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THE AMERICAN BISON AND THE DEATH OF FREEDOM

Like it or not, modern societies are as dependent on natural systems as the Plains Indians were on the bison herds.

VIC SCHENDEL

For the Plains Indians, life was a nomadic existence that centered on the bison.

When the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened." —Plenty Coups, chief of the Crow Nation, 1928.

The American bison may have been, at one time, the single most abundant large wild mammal on earth. The historical references to their immense herds are difficult to comprehend. When Colonel R.I. Ridge rode through a herd along the Arkansas River in 1871, he later reported to the great American conservationist, William T. Hornaday, that the animals stretched unbroken over a land area of 25 miles wide and 50 miles long. Experts believe that somewhere between 4 million and 12 million animals were moving together in that awe-inspiring assembly, filling the air with their noise and dust and making the earth tremble with their passage.

By 1884, thirteen years after Ridge's encounter, the bison was close to extinction. In the fading thunder of its passage, there would be a brutal reckoning for the Plains Indians of North America and the loss of a unique ecological system that the massive migratory herds had helped to create and maintain. In a perverse way, these imposing realities and the haunting images of skinned carcasses, rotting in the sun as far as the eye could see, helped foster what we might term the Great Awakening. For out of this cultural mayhem and animal slaughter, the seeds of a conservation ethic arose that would eventually coalesce into the programs, institutions, and policies that today we recognize as the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation.

How do we measure our own view of history when it often appears we are more alarmed at the loss of the bison than the human populations and incredible societies that depended upon it? Yet, we must ask, who has ever again spoken as eloquently for the bison as did the Plains Indians whose lives were entwined with it? The great lesson, so hard won, is that human traditions depend ultimately upon nature, just as do human economies and modern-day nations. Lying in the shadow of this revelation is a second: that human cultures and traditions will be the driving force behind the conservation of nature.

For the indigenous peoples who pursued the great migratory herds, such a dependency was not only recognized but glorified, in their customs, their religion, and their entire way of life. Dependence on the natural world was not a sign of weakness but one of strength and wisdom. For so many of those nations, life was a nomadic existence centered on the bison. True, these Plains Indians hunted other animals, but it was the bison that formed the linchpin of their survival, so much so that the elimination of the great

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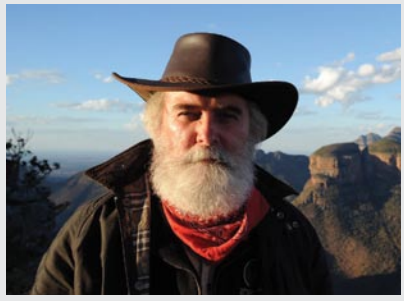
beasts all but destroyed these warrior peoples who, like generations of Americans to follow, proved determined and capable to defend their way of life. The combination of white settlement, market hunting, railroad expansion, and military operations eventually, over a thirty-year period and more, brought both the bison and the Plains Indians to their knees. In their passing, some measure of the world's freedom disappeared.

In the loss of this great intimacy between man and nature, we have inherited one of the most agonizing lessons of our own history as Americans. Figures such as President Ulysses S. Grant and Gen. Philip Sheridan enthusiastically recommended against Buffalo Bill Cody's (and others') attempts to save the bison. They did so to pave the way for ranchers and domestic livestock, forcing the once-proud indigenous peoples into dependency of a woeful kind, and along the way, assisted the railroad barons who disliked the troublesome bison, which sometimes impeded the passage of trains or caused damage in collisions with them. We are left wondering if there was not a better way.

There are many lessons we should ponder as we consider the future of our own wildlife treasures and the treasured tradition of hunting. Is it necessary for us to lose something sacred before we can achieve something great? There are always alternatives open to us as individuals and societies and we will be hard-pressed to find in history examples of where preserving nature has been the poorer choice. We may arrogantly assume that we are less dependent on nature now than in the time of the Plains Indians; yet we will still expect the land to provide us fresh water and food, and we look to nature to maintain the intricate cycles necessary to sustain our lives and our economies. Bees may seem insignificant compared to bison, but will we pollinate our world by hand as these small creatures continue their drastic decline? The reality is that without these systems left intact, wildlife will not be part of our future and so hunting itself must end. In the absence of these things we will find this world less compatible to our nature, less inspiring to our cultures. Thus we will lose a sacred and irretrievable part of ourselves.

In such a world, we will undoubtedly remark as Chief Plenty Coups did so long ago, that something significant was lost from our lives and that our "hearts fell to the ground." Even more tragically, however, we may also state that afterward, "nothing happened." Of course, if our wildlife abundance is squandered and our hunting tradition is lost, things will still happen. The question is, how meaningful will they be compared to the wondrous lives afield that we have known?

Not one day should pass without us fighting to preserve our wildlife legacy and our cherished traditions within it. Like the Plains Indians, we too understand there is an unbroken line between our hunting enterprise and the wildlife we pursue and that between them flow a shared, inseparable future. Let governments take the stands they might; let the captains of industry move as they wish. The history of North American achievement is written by the individual's hand. Every hunter has a responsibility to this greatest challenge: keeping the wild others with us so we may preserve freedom and wildness in ourselves.



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