

Fort Peck Buffalo Project: A Case Study

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Abstract

To the Nakoda and Dakota people, bison are seen as a people, *Tatanga/Tatanka Oyate*, or *Buffalo People*. In 2012, the Fort Peck Tribes in Montana (Sioux and Assiniboine) had the opportunity to bring back a herd of heritage bison from Yellowstone National Park to Fort Peck reservation lands; in 2014, an additional herd was returned to reservation lands. Seeing this as an opportunity to connect and re-connect with their relations, *Tatanga/Tatanka Oyate*, and to educate the young people in their communities about the historic and cultural importance of buffalo, the Fort Peck Tribes embarked on a community initiative in conjunction with the return of the buffalo to reservation land. In this article, Roxann Smith, Robert McAnally, Lois Red Elk, Elizabeth Bird, Elizabeth Rink, Dennis Jorgensen, and Julia Haggerty, collaborators from three different institutions involved in this initiative, document the efforts to educate about and re-connect with the buffalo, as well as their own research inquiry process, which involved utilizing community-based participatory research methods to investigate four strands of inquiry, education, and service: the impact of buffalo restoration on the Fort Peck Tribes, the Buffalo People Summit (a community education and outreach event), an oral history project documenting the history of buffalo restoration in Fort Peck, and the Buffalo Values Survey, an effort to understand community perception and needs regarding the management of the buffalo herds and wildlife conservation. This initiative, involving a collaboration among the Fort Peck Tribes, Fort Peck Community College, Montana State University, and the World Wildlife Fund, is collectively known as the Fort Peck Buffalo Project.

Introduction

This article tells the story of an integrated research, education and service project conducted on the Fort Peck reservation and led by current and retired faculty of Fort Peck Community College (FPCC) in partnership with Montana State

University (MSU) and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF). It describes four strands of interconnected work in the form of a meta-analytic case study, i.e., a case study that reviews the purpose and outcome of each of the strands in relation to each other and draws lessons from each strand and from the integrated whole to inform further research, education, and service initiatives. The connecting thread in these strands is the significance of the Fort Peck buffalo herds for the health and well-being of the Fort Peck peoples.

Faculty and staff of FPCC and MSU have been engaged in these several strands of work with diverse community partners, starting in 2013. Four key milestones in this collaboration, which serve as strands of inquiry in this study, include:

- 1) *Impact of Buffalo Restoration*: Qualitative research investigating the way in which the return of the buffalo to Fort Peck can improve individual and community health and well-being
- 2) *Buffalo People Summit*: Organization of a community educational outreach event, focused on re-building and strengthening knowledge of and cultural connections to buffalo, held during Native American Week in September 2015
- 3) *The Path Back: A History of Buffalo Advocacy by the Fort Peck Tribes*: An oral history research project documenting the recent history of buffalo restoration on the Fort Peck reservation
- 4) *Buffalo Values Survey*: A joint project with the World Wildlife Fund to survey the people of Fort Peck in summer 2015 to understand what they want from their buffalo herds' management, how the management can be improved, and attitudes toward wildlife conservation in general

All four of these strands of work exhibit collaborative strength-based strategies to improve community health, well-being and resilience. We refer to these initiatives collectively as “The Buffalo Project.”

Central Research Question

In 2012, FPCC was in the midst of a National Institutes of Health (NIH)-funded project in collaboration with Montana State University researchers called, *Ceremony of Research*, with which several of the authors of this article were involved. The purpose of *Ceremony of Research* was to build research capacity within the Fort Peck College and community, and in particular to establish a reservation-wide Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure any human subjects research happening on the reservation met ethical and cultural consonance expectations. This initiative built upon a longstanding partnership between Fort Peck Community College and Fort Peck Tribal Health Department in Poplar, Montana, and MSU in Bozeman, Montana, and had a Project Advisory Board (PAB) consisting of five individuals from the college (including author McAnally) and from the community, and a lead FPCC staff member (author Smith) working alongside the early MSU partners (authors Bird and Rink).

Simultaneously in 2012, the Fort Peck Tribes, led by its Fish and Game Department, gained an historic opportunity to improve the well-being of the Sioux and Assiniboine Tribes of Fort Peck through the return of a small herd of bison free of cattle genes from Yellowstone National Park (YNP) to Fort Peck reservation land; in 2014 the herd was expanded three-fold, adding 136 additional buffalo originating from YNP (see video of the historic 2014 event, and the work leading up to it, at: YouTube, 2012; YouTube, 2014). A World Wildlife Fund – Northern Great Plains Program Officer (author Jorgensen), also based in Bozeman, Montana, among other conservation NGOs, brought resources to bear on this process to facilitate the bison herds' transfer.

