

Engagement

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Wildlife Conservation and Settler Colonialism in the North American West

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On May 3, 1933, a common brown buffalo cow gave birth to a snow-white bison calf on the National Bison Range near Moiese, Montana. A ranger noticed it during his morning rounds, and news spread rapidly. A sense of hope swept through communities of the Flathead Nation in western Montana. It was a full year before the Indian Reorganization Act finally abolished the federal policy of allotment that saw tribal land holdings eviscerated across Native America. On the Flathead Indian Reservation, where settlers acquired more than half of the land within the reservation, Séliš, Ksanka and Qlispe[1] elders gathered to perform a ceremony in celebration of the calf named Big Medicine. Estimated to appear in one of every five million births, white bison are as rare as they are prophetic.



(https://aesengagement.files.wordpress.com/2017/03/big_medicine.jpg).

Big Medicine preserved and on display in perpetuity at the Montana Historical Society in Helena, Montana. Source: Montana Historical Society, Helena, Montana. <https://mhs.mt.gov/Museum/Permex> (<https://mhs.mt.gov/Museum/Permex>).

The white bison is a powerful symbol in many Indigenous cultures. As Moses Delaware, a Salish translator, relayed to a reporter during the 1930s in relation to the Séliš and Ksanka tradition, “our old people believed the white buffalo was son of the first Salish chief and a buffalo cow, and that is why it had great buffalo as well as human power” (Whealdon 2001, 25). Big Medicine had piercing blue eyes and tan hoofs. He sported a ruffled top knot of dark brown hair on his head, growing to six feet in height and stretching twelve feet long from nose to tail. He was huge—an estimated 1,900 pounds as a mature adult. He spent his entire life on the National Bison Range, and was one of the most popular tourist attractions in all of Montana during the Great Depression and early post-war years. He was reputed to be the most-photographed bison in history.

The story of Big Medicine is useful for exploring the role of bison in the settler colonial imagination, particularly with reference to efforts to “restore” bison populations. The creation and expansion of public bison herds on federal wildlife areas formed the backbone of this wildlife restoration effort. But current contestations over the ownership and management of the National Bison Range turn on this question of restoration—and different notions of what that means. One is about animal populations cared for by expert wildlife scientists to ensure a sustainable and governable population. The other is the revitalization of relationships between people and bison—a cultural heritage of intimacy with the bison. These two are not mutually exclusive, as the Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes seek to fulfill both ends. But often, the former obscures the possibilities for cultural revitalization inherent in wildlife restoration. Wildlife ecology maps out the relationships among different plants and animals, identifying the biome required to sustain life. Meaning-filled relationships are substituted with mechanistic explanations among species structured in geophysical environment devoid of social and cultural purchase.

The broader history of wildlife conservation in the United States is commonly told as a progressive narrative of enlightened environmental stewardship, rising above the excesses of 19th-century capitalism and violent state expansion. Foremost among the conservation success stories featured in that narrative is that of the American bison. Recently named the national mammal, the American bison is a symbol of natural heritage within the seemingly redemptive promise of renewal through endangered species protection. The National Bison Range was created in 1908 as one of the first wildlife areas in the U.S., part of a network of protected zones designated to sustain and grow the “wild” bison population, which narrowly avoided total extirpation from market hunting, habitat loss, and ecological changes in the late 19th century (Isenberg 2000). The range played a vital role in sustaining the bison population, but its creation was deeply implicated in the settler colonial project of dispossessing Séliš, Ksanka, and Qlispe peoples of their lands. Its creation coincided with allotment and white settlement, which eclipsed and undermined culturally and materially important human-animal relationships Indigenous people had with bison on the Flathead Indian Reservation.

Wildlife management uses habitat as a fundamental objective. Bison conservation requires habitat to support bison. This territorializes a set of relations, demonstrating that conservation is predicated on the commodification of “native-ness” and the objectification of nature. The model of conservation derived from settler colonialism is predicated on the threat of extermination made possible by the disruption of relationships among beings. In other words, it is the translation of land (rich with dynamic and interlocking relationships) into habitat (situated for the survival of a single or hierarchical set of species).



