

Some parallels here between Yellowstone a decade ago and the Grand Canyon now...

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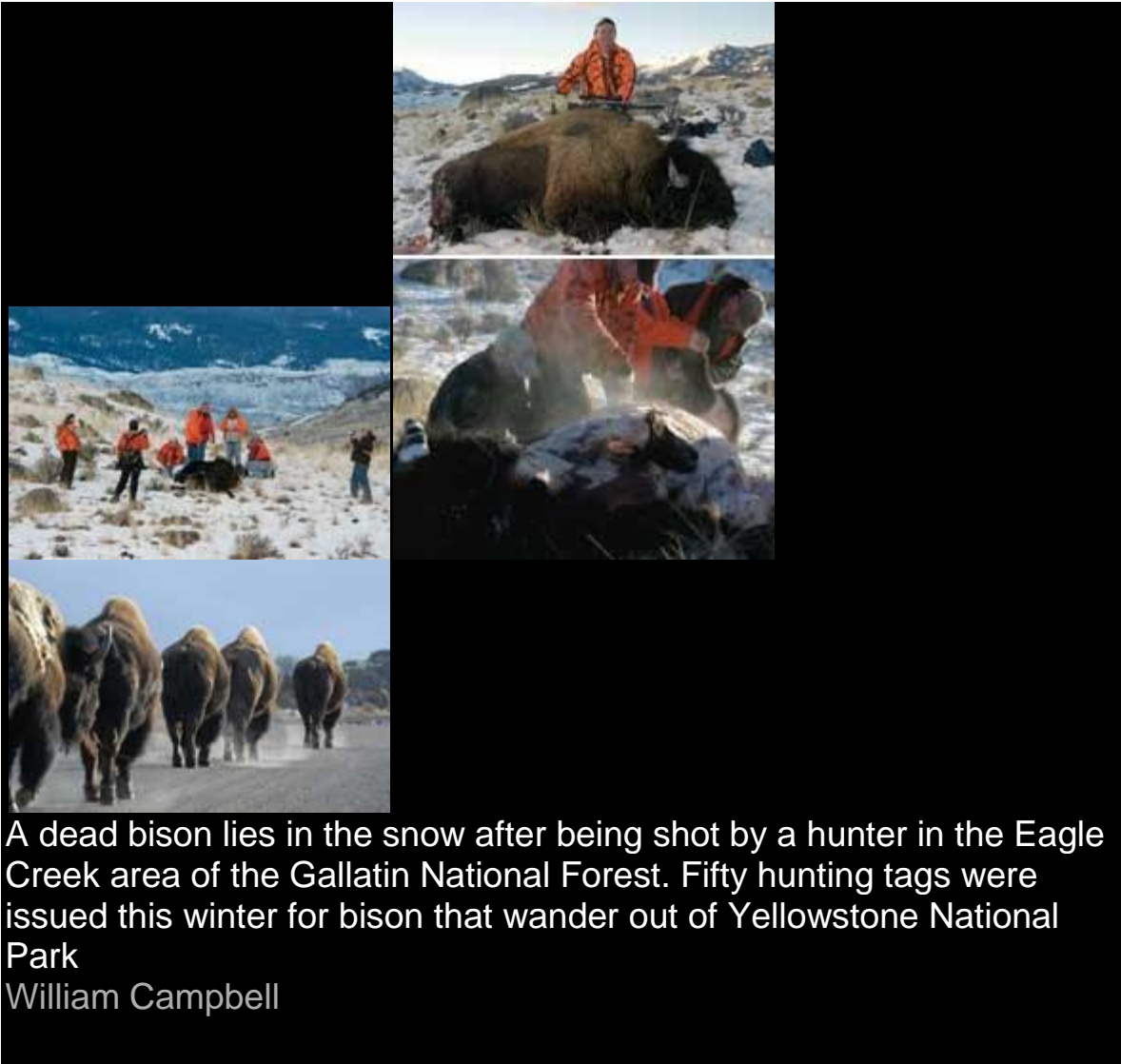
The Killing Fields

A buffalo hunt turns into a slaughter on the border of Yellowstone National Park. But could this be the key to setting the animals free?