In reflecting on the return of buffalo to Fort Peck lands, *Ceremony of Research* PAB members identified a concern and a hope for the implications of the return of buffalo. We asked (to paraphrase), “What difference will the buffalo make for the

health (mind, body, spirit) of the people of Fort Peck?” In particular, we posed this as a research question: *How can we know and measure the impact the buffalo are having on the health of our people, and how can we enhance that impact?*

We wanted to enhance the Tribes’ buffalo relationships, while answering western critics who had failed to fathom (or directly opposed) the value of the buffalo as our Nakoda (Assiniboine) and Dakota (Sioux) relatives. These questions arose in the context of long discussions in our IRB planning and training sessions. A question was proposed, with a deeply felt need to know if there could be such an impact, and off we went conducting a community based participatory research project.

Background and Context for the Buffalo Project

For millennia, the buffalo held a primary role in American Indian daily life, traditions, culture and cosmology. In pre-colonial times American Indian tribes of the Great Plains, such as the Nakoda and Dakota, relied intensively on buffalo for their food, clothing, shelter and tools. Further, the buffalo were, and continue to be, at the heart of Nakoda and Dakota spirituality; the buffalo constitute a central figure in their stories and ceremonies. To the Nakoda and Dakota, the Buffalo (*Tatanka* in Lakota and Dakota and *Tatanga* in Nakoda) were a people, the Buffalo People (*Tatanga/Tatanka Oyate*), with which they shared a life: learning from, talking, praying and listening to, and relying upon the *Tatanka/Tatanga* (Deloria 2006; Sullivan 2003).

Buffalo were exterminated from the Assiniboine (Nakoda) and Sioux (Dakota) tribal homelands during the nineteenth century when the U.S. government was determined to eliminate or assimilate the northern plains’ American Indian populations (Miller, Smith, McGeshick, Shanley, & Shields, 2012, pp. 121-122). Euro-American conquest and colonization of these profoundly place-based cultures, including the eradication of buffalo from the plains, have wrought historical trauma with its many manifestations of depression, loss of the sense of self-(or community or

cultural)-efficacy, fragility in many people’s sense of identity and belonging, and pessimism and lack of social capital, all challenging constructive cultural evolution (Calloway, 2016).

Beginning in the late 1990s, after several years of social and political advocacy, the Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes of the Fort Peck Reservation acquired 100 buffalo from their Fort Belknap neighbors. These buffalo have mixed genetics reflecting early experiments of interbreeding cattle and buffalo for the purposes of livestock production. In 2012, the Tribes gained a significant opportunity to provide a home for expelled Yellowstone National Park buffalo which have the distinction of being among the few surviving direct descendants in the U.S. of the buffalo known to the Nakoda and Dakota ancestors (Gates, Freese, Gogan, & Kotzman, 2010). The Tribes manage these buffalo from Yellowstone separately from the herd they acquired in 1999 in recognition of this genetic distinction; the Yellowstone buffalo constitute the “cultural herd” while the others form the “business herd.” Fort Peck’s adoption of Yellowstone buffalo has special significance: it showcases the leading role the Fort Peck Tribes are playing in finding a solution to a decades-long dilemma involving buffalo that migrate out of Yellowstone National Park onto private land where they are not tolerated and have been culled in large numbers (Bidwell 2009; Lancaster, 2005). The Fort Peck nations and their buffalo relatives are thus working together to heal and grow from a traumatic past. By returning the buffalo to their reservation lands, the Fort Peck Tribes were, and continue to be, in a unique position to reconstruct their relationship with this cultural keystone species (Garibaldi & Turner, 2004a, 2004b; Platten & Henfrey, 2009). The Buffalo Project seeks to redress historical ills of colonization through a community-wide initiative that broadens and enhances the impact of buffalo restoration on Fort Peck lands.

In a recorded conversation, author McAnally describes the significance of the buffalo and the importance of the Buffalo Project:

The Indians believed that these People, these Tatanka Oyate, were put here as brothers and sisters to be helpful to us. And before anyone was taken, any buffalo was taken, there were several orders of prayers and ceremonies that were done of thanks. Okay, so the last buffalo [here was killed in] 1882 -- so in this century, now we began to develop our own buffalo herd. The first efforts were years ago to develop a herd here by the tribes as an economic potential. Also it was a health issue because it's been proven many times that buffalo meat is a leaner, higher protein meat, and therefore it would be good for diabetics and other people to have this meat available to them at no cost or low cost. So there were economic and health reasons to getting the buffalo back. But there was also a huge spiritual reason, a huge psychological, emotional reason that we told the United States, we told the State of Montana, that we needed these People back not only for our health, but our well-being, okay? Our psychological health, and to teach our history, teach our culture to go back to that way and say, "We are related." This is what we believe, we're related. Every... meaning not just people, but all animals, birds, everything. It's a natural spirituality. It's not a religion, per se, but it's a natural way of believing and living, and it's sustained millions of people for thousands and thousands of years, that daily belief.

