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CONSERVATION MATTERS

with Shane Mahoney


Shane Mahoney is considered one of the leading international authorities on wildlife conservation. A rare combination of historian, scientist and philosopher he brings a unique perspective to wildlife issues that has motivated and inspired audiences around the world. Named one of the 10 Most Influential Canadian Conservationists by Outdoor Canada Magazine and nominated for Person of the Year by Outdoor Life Magazine, he has received numerous awards including the Public Service Award of Excellence from the government of Newfoundland and Labrador and International Conservationist of the Year by Safari Club International. Born and raised in Newfoundland he brings to his writings and lectures a profound commitment to rural societies and the sustainable use of natural resources, including wildlife and fish.

THE AMERICAN BUFFALO AND THE DEATH OF FREEDOM

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. . . .

Chief of the Crow Nation, Plenty Coups, 1928.

The American Buffalo (or Bison, more technically) 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 The historical references to their immense herds are difficult to comprehend; such is the scale of their numbers and the sheer improbable spectacle the authors of these reports try to convey. Perhaps these images are also difficult for us to understand because they inevitably inspire in the sensitive reader a feeling of great sadness



that such a wondrous prospect must now be denied us all, forever. Indeed when Colonel R.I. Ridge rode through a herd amassed 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 four and twelve 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 Buffalo 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 of Buffalo had helped to create and maintain. In a perverse way these imposing realities and the haunting images of skinned Buffalo 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 can we make sense of this irony?

Indeed, how do we measure our own view of history when it often appears we are more alarmed at the loss of the Buffalo than the human populations and incredible societies that depended upon it? Yet, we must ask, who has ever again spoken as eloquently for the Buffalo as did the Plains Indians whose lives were entwined with it? In modern terms, is the White Tailed Deer more important than the traditions and culture of the modern American hunter; and, if the American hunter disappears, who will argue so strongly for the deer themselves? Surely 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 a sign of strength and wisdom. For so many of those nations, like the Blackfoot, the Dakota, the Comanche and the Crow, the Cheyenne and Tonkawa, the Gros Ventre,

the Wichita and Arapaho, and numerous others as well, life was a nomadic existence at the centre of which was the Buffalo, irreplaceable and essential to their lives. True these Plains Indians hunted other animals but it was the Buffalo that formed the lynch pin of their survival, so much so that the elimination of the great beast was the most certain way of destroying these nations. These were warrior peoples who, like generations of Americans to follow, proved determined and capable in defense of their way of life and the homelands they cherished. So it was necessary that a combination of white settlement, market hunting, railroad expansion, and military operations eventually, over a thirty year period and more, brought both the predictable Buffalo and the elusive 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 North Americans. Somehow figures like President Ulysses Grant and General Philip Sheridan could enthusiastically recommend against Buffalo Bill Cody's (and others') attempts to save the Buffalo. They did so to pave the way for ranchers and domestic livestock and force the once proud indigenous peoples into dependency of a woeful kind, and along the way assist the railroad barons who disliked the troublesome Buffalo 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.

What if we had listened to the rightly famous portrait artist George Catlin when he suggested in the 1830's that a great Nation's Park for Buffalo and Native Americans be established in the still wild and expansive west? Perhaps today we would yet see vast herds moving across wide expanses; landscapes made most productive by working with what nature provided rather than what we forced upon it. Indeed, perhaps we would still marvel at those extraordinary peoples who even their enemies were forced to recognize as the greatest horsemen the world had ever known and whose ability to live within nature was extraordinary and beautiful in the truest sense of the words. Certainly changes would have come but they might have been more measured, more considerate of our inability to recreate what had emerged so naturally and which so naturally inspired those who might look upon it unfettered by greed and prejudice. So regrettably for indigenous cultures and for the once teeming Buffalo such ideas were to remain largely unknown until it was all but too late.

There are many lessons residing in this great misfortune; 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

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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 we are less dependent on nature now than in the time of the Plains Indians; but we will still expect the land to provide us fresh water and food and look to nature to maintain the intricate cycles necessary to sustain our lives and our economies. Bees may seem insignificant to Buffalo, 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 afterwards "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? Apparently they were not of much meaning to Plenty Coups.

Not one day should pass without us fighting to preserve our wildlife legacy and our cherished traditions within it. Indeed! For 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 our greatest challenge: keeping the wild others with us so we may preserve freedom and wildness in ourselves.

The Guide Outfitters Association of British Columbia (GOABC) wants to start a fundamental shift among hunters from caring about hunting to caring about all wildlife. Ranchers care about cattle and anglers care about fish, but hunters seem to only care about their sport. Hunters must be committed to the responsible use of wildlife resources and passionate about preserving a diversity of wildlife species. The GOABC is a strong supporter of the North American Wildlife Conservation Model, which stipulates that law and science should manage wildlife. This model is the result of hunters and anglers who were dedicated to conservation. As anti-hunting pressure becomes louder, it becomes increasingly important to continue and enhance the legacy of the hunter conservationist.