Hal Herring

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A dead bison lies in the snow after being shot by a hunter in the Eagle Creek area of the Gallatin National Forest. Fifty hunting tags were issued this winter for bison that wander out of Yellowstone National Park
William Campbell

The flayed elk carcass lies on a table in a cold sideroom of a borrowed and makeshift house north of Gardiner. The stacks of rich steaks and Tupperware containers of tough grinder meat are lined up like a display of the world’s oldest kind of wealth. Mike Mease is working fast to take the last of the meat from the bones. Tomorrow is the first Saturday in December, and many of the lucky hunters holding the 50 bison tags issued by the state of Montana will surely be coming to claim their trophies and their meat. Mease and the rest of the Buffalo Field Campaign will be there, too, as they have been since the hunt began on Nov. 15, to

bear witness to this latest evolution in the state's quest to deal with the unending buffalo "problem."

Mease is one of the founders and the main force behind the Buffalo Field Campaign. He coordinates groups of volunteers who come to Montana to try to convince the rest of the nation that the world's last free-ranging herd of bison deserves something better than to be classified as livestock and tormented and slaughtered every time it leaves the snowbound high country of Yellowstone National Park.

Mease and his band of self-proclaimed "buffalo hippies" are always described in the media, and in the bars of Gardiner and West Yellowstone, as "animal-rights activists," and that is what they are, if by that term you mean people who devote a lot of their time to drawing attention to wrongs done to animals like the buffalo. He killed this latest bull elk while walking around the Eagle Creek country above Gardiner before Thanksgiving. For an animal-rights activist, locals agreed, he got a pretty nice elk.

Mease has been living the life of the Buffalo Field Campaign for nine years, based out of his tepee near West Yellowstone, arguably the coldest place in Montana. He has been a kind of professional enviro-meddler ever since I've known him, wandering the world from his base in Montana. He finally came to rest in Yellowstone after the grandiose buffalo slaughter of 1996-'97, when a series of storms followed by warm winds and rains created deep snows glazed with an inch of hard ice, and every big animal east of the Divide was on the move, following the ancient traces and paths to lower ground, to places where the wind scoured the snow away from last year's grasses, dried on the stem and heavy with life-saving protein. Winter range. Without it, wildlife in the Rockies does not exist.

That winter was tough on all the big game, but the buffalo fared the worst. Deer and elk walked freely across the national park

boundary, but the buffalo stumbled into a state policy that condemned them to death if they stepped across the line. The reason, according to ranchers and their advocates in the Montana Department of Livestock, was brucellosis. As many as 50 percent of the nearly 5,000 Yellowstone buffalo may have brucellosis, a disease that was brought to North America by European cattle, which spread it to bison and other wildlife. It can cause spontaneous abortions in cattle, and give humans a nasty recurring malaria-like illness.

As everyone knows by now, there has never been a recorded case of buffalo transmitting brucellosis to cattle, but studies show that it could happen. And that presents the people trying to manage Yellowstone's buffalo with a conundrum: Because of the high infection rate, the state only tolerates the animals on small parcels of winter range. But the high concentration of the animals each winter is the reason the infection rate is so high.

The results of that conundrum — which described in print looks so sanitary, such an interesting topic for biologists and researchers and wildlife managers to puzzle over — are fiercely ugly. In those early days of 1997, 1,079 of the buffalo that left the Park were shot or rounded up and slaughtered. Of those that the Department of Livestock chased back into the Park, 1,300 starved to death. Every year since has brought similar, if smaller-scale, debacles.

During that hard winter, Mease found what he considered to be a calling — to bring attention to a problem that seemed to be ripe for fixing, if only enough people looked at it and realized that it was so clearly broken, so clearly causing an unacceptable level of real cruelty to a beast most Americans outside the cattle industry look upon with reverence. He set up his tepee in West Yellowstone, and settled in for what has become a very long haul.