So that was part of the reason for getting our buffalo herd started. And then we got the great opportunity to get the only purebred, or genetically pure buffalo in the United States up in Yellowstone Park who were quarantined for over five years, checking for brucellosis and everything else. Finally, through great effort on the part of our fish and wildlife director and his people and other people who were concerned, and the governor as well as [State of Montana] fish and wildlife officials, we were able to almost secret sixty-one buffalo up here, bringing them up, because we were going to be stopped by the court system because of the opposition by non-Indian farmers and ranchers who believed that bringing the buffalo up here would be a bad thing, brucellosis being only one of the conditions. But they're back, okay? They're here. They've been here a lot of years now. However, they're sequestered up north, forty miles north or more, which makes it difficult for us to visit with these People, to pray with these People, to look at these People, to smell these People, to hear these People. ... But to me they're bringing back these People, it's an extraordinary event. You know, it's one of the biggest events we've had in over a hundred years on this reservation, yet

it is not talked about in the general public, in the schools. You know, there are a smattering of discussions about it, but there's no real--that I've seen--buffalo plan, buffalo management, development, whatever you want to call it, plan. ... But I think that these People, the Tatanka Oyate [Buffalo People] can be and should be really important in the lives of our elders and us and our young people. ... I think we're sitting on a piece of our culture and our history that we're not doing anything with, okay? We're big on powwows, we're big on other ceremonies, but including the Tatanka is something that we haven't done yet.

I know it's a long process, since they've been gone so long, but I think that now that they're back, we need to actually promote their presence more.

Methodology

This paper offers a case study of a community-based participatory initiative. The community-based participatory research (CBPR) framework provides the foundation for established research studies with, for, and about Indigenous communities that have demonstrated the importance of Indigenous nations' proactive production of their own knowledge and the need to ensure that research with Indigenous populations has relevancy for their culture and communities (Christopher et al., 2011; Koster, Baccar, & Lemelin, 2012; Salois, Holkup, Fripp-Rumer, & Weinrent, 2006). The Buffalo Project is both community-based and participatory, exemplified by the fact that it is rooted in the engagement of community partners and initiatives well beyond FPCC, MSU and WWF. In addition, the Fort Peck (tribal) IRB reviewed and approved this manuscript prior to its publication.

The inception of The Buffalo Project was in 2013 when we conducted research on the ways in which the return of the buffalo to Fort Peck can improve individual and community health resiliency (Rink et al., 2015). In late 2014, as we considered fresh options of how to move forward from there, we were challenged by author Red Elk, who urged, "Let's not just talk about this. Let's do it!" We then began organizing for a "Buffalo People Summit" to share and strengthen the Fort Peck buffalo culture

through school field trips, story telling and reenactment, and a workshop for adults concluding with a community “Taste of Buffalo” feast. During this organizing period, authors McAnally, Rink, and Haggerty initiated complementary research to understand and document the history of these efforts in, *The Path Back: A History of Buffalo Advocacy by the Fort Peck Tribes*. Finally, aiming to build on the World Wildlife Fund’s ongoing efforts to support sustainable management and expansion of the Fort Peck buffalo herds, we added the WWF Buffalo Program Officer as a collaborator. In particular, the interest of WWF lay in conducting a survey to understand the values, needs, and aspirations members and residents of Fort Peck Reservation hold with respect to buffalo and buffalo management, and more broadly their attitudes toward wildlife conservation. Other Buffalo Project participants informed and expanded upon the questions within this survey. These four pillars of the Buffalo Project constitute the four strands under study in this inquiry. The work on the first strand started in 2013, with much of the work on the additional strands taking place during 2015, and continuing. Current and future research inquiries aim to answer the original PAB’s core question: *What difference will the buffalo make for the health (mind, body, spirit) of the people of Fort Peck?*

