

# Social acceptance drives bison reintroduction work



Plains bison graze in Elk Island National Park.

by Rob Alexander

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A new report is helping to demonstrate that the primary challenge to reintroducing bison to its historical territory throughout North America is social acceptance.

Cormack Gates, co-chair of the IUCN/SSC Bison Specialist Group and professor of Environmental Design at the University of Calgary, said restoration of bison is not an impossible task, as long as the public accepts it.

“One of the questions I think is important to think about here is ‘okay, what are we smoking here? Is this really possible, or is this the midnight ravings of a bunch of lunatics spread between Mexico and Alaska?’

“Well, we’re doing it and I think the proof is on the ground, or the hoof, in this case,” Gates said, referring to bison restoration projects in the U.S., Mexico and Western Canada.”

But for it to work anywhere in North America, not just in the Rocky Mountains where Parks Canada hopes to reintroduce bison, society has to buy in and actively participate.

“In fact, restoring bison is a societal decision. It is not the midnight ravings of a lunatic biologist,” Gates said.

The key, he added, is helping people understand and accept that the bison is an animal which, while it requires large spaces, have an opportunity to play a significant role in the environment.

“This is where the work needs to be done, in creating additional opportunities for significant scale restoration of bison on the continent.”

But Gates said bison reintroduction projects generally take a long time, a decade at least, with Mexico being the most recent and obvious exception.

The Mexican government reintroduced plains bison in late 2009, within a year of initiating planning to bring a small herd from Wind Cave National Park in South Dakota to its historical range in the northern state of Chihuahua.

Large-scale projects are also currently underway in the U.S. in Montana, along the eastern edge of the American Rocky Mountains and Alaska.

In its current draft management plan, Banff National Park has proposed restoring bison to the park as an integral part of the ecosystem.

BNP superintendent Kevin Van Tighem agreed with Gate’s assessment that working with the public has to occur to ensure reintroduction projects could take place and be successful.

“The ecosystem can handle it,” Van Tighem said recently. “We have found ways to manage most of the physical problems on the landscape, but it is mostly social acceptance and that is because of people’s fears about what could go wrong, and those fears are legitimate.

“I don’t think there is anything insurmountable. It is mostly a matter of time and conversations.”

Mature plains bison bulls can weigh up to 1,000 kilograms (2,200 lbs.) and, like any large mammal, can be dangerous.

However, both Gates and Van Tighem agreed the number of injuries or even deaths caused by bison in Canada are low, even in places such as Elk Island National Park, which Gates said has an exceedingly low rate of injury throughout its history.

“I don’t think the public safety issue is really the big challenge. You can manage for public safety. We already have people visiting a park that is full of elk and grizzly bears and there is Yellowstone, Elk Island and Prince Albert National Park. There are lots of national parks with bison, so that is not the challenge,” Van Tighem said.

“The real challenge is bison are a species of the landscape and they wander.”

And it is wandering bison that has the province worried, as it has stated free-ranging bison could create management and public safety issues and affect Alberta’s elk population.

Even so, Van Tighem said, those issues are not insurmountable and he expects that, like prescribed fires which have replaced the previous approach of total fire suppression, bison restoration will likely become a common idea.

“If you go back 20 years, it was hard to imagine fire except as a problem. Fire is back in the landscape and maybe bison will be back in the landscape. Strangely enough, it will become a more natural landscape, but it won’t be one that people necessarily immediately recognize as a natural one,” he said.

The report, *American Bison: Status Survey and Conservation Guidelines 2010*, is a resource that in part provides background on the animal’s history, biology and management and perhaps more importantly, offers wildlife managers and agencies guidelines and information to consider when undertaking a restoration project.

“We did want to be prescriptive, presuming to tell agencies what they should do, rather than just providing guidelines in the form of information they should consider if you were designing conservation projects. We want to inform policy not prescribe it,” Gates said.

He added he plans on asking wildlife managers throughout Canada to create a Canadian bison technical working group.

“All I can hope is a few of the wildlife directors would see this to their advantage, to be able to draw on expertise and information from disciplinarians, practicing biologists and social scientists as well that might be able to inform their policy development and their actions.”

Based on the work currently underway throughout North America, Gates is optimistic bison could one day roam freely again in the Rocky Mountains.

“There is space. The question is, is there opportunity? The eastern slopes between Banff and Jasper, including those national parks, clearly have the habitat capability on provincial and national public lands to do it. The space is not the question. The real question is who are the beneficiaries and are they really interested in doing this? The social licence to do something like this needs to be developed,” Gates said.