

Bringing Back the Buffalo

Tens of millions of bison (also known as buffalo) once lived in the prairie ecosystems of North America. Huge herds of them crossed the grasslands, eating the plants, moving seeds in their droppings or caught in their fur. They were hunted by wolves, grizzly bears, and people—the Native Americans who lived on the prairie— but the buffalo population was large and stable. Native Americans of the area depended on the buffalo. They ate buffalo meat and used their skins for clothing and more. Since time immemorial, buffalo were extremely important and central to their way of life. Then, about 150 years ago, European-American settlers arrived on the prairie. The settlers shot buffalo for sport. The United States government encouraged people to kill buffalo in order to make life harder for Native Americans, so that settlers could take their land. Over the next 100 years, nearly all of the buffalo were killed.

When Jason Baldes was a boy, he used to ride on horseback with his father across the prairie on the Wind River Indian Reservation in Wyoming. Jason's father worked as a biologist studying the prairie ecosystem. They rode many miles, visiting several lakes. Jason helped his father test the quality of the water and sample fish populations. As they rode, they saw elk, deer, moose, bighorn sheep, and pronghorn antelope, but no buffalo.

When he grew up, Jason Baldes went to a university to study Environmental Science. As a member of the Eastern Shoshone Tribe, he wanted to bring buffalo back to the Wind River Indian Reservation. He researched the Wind River ecosystem and how buffalo populations interact with other populations. When he finished his studies, he worked with the



Jason Baldes is the buffalo representative for the Eastern Shoshone Tribe.

Shoshone Tribe and with other organizations to make a plan to bring back buffalo. In 2016, ten buffalo were released to the Wind River prairie ecosystem, and more have been released since then. The plans are to help the population in the ecosystem increase to about 1,000 buffalo.

Buffalo aren't the only organisms that this plan will affect. Since wolves and grizzly bears eat some buffalo, the wolf and grizzly bear populations may increase. There will also be indirect effects of bringing back buffalo. When the buffalo eat grasses, this leaves more room for other plants that buffalo eat less often, such as wildflowers. If wildflower populations increase, populations of the butterflies and bees that get food from the flowers may also increase. Buffalo roll in the dust to clean themselves, and when they do they create shallow pits in the ground, or wallows. In the spring, the wallows fill with water and make small ponds, where insects and frogs can live.

If there are more insects and frogs, populations of birds that eat these animals may increase. Bringing back buffalo can help increase the biodiversity of the whole ecosystem.

Today, when Baldes rides to the lakes he and his father visited, he sometimes sees the buffalo herd. Other times, he might spot a fresh wallow, or buffalo droppings, or wildflowers blooming where buffalo have eaten grasses. Baldes believes that bringing back bison can help his community and also help the ecosystem. He says, "They took care of us, now it's our turn to take care of them. We must all fight for our buffalo."



After many years without buffalo, the Wind River Reservation once again has a population of buffalo.