The Buffalo Project has been built on lessons learned from *Ceremony of Research* focus groups and the principles of collaborative strength-based research with tribal communities (Rink et al., 2016). Focus group participants indicated that any research that is carried out in their community should be: 1) relevant to Indigenous community needs and interests; 2) respectful of community history, customs, members and ways of knowing; and 3) in alignment with community ethics of reciprocity. Each strand of the Buffalo Project has followed these guidelines, and each is focused on investigating and supporting community strengths rather than highlighting problems to be addressed. A problem-focused approach has been criticized for perpetuating colonial attitudes (with its presumption of white/western culture’s superiority) and

dependency relationships by emphasizing tribal community deficits (Jervis et al., 2006; Whitbeck, Adams, Hoyt, & Chen, 2004; Whitbeck, Chen, Hoyt, & Adams, 2004). Specific methods used for each of these Buffalo Project strands are described below.

Strand 1: Impact of Buffalo Restoration

To gather perceptions of community members, focus groups and key informant interviews were used in this study. These methodologies have been identified as effective ways of collecting data with Indigenous peoples because their descriptive nature allows research participants to share and exchange information through story telling and discussing their life histories, experiences and beliefs (Kovach, 2012).

The research team worked together to develop the focus group guide. Following review of focus group transcripts, a separate guide was used for key informant interviews. Questions in the focus groups had two parts: 1) What do you feel or believe is important about the role of the buffalo? 2) What are your thoughts about how people's relationship with the buffalo influences their well-being? The key informant interview guide asked for participants to elaborate regarding the Fort Peck peoples' relationship to the buffalo and the potential impact of their return.

One FPCC researcher and one MSU researcher facilitated the focus groups. Focus group participants were provided with a light snack and a small gift to thank them for their time and participation. One FPCC researcher and one MSU researcher also conducted the key informant interviews. Key informants received a small gift for their participation in the project. The presence of the FPCC primary researchers was critical to our success in eliciting in-depth and often profound responses.

The focus groups and key informant interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. After our analysis was completed all of the files were archived in the tribal archives at the James E. Shanley Library at FPCC. The Fort Peck Institutional

Review Board gave ethical approval for the focus group and key informant interview protocols. Ethical approval was also received from Montana State University. The focus group (N=41) and key informant interview participants (N=7) revealed that virtually all of the respondents (selected both based on diversity in cultural/community affinity and age, and by random off-the-street recruitment) yearned to have a relationship with the bison herd and characterized a potential relationship in terms of both physical and emotional/spiritual health.

Strand 2: Buffalo People Summit

During early winter of 2015, Fort Peck partners identified a community education and outreach agenda to accompany the previously initiated research related to hopes and aspirations regarding impacts of the return of the buffalo. Partners decided to organize a major community event aimed at re-building cultural connections and individual relationships with the buffalo as spiritual relatives and teachers. By spring, a loose-knit group of advocates named themselves the Pté Group (*Pté* translates into “female buffalo” in both the Dakota and Nakoda languages) and began organizing for a September 2015 “Buffalo People Summit” to be held during the local school districts’ Native American week (in conjunction with the last Friday in September so designated statewide). MSU and WWF partners wrote grant proposals and gathered funds to support the summit. WWF funds in particular supported community organizing for the Summit as part and parcel of engaging the Fort Peck populace in the Buffalo Values Survey. During this time we also had many discussions concerning what shape the Buffalo Summit might take. We invited many people to participate with the Pté Group and ended up with a core group who attended our bi-weekly meetings.

The Pté Group envisioned the Buffalo People Summit as an opportunity to engage tribal members reservation-wide in a community building initiative intended to

rejuvenate ongoing and life-giving connections with their buffalo relatives. Our work was founded in the belief that as the bison prosper, so will all people who connect with them for learning, for spiritual development, and for physical and mental health and well-being.

Members of the Pté Group and partners organized activities aimed at building momentum for the Summit throughout the summer by convening three buffalo cultural activities:

- 1) Buffalo hunt and traditional butchering to feed the populace during the Summit (organized and conducted by the Fort Peck Fish & Game and Language & Culture Departments).
- 2) Dry Meat preparation class taught by a community elder.
- 3) “Winter count” buffalo hide painting, history, and culture class taught by the Fort Peck Cultural Resources Director, creating a replica of the historical/ancestral Lone Dog Winter Count.