Mease learned early that if he brought a video camera down to watch the efforts of the Montana Department of Livestock, agents

handled the buffalo with a lighter hand. Since that discovery, he and a revolving roster of volunteers have followed the employees of the Department of Livestock as they've raced about, winter after winter, hazing buffalo away from anywhere that they might conflict with cattle, using snowmobiles and four-wheelers and helicopters while the taxpayers' money flies away like the snow under the wild rush of wind from the rotors, and the rest of the wildlife trying to winter in the area flees in wild-eyed terror.

The Buffalo Field Campaign volunteers have met with Montana Gov. Brian Schweitzer, filed hundreds of reports on their website, been on television and the radio and in the newspapers. They argue that the buffalo, which are obviously wild animals, should not be classified as livestock, and should not be under the control of the Department of Livestock, an entity that has no reason whatsoever to protect them or advocate for them, and one that puts its employees in an impossible position with its absurd, never-win policy.

The volunteers also point out that the buffalo are hazed away from pretty much the whole Yellowstone ecosystem, even though there are actually very few cattle there. Meanwhile, wolves and grizzlies, and other big game like mule deer and elk, are for the most part free to roam. This, despite the fact that brucellosis is having a field day in elk, especially in Wyoming, because the elk are concentrated and their numbers are kept artificially high by state-run feedgrounds that substitute for winter range that's all being claimed by cattle (HCN, 12/26/05: A desperate move to protect cattle ranchers). And unlike buffalo, elk have actually transmitted the disease to cattle.

Mease thinks the difference in how the elk and the buffalo are treated goes deeper than the brucellosis issue, that even if there were some way to control the disease, buffalo would still be persecuted. "If you watch them long enough," he says, "you see how strange they are, how wild. Whether people recognize it or

not, they respond to that wildness, and a lot of people just can't stand it. They want to control them, keep them in the park, or get rid of them. It's a kind of prejudice, and it's tied in to why they were wiped out in the first place."

Since 2003, the state of Montana has been trying to figure out how to have a new buffalo hunt. Residents want it. They see the buffalo hazed and run and shot and sent off to slaughter, and they look in their empty freezers or at a blank space on the trophy room wall, and mutter, "Why not me?" But it has not been an easy sell. The notion of "fair chase" is hard to establish when it comes to buffalo, because they live most of the time in the park, amid hordes of tourists, and have no fear of people. Even when they ruled the American Plains, they were as likely to face enemies by standing firm as to thunder away. They are not pronghorn, not whitetails.

Montana's old buffalo hunt was brought to a halt after a particularly big kill during a stretch of harsh weather in the winter of 1990-'91, when the media picked up photos of buffalo sprawled in bloody snow, of men dressed up like Buffalo Bill firing big-bore pistols into the buffalo's heads at point-blank range, of steaming supersized guts loosed from broad black bellies while other buffalo nosed in, wall-eyed, to see what the heck was happening. The hunt looked more like a slaughter. It was too much, too messy, it was bad for Montana public relations. The next winter, the Department of Livestock took over the job of harassing and killing.

After years of consideration, Montana announced that it would reinstate a hunt in the winter of 2004-'05, but the hunt was cancelled after a wide range of wildlife officials and others pointed out that, since buffalo management policy had not really changed, any new hunt would be conducted while livestock agents hazed the animals to and fro. It might look even worse than 1991.

But in 2005-'06, the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks decided to go ahead with a hunt, setting up a lottery system for 50 permits. A total of 6,177 people applied for the tags. The hunt would run in two stages from Nov. 15 through Feb. 15. Livestock agents would take a break from hazing the animals during the three months that the hunt ran, and they would refrain from hazing on an additional 30,000 acres up Eagle Creek, allowing for more hunting territory and more room for the animals.