(<https://aesengagement.files.wordpress.com/2017/03/burrow2.jpg>)

Photo of National Bison Range, 2015. Photo by author.

colonialism and conservation share in common the animating focus of territoriality, and the underlying ideology of dominance. Jessica Cattelino (2015) describes the settler imperatives involved in restoration, which are useful for thinking about settler colonialism in and around the Flathead Nation: an ethic of care for wildlife (bison) emerges at the same time as the land is being dispossessed and transformed into agriculture. These logics of elimination are not just centered on Indigenous bodies, which settler colonialism seeks to eliminate, but also on the very relationships of mutual obligation that constitute the land itself (Carroll 2015; Coulthard 2014). Thus, the territoriality of settler colonialism is about transforming land into its singular and interchangeable capitalist form. In order to accomplish this, relationships are severed. The imposition of regimes of private property on the Flathead Reservation through allotment played an important part in disabling Séliš, Ksanka and Qlispe efforts at protecting this relationship with bison.

Given the colonial legacy of wildlife conservation as a way of thinking wrapped up in practices of exclusion, elimination, and territorialization, conservation is a fraught but still-important concept for anti-colonial work of Native people seeking to reclaim both land and lifeways. I want to argue that settler society needs to look more to the other-than-human in a way that is attentive to entanglements between these beings (human and not) rather than seeing the other-than-human as an object. And we should see this space of entanglement not as something that occurs on parcels of land or in singular habitats, but as life itself imbricated with relationships of mutual obligation. Conservation is not

In this sense, conservation is not just about sustaining a place, and its ways and species, or even a species itself, but about conserving the endurance of the settler colonial project, a way of life that individuates by separation, eliminates through replacement, and sustains through domination.

Territoriality is an animating focus of settler colonialism—which explains the importance of the dispossession of Indigenous land. But settler colonialism is more pervasive and complex than just expropriation of land and violence against Indigenous bodies—it is also about disrupting relationships of mutual obligations among human and other-than-human beings. Central to this are what Patrick Wolfe (2006) called “logics of elimination,” which he uses in reference to Indigenous peoples, but which I argue are evident in the elimination *and* conservation of bison. The American bison was decimated by the expansion of capital markets into the countryside, ecological transformations, and wanton hunting, which made a commodity of the bison and hastened its population crash. It was then commodified further, and reified, as a symbol of national pride situated in a territorial arrangement that kept the species discrete from pre-existing human-animal reciprocities. What is evidenced in the effort to claim and maintain the herd is that settler

objectivist or value-neutral. Understanding its co-production with settler colonialism demonstrates how they share the same underlying logics of territorialization, replacement, and elimination. In short, it's not about the bison—conservation can be a profoundly political project.

By thinking through bison conservation as it concerns territoriality and habitat, we can understand the way nature is produced through settler colonialism. Conservation operates on a series of categorical exclusions, the foremost of which is the idea of species. Early conservation efforts were single-species projects and this is especially true for bison. The problem with indexing the object of conservation against the category species is that it ignores the entangled relationships in which all beings exist. Bison index a history in which the richness of bison *in relation* to people is important to the survival of a particular set of relations, not just a particular species. As it became an other-than-human object of care, bison become the sole object of protection. Land is transformed into habitat as a space singularly oriented around the biopolitical control of bison populations. Many early conservation organizations focused on wildlife like bison. These early undertakings involved assessments of threatened species—seeking to map where these species lived and how many remained. This effort doubled as a form of biopolitical control—making populations legible such that they could be closely managed. This projects a particular notion of territory. The prevailing ideology characteristic of settler colonialism is the desire to fulfill imagined manifest destinies, carving out a territory that severs the relationships of mutual obligation that constitute the land itself.

I started this essay with the story of Big Medicine. His popularity is revealing for what it says about the settler colonialism imagination. The dual reading of his meaning—as national icon and symbol of coming change—reveals contested visions of land and life. It reminds us that bison conservation is part of larger structural processes of dispossession, but can also be a means of realizing decolonized futures. Big Medicine died in 1959, but he still remains on display at the Montana Historical Society in Helena (see Figure 1). Last year, the Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Nation announced their intention to put forward U.S. congressional legislation to transfer the National Bison Range from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to the Tribes' Natural Resources Department. The Department of the Interior and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service indicated their support for this measure after decades of fraught attempts at co-management. There is hope that with widespread local, federal and congressional support, the legislation will move forward to see the range transferred back to the Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes. It would be the consecration of the spirit of Big Medicine's return.

Notes:

[1] The Flathead Indian Reservation is home to the Bitterroot Salish, Pend d'Oreille Salish, and Kootenai (or Kalispell) tribes. I use the transliterated names of the three tribes in their respective languages in this article. In other places, I use "Salish" to refer collectively to both the Bitterroot Salish and Pend d'Oreille peoples.

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