Throughout the summer we worked out who and how best to recruit presenters for the Summit events. A key focus was always school children and how we could promote their interest and understanding of the buffalo and the land. We met with local school principals and superintendents about including the Buffalo Summit in their schedules for Native American week and arranging for transportation to the Turtle Mound Buffalo Ranch, which was to be the site of the school field days. We recruited tipi owners and builders to create the setting for the school field days. We worked with teachers to help them prepare their students for the Buffalo Summit adventure. We organized catering and recruited a number of community members to receive a portion of the buffalo meat to prepare their favorite dishes for all community members at the “Taste of Buffalo” meal. We developed a Buffalo People Summit logo for use on publicity and educational materials. There were more than

half a dozen of us working as primary organizers and publicizers (largely on Facebook), and twice that many more helping with ideas and resources and key tasks.

Considered in the context of the legacies of conquest, buffalo restoration to Fort Peck tribal lands offers profound educational opportunities, including the lessons of past generations that experienced buffalo as part of their economies, daily lives and spirituality—lessons that many community members cherish. Other educational foci of the Buffalo People Summit included the changing politics of nature in Montana, and buffalo management and natural history. Youth from schools on the reservation learned that before the bison were deliberately exterminated from the Assiniboine and Sioux (and other Plains) tribal homelands, as a US federal government strategy to eliminate or assimilate the northern plains' American Indian populations, the tribes had relied intensively on buffalo for food, clothing, shelter and tools in addition to honoring their central spiritual role. They learned the importance of the White Buffalo Calf Pipe Woman (Pté San Win) and the seven sacred rituals she taught. High schoolers attending the third field day had the opportunity to witness the first annual reunion of signatories to the Northern Buffalo Treaty. These tribal leaders from a dozen Montana, Alberta and British Columbia tribal nations were eager to come to Fort Peck and make their gathering a part of the Summit.

The five-day Buffalo People Summit reflected all these agendas and provided momentum for existing efforts by Fort Peck Community College and the Fort Peck Tribes' Language and Culture Department to greatly enhance the impact of the buffalo's restored presence on the reservation. A Sunday evening opening ceremony for families provided a reenactment of the Pté San Win story. After three days of school field trips there followed a day of presentations for adults, featuring similar content. The Summit concluded with the community "Fort Peck Taste of Buffalo" feast.

Strand 3: The Path Back: A History of Buffalo Advocacy by the Fort Peck Tribe

The oral histories collected as data in this strand of the inquiry seek to document the recent history of buffalo restoration on the Fort Peck reservation with a focus on environmental governance. Specifically, the project has been documenting in detail how tribal members and their allies worked to overcome the legal, political and institutional barriers to hosting buffalo at Fort Peck. Buffalo restoration was not an easy undertaking; it played out over many years and required persistence and leadership from a number of individuals and communities within Fort Peck. The approach also considers what systems and strategies the tribes have deployed to work with the buffalo upon their return. The theory driving our approach is that the process of clearing a path for buffalo to follow back to Fort Peck both drew upon and enhanced community resilience. Resilience is a broad term that generally describes capacity for recovery and persistence in the face of stressors and shocks. Features of community resilience include cultural adaptations, levels of social and financial capital, personal coping mechanisms, and governance processes that facilitate social learning, among many other social and cultural characteristics of communities and their members. Buffalo restoration was not an easy undertaking; it played out over many years and required persistence and leadership from a number of individuals and communities. The assembled oral histories can help explain exactly how it did so, thereby communicating positive messages about the capacity for contemporary Native Americans to assert sovereignty in ever-increasing and creative ways.

This research involved semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Author Haggerty supervised an undergraduate student at MSU in conducting document analysis. The partners conducted 20 semi-structured interviews during summer and fall of 2015. Interviewees were those who had actively participated in buffalo restoration efforts whether in formal tribal government or informal capacities. They were selected with a purposive sample approach and snowball sampling through

referrals. The Fort Peck IRB and MSU IRB gave approval for the research.

Preliminary analysis of these interviews is in publication (Haggerty, Rink, McAnally, & Bird, 2017).

Strand 4: Buffalo Values Survey

The primary purpose of the survey was program evaluation for both the WWF Northern Great Plains buffalo restoration program, and the Fort Peck Fish & Game buffalo herds managers. It was conceived to inform their collaborative efforts to develop a business and conservation plan for the tribal buffalo business and cultural herds. Team members identified a need to secure a better understanding of the values, beliefs, and desires of tribal members in relation to buffalo and wildlife with the goal of enhancing future outcomes and benefits of tribal Fish and Game programs to community members by improving alignment and communication between the Fort Peck Fish and Game Department and community members. Partners hope this will result in greater community satisfaction and long-term buffalo program sustainability (financial, cultural, and environmental). World Wildlife Fund also sought to benefit from the survey as a means of assessing how it can be most effective at Fort Peck in its own efforts to contribute to tribal wildlife (particularly buffalo) restoration efforts.