Mike Mease and the Buffalo Field Campaign say they support the newly revived hunt, if it proves to be the lever that moves buffalo policy out of the black hole that it has been in for the past 15 years. But the cold truth of the matter is that the 2005 buffalo hunt looks an awful lot like the 1991 buffalo hunt — same bulls standing around watching the same hunters pile out of their pickup trucks and take aim from 30 yards, same blood-stained snow and gutpiles of epic dimensions. What has changed is our own capacity to understand just how badly a big, wild and unique animal can be treated when subjected to the cold realities of an "interagency policy" that has institutionalized fantastic cruelty and failed to seek any new remedy. We have been shown, winter after winter, that there are plenty of fates that can befall a species in a human-dominated world that are worse than being hunted.

But inviting Montana hunters into the house of such an obviously dysfunctional policy might ultimately prove very dangerous to business as usual for the buffalo-management crowd.

There is a road up Eagle Creek, just north of the park, in the sagebrush and grassland hills just above the town of Gardiner. The Eagle Creek Basin is one of the few bits of winter range where the buffalo are tolerated. Not surprisingly, it is where the bulk of the killing has been done in the hunt this year.

There is a road through the basin, leading to a dead end in higher country just short of the open Doug fir and lodgepole forests. The buffalo hunters need the road, because buffalo are so big that getting them out after you kill them is a major operation. But the road makes the hunt feel a bit odd, too, because there are a lot of buffalo grazing along it, wandering up and down it, and standing beside it. They gaze Zen-like into nothingness, their long tongues lapping in and out, breath like smoke in the cold. They stand there in their dignified and inscrutable immensity, a posture they maintain, other than a long, untroubled swing of the head to regard the man with the rifle, right until the bullet kills them.

The buffalo hunter calls himself "Mr. Mike" and he's retired from the Boston police force, and lives in Billings. He walks with a cane and moves slowly from injuries sustained in a crash that ended a high-speed chase, years ago. He's shooting a .270, which is light for buffalo, but sufficient in the right hands, which Mr. Mike happens to have, since he does a lot of benchrest and other kinds of shooting. He has just walked up to the edge of this Forest Service horse pasture, perused the two immense bull buffalo standing 100 yards behind it, rested his rifle on the fence, and slammed a bullet into the 2-inch-by-2-inch space behind the biggest one's ear. The bull dropped straight to the ground. It was a kill so clean that it was lauded even by some Buffalo Field volunteers watching from a nearby ridge with binoculars.

Mr. Mike is unfazed by the presence of the Buffalo Field Campaign people and their act of witness; he's unfazed by the utter unblinking and condemnatory silence of the tall bearded young man in a long wool coat, who points his video camera at Mr. Mike as if, rather than recording his hunt, he would like to erase him from the scene. Mr. Mike is a fast-talking, story-telling man, unabashed South Boston accent. He's happy about taking down the bull, telling me right off that he's planning to write about his buffalo hunt for the *Safari Club Magazine*, in a section he writes about big-game hunting opportunities for the disabled.

We walk out into the horse pasture, focused on the dead bull's sidekick, a not-much-smaller buffalo that is standing off to one side, tail half-raised. If a buffalo's tail goes straight up, people tell me, the rule is, "it's gonna charge or discharge." I've got on what now feels like a garish blue jacket, and am hoping I am not going to be remembered as the fool who was flattened during the first buffalo hunt of the 21st century.

"You can't haze these things," says the man who takes care of the property. As we try to do just that, one of the local boys who has volunteered to help Mr. Mike with the formidable task of gutting and caping the bull adds, "These are the stupidest animals on earth." But Mr. Mike is unfazed by that pronouncement, too. He's listening carefully to one of the Buffalo Field people, a clean-cut man who works in the park as a naturalist and is explaining why they are documenting the hunt, what they would like to see changed about the way the state treats buffalo.

