Bison Restoration and Native American Traditions

Buffalo (the popular name for *Bovidae bison*) have been important to humans in North America since the latter first populated these lands 12,000 to 30,000 years ago. Ranging originally from the eastern woodlands to the desert southwest and northward into the subarctic, buffalo made human life possible – serving as both food and the source of raw materials for clothing and tools. Humans hunted them on foot using various techniques based on the opportunities offered by culture and landscape. Effigies in the shape of bison have been discovered that are thousands of years old, which are evidence for their use in religious ritual. Written records becoming available after the European colonization provide numerous accounts of the importance of buffalo, economically and spiritually, to many tribes across North America, and include detailed descriptions of ceremonies and social events dependent upon the buffalo. Some native languages highlight the animals' practical and symbolic importance by emphasizing the etymological links between the animals and the sacred, as in the Lakota terms for buffalo, *tatanka*, and the mysterious powers animating the world, *wakantanka*.

The importance of buffalo to the Indians of the Plains thus cannot be overstated. For thousands of years it was the most important prey animal upon which humans depended, to the point that their basic material culture can be described as hide-based rather than wood- or vegetal-based. This means that hide was used as the basic material to create goods produced from alternate materials in other regions of North America. The return of horses – following sixteenth-century Spanish incursions into the southern plains – and their diffusion across the region over the next two hundred years, enabled native peoples to become even more efficient hunters, enlarging their lives and enriching their cultures from the success of the hunt. Their population increased because food was more abundant and people were better fed. Horses made transportation of goods easier and buffalo-hide teepees became larger to house bigger families. The strength of the buffalo economy was also its eventual weakness, however, as overhunting and a deliberate post-Civil War U.S. military policy of bison extermination drove Plains tribes to succumb to their confinement on prison-like reservations in the 1870s and 1880s.

The dislocation of Plains tribes from their original lands, the forced imposition of Euro-American culture and the aggressive proselytization of Christianity, disrupted the linkage between land and the sacred that has shaped all Indian religions. On the Plains, the death of the buffalo, for many Indians and certainly for the land-hungry whites, meant the death of a form of culture. Lakota holy man turned tribal police officer and deacon George Sword, for instance, spoke for a significant portion of his generation, when he said in 1896 that he chose a new name and determined to adopt the new white ways after it became clear that the whites could not be moved. However, the fundamental sense of connection with the land and its nonhuman inhabitants that underlay buffalo culture did not completely vanish from Plains communities. During the oppressive decades of the reservation era, some tribal members – Christian as well as traditionalist – retained that knowledge of land–life connection and the multiple ways in which it can be celebrated and respected in religion or moral code.

Thus, despite the negative consequences of colonization (i.e., social disorganization, kinship fragmentation, and the loss or transformation of many religious and cultural practices) today the buffalo remains a strong image and icon for many tribes, particularly in the Plains and Southwest. Images of the buffalo appear as art, posters, school logos, sport team names, sweat shirts, etc. Legal surnames still incorporate the word for some families in a system created during the early reservation period, and personal names that include the word in a native language are still acquired either by inheritance as a family name, clan name, by accomplishment or in a religious experience such as a vision quest or sun dance. The buffalo as a source of religious power and reverence remains important for many tribal peoples, whether reservation or urban-dwelling families, and possession of tanned buffalo robes or items from buffalo products are prized possessions. Some contemporary ceremonies require buffalo items for efficacious performance such as the use of a buffalo skull and/or tanned hide in sun dances, hide headdress and cuff in Pueblo buffalo dances, and skulls in many private rites that are performed by families outside public view. Buffalo religious power is always positive and usually expressed in terms of health, fertility, success or healing in various combinations of importance in different tribal settings. A few families who own sufficient acreage even acquired small numbers of buffalo for their own use or enjoyment, although this is not commonplace. Some individuals express a sense of loss because there are no longer free ranging buffalo and make trips to public parks where they can visit herds. The birth of white buffalo calves to Indian and non-Indian families is interpreted by some as a sign of positive change and returning strength to native traditions. Individuals make trips to visit these animals, to pray and leave offerings as religious acts.