Throughout the summer we reached out to the Fort Peck communities (six towns across the reservation) and presented the survey to the residents. We invited residents of Fort Peck to participate in the survey by organizing community feeds, through Facebook outreach, and personal contacts. Throughout the summer we didn't have many people coming to the community feeds, but those who did respond were happy to have a voice in putting together a strategic plan for the buffalo. In addition to the feeds, organizers elicited responses using both digital and paper versions of the survey distributed via social media and visits to community gatherings

such as senior center meals. People were encouraged to fill out the survey by being entered in a drawing for 60 \$50 gift cards. The survey itself, both on-line and on paper, was anonymous.

Demographic questions sought to identify whether respondents were tribal members, which communities they lived in, gender, age, and income level. Four pages of survey questions were posed with a five-point Likert scale and one open-ended narrative question. Questions covered respondents' values regarding the purpose of a buffalo program, how the buffalo herds should be managed and to what ends (e.g. economic development such as eco-tourism, food, spiritual relationships), perceptions of the current management program, values regarding distribution of buffalo hunts, meat and products, patterns of current and preferred buffalo meat consumption, and general wildlife value orientations. Questions stemmed from the need for greater understanding of the values, perceptions, and desires held by tribal members in relation to buffalo to enhance the tribal buffalo program in the future, and the benefits delivered to tribal residents. The portion of the survey concerning wildlife values had been validated by Colorado State University's Department of Human Dimensions of Natural Resources, and tested extensively in the American West, though not specifically among American Indians, and around the world in diverse countries including China, Estonia, Mongolia, Thailand, Kenya, Uganda, and throughout western Europe (Manfredo, Teel, & Henry, 2009; Teel, Manfredo, & Stinchfield, 2007). Qualtrics was used by the MSU Human Ecology Learning & Problem Solving (HELPS) Lab to gather responses, and the qualitative question was analyzed by identifying themes.

Data & Analysis

One common theme across the findings of each project strand is the enthusiasm among the Fort Peck population for connecting with the buffalo,

contrasted with a distinct lack of information about how to do so (for various purposes, such as ceremonies, hunt and buffalo product access, and simply observing the buffalo on the ranch). In addition, knowledge concerning common tribal buffalo songs, stories, protocols, and arts is limited among tribal members. These data suggest there is ample space and indeed demand on the reservation for educational programs, ceremonies and events that could help fill this gap between the desire to know and appreciate buffalo culture and the current availability and distribution of this knowledge.

Strand 1: Impact of Buffalo Restoration

The 2013 focus groups and interviews provided excellent opportunities to find out exactly how a variety of people felt and what their visions for the future might entail. There were a range of ideas expressed. On one hand, younger participants didn't know where the ranch was located; at least one hadn't heard the Tribes possessed buffalo. On the other hand, one respondent expressed a feeling of being upset about how disrespectful people can be in areas of fishing and hunting.

The following strength-based themes emerged from this 2013 qualitative exploratory research:

- 1) Buffalo were and are again important to material survival. They can improve our health if we learn to prepare and appreciate buffalo meat.
 - That buffalo sustained us. We were able to get everything that you needed from that buffalo. The food, they provided some shelter, provided the clothing, your basic necessities.
 - I think nowadays there's so much sickness, so much cancers, so many diseases. Way back, I don't think there was that much because people ate buffalo meat and not so much dairy, processed foods.
- 2) Buffalo are central to culture: they are key to many ceremonies. Research participants discussed a tradition of honoring buffalo through stories and

songs, noting that many of these stories pay homage to the historical role of the buffalo in supporting the survival of Native communities. Songs also honor the strength and beauty of the animal.

➤ I remember it was cold. It was snowing. Then it was raining. [The buffalo] come in. But it was interesting too when they got off that trailer. The bull, they put him off. He jumped off and he just stomped and he turned around. He looked at all of us ... And then he just walked out. Then some of them, they would run out. And after about maybe a half hour the Tatanka Oyate singers lined up and they sing a buffalo song. [The buffalo] were just running like this because I don't think they really knew. But the minute they started singing you should have seen them. I filmed it. They turned. They turned ... The bull on this side, his legs were doing this ... To the buffalo song. "The buffalo are coming dancing," is what the song was saying.

3) The buffalo are teachers – they model lessons on fortitude, endurance, and generosity. They teach through dreams, visions, medicine. They connect us to all of nature. We need them to help educate our youth, and create better times.