Mr. Mike, it is clear to me, is exactly the kind of hunter who might understand that, in order for hunting to have any meaning, you have to give a little bit to the game animals. He is about to lay out almost \$2,000 to have the bull mounted, and, as he sits on it, rifle in hand, for the trophy photos, he's proud of the beast, proud that it's an old bull with a thick coat of hair that looks six inches deep, hair that is bleached by years of sun and the winds of the high country, proud of the scar on the bull's flank that we decide was received in some violent contest with another bull. It may sound odd to a non-hunter, but there is respect there for that bull. It is the kind of respect that has translated into the American wildlife conservation ethic, arguably the strongest and most unique conservation ethic in the world — an ethic that has so far not been applied to the buffalo.

While the volunteer helps discover just how difficult it is to field dress a 1,900-pound animal with skin like a six-ply tire, Mr. Mike and Mike Mease exchange addresses, so that Mease can

send him a video of his hunt. They shake hands, and we leave, just as the local boys start chopping at the bull's pelvis with a single-bit axe somebody has produced.

Farther up the Eagle Creek road, a bullet struck a buffalo bull somewhere around the left side of his head and knocked him down, rolled him, the witnesses told me, so that his feet were straight up in the air. Then the bull got up, and a second round drove him down again. The boy was shooting a .270 like Mr. Mike, but he was hitting just a little bit off, maybe because the rifle was sighted in for 100 yards or more, and they were much closer than that to the bull. A little bit off would put a fairly light bullet up against the heaviest mammal skull that North America has to offer.

When we first get there, the shot bull is up again, and climbing straight up the face of a barren ridge about 500 feet high. He never runs, but his shuffling progress, huge shaggy head bobbing up and down, is deceptively fast. He hits the top of the ridge and disappears while the boy who shot him stands there with his father, his sister and his brother, in the snow and sagebrush beside the road, watching him go.

On the other side of that ridge is the big basin of Eagle Creek, sprawling and undulating sagebrush country, the ribbon of willows enclosing the creek at its center, fingers of aspen at its perimeters. The shot bull crosses the spine of the ridge and bears on uphill, through little knots of wintering mule deer, below a small band of elk. His tracks in the snow merge with the tracks of dozens of other buffalo, some of which raise their heads to watch his inexorable progress. There's no blood trail, and we drive up the road, following a game warden's truck, hoping to be able to tell the hunting party, when they arrive, which of the many buffalo out there is the one that needs a finishing bullet.

The road dominates the basin, and there are few places that are distant from its access. The wounded bull comes up onto a small flat and stops about 75 yards below where we parked. He joins a little bachelor group of three other bull buffalo that are grazing there, near a frozen gutpile left over from a bull killed earlier in the week. The orange-clad hunting family is far away, brilliant dots against the snow, and slowly closing. Other trucks join us; one of the animal-rights people has given a ride to the sister of the boy who shot the bull, and the boy's mother pulls up in another truck with Bozeman plates.

The wounded bull stands on the flat, its tongue slowly lapping at the air. With binoculars, you can see some blood splashed down the side of its head in the thick hair below the ear. Magpies whirl and chatter in a nearby clump of serviceberry, crossing to the gutpile and then back again, looking a bit frenetic in comparison to the ravens that occasionally soar by, commenting with a simple, slow croak.

The people gather. Dreadlocked volunteers from the Buffalo Field Campaign, clad in Army surplus woolens, videotape the boy and his brother and father as they labor up the snowy steep to the road, their hats off, sweating through, silent and intent. The family meets at the tailgate of their truck, and then the father and the boy begin an exaggerated and utterly unnecessary stalk down to the wounded buffalo, which is standing motionless with the other bulls. The volunteers follow, just far enough behind to avoid the appearance of hunter harassment — a green Forest Service enforcement truck has joined the long convoy along the road, the officer in wraparound sunglasses and equipped with a no-nonsense AR-15 in the gun rack.

Two other trucks pull up, a local outfitter and his passengers, just out to see the hunt, and a group of men dressed up like movie gunfighters in spotless cowboy hats and long dusters. They, it turns out, have come to shoot one of the bulls themselves, though

they keep that to themselves as they stand in the road and joke with a wiry, middle-aged Field Campaigner named Canyon.

