

RETURN OF THE BUF

American Indian tribes lead the way in bringing the buffalo back to the wild. **BY ELISE BROACH**

The silver trailers cross the grassy plain, rolling to a stop in a line. From inside the trailers come strange noises: snorting, banging, the knocking and scraping of hooves. These are the sounds of giant beasts, waiting to break free.

All at once, the trailer doors open, and out charge 63 buffalo, thundering onto the prairie.

It is the winter of 2012. On American Indian land in Montana, after a 120-year absence, these buffalo are coming home.

THE BUFFALO'S RIGHTFUL PLACE

Behind this historic moment lay more than five years of hard work by the Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux tribes. In 2007, tribal members had the idea of returning a small herd of wild buffalo to their lands. At the time, the largest wild buffalo herd was in Yellowstone National Park—a vast protected wilderness in Wyoming and parts of Montana and Idaho. Inside Yellowstone, the herd had grown to about 5,000—too many for the park ecosystem to support. There wasn't enough grass and open land for such a large herd to live in a healthy way. Thousands of buffalo had been **culled** over the years to protect the herd and the land.



Jonny BearCub Stiffarm

The Fort Peck tribes wanted to save some of these buffalo and bring them back to tribal land, to their place at the center of tribal life. But the tribes immediately ran into problems. Ranchers in Montana **opposed** moving the buffalo. They worried about a disease called brucellosis that half the Yellowstone buffalo carried. This disease affects cattle and can cause their babies to die before they are born.

Finally, in 2012, after a long legal battle, the Montana Supreme Court ruled in the tribes' favor. Yellowstone Buffalo could finally be brought to Fort Peck land.

JOY, HOPE, AND PRIDE

Now, thanks to the Fort Peck Buffalo Program—and with help from the National Park Service, Defenders of Wildlife, the World Wildlife Fund, and several other organizations—303 Yellowstone buffalo have been relocated to Fort Peck tribal lands. For the Assiniboine and Sioux, the buffalo bring joy, pride, and hope—like seeing a long-lost family member finally come home.

One of the leaders of the buffalo program is Jonny BearCub Stiffarm. She says that when she was a child, “We only read about buffalo in books or saw them at a zoo. Now, as our children grow up, buffalo will always have been part of their lives.”



FALO



A buffalo brought from Yellowstone is released onto Fort Peck tribal lands in August 2019.

The Fort Peck Buffalo Program saves as many as 100 Yellowstone buffalo every year. When these buffalo arrive at Fort Peck, they are quarantined until they can be tested for brucellosis. Some will be added to the Fort Peck herd. Others will be sent to 16 tribes across the United States. This will **enable** the tribes to form their own buffalo herds on their lands.

ON THEIR WAY

The goal is to establish at least 1,000 buffalo in herds on American Indian lands. These herds will help restore the grasslands, bringing new bird and plant life. And they will preserve the buffalo's place in the history, culture, and spirituality of the tribes, enabling

American Indians to once again perform traditional ceremonies, make traditional medicines, and cook traditional foods that incorporate parts of the buffalo.

This past August, a trailer arrived at Fort Peck to carry 40 buffalo to new tribal homes in Kansas, Wisconsin, and Alaska. Wishing them well, members from the Assiniboine and Sioux tribes gathered in a drumming group called Tatanka Oyate, which means "Buffalo Nation."

They drummed loudly as the buffalo were herded into the trailer, thanking them, blessing them, and sending them on their way. ●

Writing Contest

Imagine that you work for a conservation group focused on raising public awareness about buffalo. Design a slideshow, a social media campaign, or a poster for the group that explains why buffalo are important and why they should be protected. Send your design to **Buffalo Contest**. Three winners will each get *A Whale of the Wild* by Rosanne Parry.



Get this activity online.



Entries must be submitted by a legal resident of the U.S. age 18 and older, who is the teacher, parent, or guardian of the student. See page 2 for details.