➤ [The Buffalo] also showed us a way of life.... And I always look at how headstrong Indian people are. The Buffalo don't run from a storm. They meet the storm head on. They don't turn around and take off and run the other way. They're there because they know. Because I really believe they have that connection and know exactly what's going to happen.... And I think for Indian people they've done that. When they talk about wars or they talk about Indians in your history that have had all these different things happen to them they've met them head on. And whatever those consequences after that or those outcomes they were what they were.

4) The buffalo are spiritual beings – a link to our Creator, our Source. Their return represents a continuation, renewal, of a spiritual journey.

➤ We pray to [the Buffalo] because he is with the Great One, this buffalo. We all come from him. Every animal--even them ants--come from the good Lord. Everything on this earth.... And we ask [the Buffalo] to

pray for us. That's how we do it. That [the Buffalo] will also send prayers up to our Creator to help us.

- 5) Buffalo make us happy, contented. Watching them brings peace and joy. If we participate, they will help heal our people.
 - We have ... an innate feeling, you know, towards animals.... They just bring their energy, they share their energy with us, you know?

Themes that demonstrated concerns have informed the more recent buffalo project strands:

- 6) *Self-Efficacy*. Most older focus group participants expressed considerable self-efficacy in their ability to maintain good relationships with land and animals. Younger participants expressed greater discouragement, or seemed to feel unable to comment on environmental values, inter-species relationships and cultural practices. This result motivated the key focus of the Buffalo People Summit, which was education of the youth about the importance, value and life-enriching potential of buffalo relations.
- 7) *Social Capital*. Social capital can be defined as shared community norms of reciprocity and mutual trust and multiple social network ties that lead to a “united view of a shared future” and capacity for collective action (Flora, Flora, & Gasteyer, 2015, p. 179). The theme of a struggle for social capital was manifest in lack of shared knowledge about the buffalo herd and how it was being managed; tension between people and their government structures; issues of community pride; lack of youth direction/investment; lack of social space where people can gather; changes in land ownership policies; and issues of infrastructure management. This theme informed the decision to mount the strength-based “Path Back” research that celebrates

social capital and resiliency evidenced in the buffalo's return; and the Buffalo Values Survey aimed at improving buffalo herd management practices and community knowledge about the herds.

Strand 2: Buffalo People Summit

The summer classes laying the foundation for the Summit were well attended. About 20 people participated in the hunt and butchering. About 50 people showed up for the Dry Meat class. And a solid half dozen Winter Count students succeeded in painting the Lone Dog replica. All of these events, along with the community meetings and publicity surrounding the Buffalo Values Survey, helped to build momentum and public interest in the Summit.

During the Summit itself, the Opening Ceremony and adults workshop day each brought about 100 participants. Over 1000 students and perhaps 60 teachers participated in the three days of field trips (each day inviting different grade-groups) to the Turtle Mound buffalo ranch in between those two plenary events. According to an informal poll, on the last day participants were about half local tribal members, one third non-Indian non-residents, and the remainder split between visitors enrolled elsewhere, and non-Indian reservation residents.

The Summit was evaluated through a one-page program evaluation aimed at the adult participants, a student worksheet for use by the teachers involved with the school field trips, and a teacher evaluation of the field trips which elicited summaries of student worksheet themes. The program evaluation sought data on how participants heard about the events, how they wanted the buffalo management program to communicate with them and ways in which the buffalo herds can benefit the Fort Peck communities. It elicited narrative feedback on what they learned from the Summit, what they would repeat or do differently. Thirty-four participants' evaluations were returned. The teacher evaluation elicited narrative responses

regarding what they learned, what they would repeat or do differently, what their students highlighted as “interesting things” about the field day, and what they observed at the buffalo ranch where the field days were held. Only four teacher evaluations were returned but we collected about 200 student worksheets as well.

Participants emphasized they learned about the importance of the buffalo in Fort Peck Tribes’ spirituality, gaining an understanding that buffalo are relatives, understanding the significance of relationship with the buffalo, the buffalo’s value to culture and how it can “affect the native community as a whole.” Ten respondents mentioned a desire to see the buffalo, either with a tour to the ranch, or a local viewing herd. This was a sentiment heard more widely through word-of-mouth and from the students. Several suggested another summit include more cultural events, such as a “sweat”, or a pow-wow or a “Wacipi - a dance/celebration.” Several made “culinary” comments – asking for “more buffalo tastings,” asking to “make sure all the people get to eat buffalo all the time,” asking for a cooking class, and asking for a recipe book.

