give every animal I killed a prayer to them and their family. To be part of nature and raise them as part of nature I had to do the same thing all hunter-gatherers would do, honor and respect all forms of life.

I believe there is better way for everyone; otherwise, I wouldn't be doing this. The switch in operational attitude may, upon first glance, seem irrelevant to anyone but the producer. In reality

it is a harbinger of philosophical change in how we view animals. By allowing bison and other animals the dignity of having a little self determination on the ranch or the refuge and national park, the consumer and general population is being exposed to a concept of greater respect of animals. This, in turn, allows researchers, public herd managers and decision makers to follow suit and “rediscover” what all hunter-gatherer populations knew, that there is uniqueness in all animals and in many ways they are reflections of us.

If, in the end, this year is not the “right time” for this kind of thought, for me it still means the satisfaction of knowing there is a better way still waiting to happen. Whether it is protecting the animals of Yellowstone from poachers or raising them on my farm, I am my Brothers Keeper in the animal kingdom. And so are you.