

Position Statement of the Montana Chapter of The Wildlife Society on Wild Bison in Montana

The Wildlife Society -- The Wildlife Society (TWS) is an international professional society established in 1937. The Society's membership of more than 9,600 includes research scientists, educators, communications specialists, resource managers, conservation law enforcement officers, administrators, and students in more than 60 countries. The principal objectives of The Wildlife Society are:

- (1) to develop and promote sound stewardship of wildlife resources and of the environments upon which wildlife and humans depend;
- (2) to undertake an active role in preventing human-induced environmental degradation;
- (3) to increase awareness and appreciation of wildlife values; and
- (4) to seek the highest standards in all activities of the wildlife profession.

The Montana Chapter of The Wildlife Society (hereafter known as The Chapter) has a current membership of 310. Chapter members include individuals employed by state and federal agencies, educational institutions, non-profit organizations, industry, and consultants, as well as retirees and graduate students.

Legal Status of Wild Bison in Montana - Wild Bison in Montana are recognized as a game animal [Montana Statutes 87-2-101 subsection (6)] and also as a species in need of management (ibid. 87-1-216). Bison originating from Yellowstone national park are designated as a species requiring disease control [ibid. 87-1-216 (1)(a)] while other wild bison are designated as a species in need of management [ibid. 87-1-216 (1)(b)].

Values of Wild Bison in Montana - Montana is a state richly blessed in scenic splendor, abundant wildlife, and extensive wild lands. Bison were once the dominant ungulate on Montana's prairie grasslands. They were extirpated through unregulated hunting during Montana's territorial period but were not included in the wildlife restoration efforts of the 20th century. Wild bison once roamed the vast rolling plains in numbers almost unimaginable, and are an important part of our American heritage and western culture. Restoration of wild bison is important ecologically and culturally because:

- a.. Bison were a keystone species of the prairie ecosystem; significantly affecting the way the prairie grassland ecosystem evolved and playing an important role in maintaining it.
- b.. Wild bison remain ecologically extinct in Montana. The State of Montana Department of Livestock has prevented the natural dispersal of wild bison into Montana from Yellowstone National Park because of disease issues while no attempts are underway to restore the species outside of this controversial region.
- c.. Current management of private, state and Federal bison herds is leading towards domestication of bison that threatens their wild character and limits important natural selection processes.
- d.. Wild bison were of great prehistoric and historic importance to Montana. Indeed, no other wild animal is more symbolic of the American west than the bison. The Lewis and Clark expedition noted this importance in their journals and were dependent upon bison for food and materials when exploring Montana. The Lewis and Clark bicentennial in Montana will be 2005-2006. Restoration of bison to an area traversed by Lewis and Clark would be a living tribute to an event that was so important to our State's history.
- e.. Wild bison had great economic, cultural and spiritual importance to Montana's Indian tribes. Cooperative management of wild bison on reservation/Federal lands would help restore these traditional values.

Position of the Chapter - In view of the foregoing, The Montana Chapter of The Wildlife Society is in full support of maintaining current free-roaming wild bison and encourages the establishment of additional herds in Montana where it is ecologically, economically and socially acceptable. We recommend that Federal and State resource agencies in Montana develop long range plans for the restoration of free roaming bison herds on tribal lands or suitable federal public lands.

Signed by the Executive Board of The Montana Chapter of The Wildlife Society

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