The boy lays his rifle across a backpack for a rest, and takes aim. (Mike Mease later tells me he suggested to the boy's father that they try a heart shot, since that has been more successful in the hunts they had witnessed so far. The man, out of patience, replied with an obscenity.) The video cameras roll, and the boy shoots. The bull lurches, steps forward, and then falls, rolling over onto its side, its legs straining, relaxing, straining again.

And then I witness something that I have not seen before, in 30 years of hunting elk and deer and just about everything else, of seeing domestic cows and goats and pigs shot.

The three remaining bulls stop grazing and slowly walk over to the bull lying in the snow. They put their heads close to him and breathe out great clouds of steam. Their tails go up, not quite straight, but like a shepherd's crook, and they make some odd grunting noises. Then they circle the downed bull. And keep on circling.

Canyon, who told me earlier that he was an "enrolled tribal member," and has not, until now, witnessed a buffalo being killed, says, "They are circling just like we do when we go into the sweatlodge, clockwise, like the world turning!"

I stand and stare, transfixed. Mike Mease comes up onto the road and tells me that that almost every one of the kills has been just like this. "A lot of times they'll hook them with their horns to try and get them up," he says, "and they'll circle. Somebody who was with us earlier said that elephants do this, too."

The bulls show no inclination to move off, or to resume grazing. They face the hunters and stand, tails up, as if they are made from dark stone, as if they will be there like this until the end of winter, or the end of time.

The boy's mother comes down the road to where everyone is standing and asks if somebody can please help them haze the bulls away. She is a strong-looking woman, at home in the cold and the snow, and she is obviously upset. She has tears in her eyes. "I'm not really your stereotypical hunter," she says, uncomfortable, but clearly trying to make a connection with Field Campaigners, trying to see if such a thing is possible. It is. Canyon steps up to her and hugs her, and she hugs him back.

Below us, her son and husband begin walking toward the bulls, and the boy fires his rifle into the air. Some of the Field Campaign volunteers head down the slope to help try to move the bulls. The downed bull waves its feet, suddenly. About a minute later, the boy shoots it again, from a distance of a few feet.

When I went down to the Yellowstone in December, my hunting season was finished, with two mule deer and a yearling elk hanging in my barn, and a gift antelope in the freezer. My plan had originally been to accompany one of the buffalo hunters, offering to help with gutting and packing meat in exchange for a first-hand look at the hunt. I had more than one friend who applied for the tags — one of them, an old hunting and working buddy, was planning to shoot the buffalo with some kind of huge rifle that he called "Numa." I even thought seriously about applying for a tag myself, and looking for a yearling.

Leaving Eagle Creek that afternoon, I asked myself whether I would have wanted to shoot one of those buffalo, video cameras, dreadlocked witnesses and oddballs in gunfighter get-ups notwithstanding. The answer was no, but I wasn't exactly sure why.

Less than a month later, in early January, the hunt was halted temporarily, while crews from the Department of Livestock honored their commitment to the management policy by hazing buffalo that were trying to enter the public lands on the west side

of the park. There are never any cattle on these public lands in the winter, but the policy has a zero-tolerance stand regarding buffalo on them. And so the livestock agents went to work.

On Jan. 12, a team of snowmobiles forced bands of buffalo out onto the ice of Hebgen Lake, where 12 of them crashed through into five feet of water. The photos circulated, the video from the Buffalo Field Campaign was suitably gut-wrenching, the big heads of the animals sticking up from the water, the thrashing, obvious terror. And the snowmobiles in the background, the motorized human tormentors, who of course rushed to save the drowning buffalo in an hours-long effort with a chainsaw and ropes, rescuing all but two of them. The 10 lucky survivors were hazed back to the park.

