

Reintroducing Bison Restores the Great Plains Ecosystem

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Great Plains history

The Great Plains offer a familiar story of overexploitation and the emergence of the need to fix the damage. Today rural areas are showing the decline of traditional agriculture and extractive land uses that have left the area barren and unproductive. Restoration projects, in particular those involving the reintroduction of the bison, give an example of bringing the native ecosystem of an area back to life.

Grasslands once covered 40% of our nation, the bison once ranged over 48 of our states. Pre-settlement bison population estimates range from 30 to 70 million, after the extensive overexploitation of these animals their numbers dwindled to less than two [dozen](#) ([Walters, 1996](#)). The grasslands were a highly productive ecosystem even when the bison numbered in the millions because the two coevolved with each other adapting to conditions as well as each other. Today's cattle from the old world have replaced the

bison's place in the [plains](#) degrading them while collecting the majority of the grains produced by American agriculture. Given the natural intact environment, bison thrive on their own without outside help. They are adapted to the harsh plains, "burned into the genes of bison is the speed and agility needed to outrun a prairie fire or track the greenup path of a summer thunderstorm. This is an animal shaped by millennia of natural selective pressures in the Great Plains environment," Fox and biologist Craig Knowles wrote (Defenders).

The Great Plains have suffered cycles of booms and busts since its early white settlement. The first began in 1862 with the Homestead Act. The Act gave pioneer families 160 acres of free federal land to be farmed for five years. This was the start of federally subsidized settlement that caused soil erosion and the lowering of the water table eventually leading to heavy depopulation. The next cycle began in the early 1900s with new homestead laws and larger free land incentives. This second cycle ended with the Great Depression, drought, the Dust Bowl, the abolition of homesteading, and was illustrated to us in John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*. The third cycle beginning in the 1940s reached its peak in the 1970s when the Department of Agriculture encouraged fence-post to fence-post cultivation. By the mid 1980s the bust phase set in and is still continuing (Popper, 1994).

The Buffalo Commons

The Buffalo Commons is a phrase that was coined by Deborah E.

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