A gradual reassertion of Indian identity began in the 1960s and has remained on the upsurge for over four decades; the buffalo has been part of this cultural and political resurgence. Many native people felt it was time to establish tribally owned buffalo herds on Indian land and bring the animals and the land back to health and by extension the well-being of tribal people. By 2003, 47 Indian tribes had established tribally owned and managed herds on reservations for the use and welfare of tribal members with a collective number of over 8000 animals. Buffalo meat and hides are available at no cost to tribal members for community events that require communal meals. The ability to serve buffalo at feasts completes cultural practices in ways that serving cow does not. Native American participants believe that the spirit of the buffalo is present at the event and bestows its health and well-being on those who partake of the meal. Participants report they feel better nourished and healthier after eating meals in which buffalo meat is a major part. Tribal artists use buffalo products in their work, which is given to others or sold to generate income. Some members of the Lakota, Crow, and Kiowa and probably others as well visit the herd privately and can be seen in meditative repose, watching them. Buffalo shed their winter coat in the spring and the "shed hair" falls to the ground or is caught in bushes on the grazing lands where it is gathered for use in rituals or domestic purposes. Some use it as padding in their pipe bags or for small pillows. As in the past all parts of the buffalo are used for food, hide and tools.

Environmental degradation on the Plains is commonplace due to overgrazing by cattle and sheep, which are more destructive to the grasses and the land than buffalo unless kept at a proper carrying load per acre. Teachers on the reservation grapple with changes in the landscape by taking school groups to visit the buffalo herd to learn about its traditional cultural and ecological importance. They learn about other animals that used to be common there such as prairie dogs, black-footed ferrets, and other grassland native creatures. Many contemporary Plains Indians believe that the restoration of the buffalo will aid in the recovery of the land to its original healthy condition before the advent of Euro-Americans. Indian communities have been impacted by a dramatic increase in diabetes and heart disease due to high-fat diets, overweight and sedentary lifestyles over the last 40 years. As a result a healthy diet has become an important community issue and the buffalo is part of this discussion. Buffalo meat is lower in saturated fat than cattle and is being marketed nationally as a healthier food choice for those who want a low-fat diet but still want to eat meat. Some Indian tribes are raising buffalo in part as a commercial venture and selling to food suppliers who market it nationally. Simultaneously, Indian medical professionals encourage native people to take the same advice and switch to eating buffalo instead of cattle as well as other aspects of the traditional diet. Some Euro-American ranchers are raising buffalo commercially as a substitute for beef in response to new concerns about high-fat diets, and Indian tribes are taking advantage of this new market and selling meat nationally. Some contemporary Native Americans interpret the obvious link between modern diets and lifestyles and resultant disease as another sign of the failure of contemporary life and the superiority of traditional values and lifestyles.

Many communities have established summer culture camps for their youth where they learn about traditional values and ways and are taken to visit the tribal buffalo herd. Where possible the herd is kept in distant pastures with no paved roads, so it takes some effort to reach them and discourages casual visitors. When approaching the herd, prayers are said to honor and appease the animals and to remind humans of their reliance on these animals in the past and the present. While many of these children are from Christian families, the linkage between the natural world and humankind, often expressed in terms of respect, is stressed as the proper way in which to approach all of the landscape and its inhabitants. The inherent sacred nature of the Earth is believed to be manifest in these visits and it is hoped that the children will take this away with them and observe it in the rest of their lives, no matter what religious faith they may observe. Practitioners of traditional Plains religions are usually sanguine about simultaneous participation in Christian faiths although the reverse is not true. Nevertheless, the land–human relationship found in all native religions, and embodied so clearly for Plains people in the buffalo, is intact and being taught in subtle but deliberate ways to future generations of Indian people. In the words of a Lakota song – "Buffalo Nation, the People are depending upon you, so we pray you will be healthy" (www.intertribalbison.org).

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Further Reading

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Pickering, Robert B. *Seeing the White Buffalo*. Denver: Denver Museum of Natural History Press, 1997.

Roe, Frank Gilbert. *The North American Buffalo*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970.

See also: Lakota; Native American Spirituality; Yuchi Culture and the Euchee (Yuchi) Language Project.

Black Elk (1863–1950)

Nicholas Black Elk is the most famous American Indian religious thinker of the twentieth century. He was a member of the Oglala tribe of the Lakotas (popularly known as the Teton or Western Sioux). In his childhood and youth he participated in the traditional buffalo-hunting way of life, then witnessed the wars of the 1860s and 1870s between the Lakotas and the U.S. Army and the destruction of the buffalo herds by the early 1880s. In 1881 he settled on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in southwestern South Dakota.

Outwardly, Black Elk's life differed little from his contemporaries and may serve as representative of the experiences of the first generation of reservation Lakotas.