The next week, it was announced that there were 651 captured buffalo in the pens on the east and west sides of the park. According to a story in the *Bozeman Chronicle*, 347 had already been sent to slaughter, and 34 calves were sent to a quarantine pen in Corwin Springs, north of Gardiner. Two buffalo had died in the traps. The 264 animals that remained in the capture pen would be shipped to slaughter as soon as possible. Would they be tested for brucellosis? No. Was this population control, since the "Interagency Bison Management Plan" had selected the seemingly arbitrary top number of 3,000 buffalo for the park? "This is not population control," park spokesman Al Nash told the *Chronicle*. The story did not answer what it was that the capture and slaughter was meant to accomplish. The impression was that there was no answer.

But in the photos of the buffalo struggling in the freezing lake, and the accounts of the captures, I at least answered my own question about why I did not want a permit to hunt buffalo. I wanted no part in the buffalo hunt because there was no buffalo hunt in 2006. Instead, there was simply an accelerated campaign

of torture and harassment, and a lottery to see which 50 Montana hunters would be invited to join in.

Perhaps the various agencies involved in buffalo management believed that if we were given the opportunity to kill some of the buffalo ourselves we would be less likely to protest the cruel stupidity of their never-changing non-solutions. But I'd like to think that they made a miscalculation. I'd like to think that after we were invited in to see the animals themselves and the policy under which they suffered that we would decide to change the whole equation.

It is clear that the tireless efforts of the buffalo hippies need to be augmented by the short-haired, big-game hunting, SUV-driving advocates of wildlife and habitat that have already done so much for wildlife and habitat and wildlands all over the West. We know that there is no hunt, in these modern beyond-subsistence (for most of us) days, unless it involves giving something back to the wild animals, giving them room, advocating for the places that they and the other nations of wildlife, live.

Those buffalo calves sent to that quarantine pen in Corwin Springs can gaze out across the mighty Yellowstone River and look right at one of the most important purchases of land for wildlife ever made. In 1999, with the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation as the driving force, the U.S. taxpayers paid \$13 million to acquire 5,262 acres of land from the Church Universal and Triumphant, all of it a crucial migration corridor for the northern Yellowstone elk herd and all the other wildlife of the area.

But the larger effort to open the area to migrations hit a snag. The deal to buy the Church's grazing rights stalled when the price went to \$2.5 million, almost five times what the federal government and other players believed that they were worth. The Church has maintained a herd of cattle there, so while the elk and

mule deer and wolves and bears roam the corridor, under the current policy, the bison are excluded.

Beyond that land, the west side of the Paradise Valley opens up, to the great valleys and open parklands of the Gallatin Range: Cinnabar Creek, Tom Miner Basin, Rock Creek, and on and on, some of the finest wildlife country left on earth, huge expanses of it public land, more than capable of supporting the Yellowstone buffalo at its current population level. Allowing buffalo to roam freely there would require some concessions. But buying out grazing leases, paying for conservation easements on private lands, asking landowners for a certain amount of patience for wildlife — all of these ideas are working right now across the West. The amount of energy and money that hunters and other conservationists have put into them speaks volumes about who we are as a people, and what we value, when we are at our best. To say we cannot work around Yellowstone National Park for buffalo is defeatist, a repulsive exercise in stagnation.

There is no place on earth more capable of being the landscape within which a buffalo hunter could feel, and be, free and proud. It does not matter if hunting buffalo is not as difficult as hunting a big bull elk. "Fair chase" does not mean that you pursue only the wildest and most secretive of the game. It is about taking meat or a grand old horned beast from a species that has been treated fairly, to the absolute best of our ability, in all its elements.

It is certainly not the killing of the buffalo up Eagle Creek that is ugly. This is Yellowstone, after all, the personification of nature red in tooth and claw, watered with blood and fed on raw meat and steaming gutpiles, the great wheel of life and death spinning here as nowhere else, the ravens overhead and the wolf always right out there beyond the circle of light cast by our fires. The killing of the buffalo by hunters right now feels ugly, the "hunt" feels controversial because the quarry as a whole is being treated with a combination of contempt, cruelty, and worst of all,

indifference. Until that is changed, there will be no buffalo hunt, no matter how many tags the state issues.

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