During the field days, the students had circulated through about 20 different “tipi [and outdoor] stations” with speakers on cultural, historical, and ecological lessons of the buffalo, singing, tipi pole scraping, games, and displays of a taxidermied buffalo and horses. The teachers appreciated the events very much, especially highlighting their students’ response to active or hands-on lessons (“*Learning Nakoda Buffalo song*,” “*scraping the lodge pole #1 favorite*”). One comment about what a teacher would have the Pté Group repeat was, “*All of it. Great Job!*” Oral feedback gathered informally at the end of each field day was overwhelmingly positive, despite organizational hiccups.

A significant disappointment for the students and teachers is that they didn’t have any (or sufficient) opportunity to actually see the buffalo herd despite efforts by

Fish & Game personnel to herd some of the buffalo toward the field days site (the ranch includes thousands of acres). Requests for additional activities included:

- ▶ More story-telling (history). More drumming with identification and meaning of songs. More "hands-on" like the peeling of poles.
- ▶ Maybe how do you set-up the tipis.
- ▶ It would have been cool to have cooking over the fire - stew to enjoy and test taste.
- ▶ Wish we would have had the tour guide or story teller on our bus - that was a great idea!
- ▶ When have more buffalo could show kids how to scrape, tan, dry hides; cook buffalo recipes; make buffalo bags and many other items from the buffalo; etc. - More hands-on, most kids have trouble sitting & listening these days.
- ▶ Add more historical spiritualism.
- ▶ [The students] really enjoyed the horse and would like more opportunities to ride and be around horses. Horse (equine) therapy.

The students' worksheets highlighted the value of diverse tipi stations, some more than others, but most received some particular mention. The largest portion mentioned what they'd learned about the different uses their ancestors had made of all parts of the buffalo. A significant number mentioned learning a buffalo song and engaging with stories. Some students drew pictures of what they had observed out at the buffalo ranch. Many notable comments from students about what they learned suggest they paid close attention and were quite enthralled with their field day. Three of these students offered up memorable items of learning:

- ▶ That a tipi is a language.
- ▶ I learned about trust.
- ▶ That the land is perfect for the Indian tipis and that the buffalos are in a good place. The land is sacred and has sacred Rocks.

Strand 3: The Path Back: A History of Buffalo Advocacy by the Fort Peck Tribe

Presentations during the Buffalo People Summit described the history of the buffalo's 19th century devastation and the path of native (Yellowstone) buffalo back to

the Fort Peck reservation. An early Fort Peck buffalo advocate talked at the final day of the Summit, demonstrating with his story the long and complex history of the buffalo's return.

Preliminary analysis of *The Path Back* oral histories has examined how ecological restoration can have therapeutic and protective mental health benefits. These are achieved through reconnections and affective experiences of and with buffalo. The interviews highlight the importance of access to spaces of “affective ecologies” as well as personal investment in spiritual traditions among other avenues of reconnection with the buffalo people (Haggerty, Rink, McAnally, & Bird, 2017). Further analysis and findings from the interviews remain in progress.

Strand 4: Buffalo Values Survey

The survey asked what the people want for the future of our Buffalo Ranch. There were 369 participants who completed the questionnaire (161 paper; 208 internet), including 285 enrolled members. About half of these were from the west side of the reservation (largely Assiniboine) and half from the east side (largely Sioux). Respondents were 62% female; 37% male.

We had a variety of responses to conducting the survey. Analysis of responses has revealed some key findings about the Fort Peck people's perceptions of the buffalo on their lands. Among tribal member respondents, 88% valued buffalo as wildlife, 68% valued them as relatives, and 54% valued them as livestock.

Ninety-one percent of tribal members agreed that “we should encourage our youth to learn about buffalo and other wildlife for future jobs,” 87% agreed “we should use buffalo for healthful food,” 86% agreed “we should encourage our people to reconnect with buffalo through tribal traditions,” 83% agreed that “we should help to restore buffalo to the grasslands of North America,” and 78% agreed that “the return of buffalo will be a source of healing for our people.”

Critique of the current buffalo herds management came through in the difference among the percent of tribal members who feel that “Tribal members should be consulted about goals for tribal buffalo management” (74%), those who feel that “I understand how the Fort Peck Buffalo herds are currently being managed” (44%), and those who feel that “Goals for tribal buffalo management are communicated clearly to all members” (32%). Similarly, 64% of Tribal members agreed they should be consulted about the process of selecting tribal recipients of buffalo meat and products, while only 30% said they understand how the Tribes select tribal recipients of buffalo meat and products, and only 25% agreed, “The process for selecting tribal recipients of buffalo has been communicated clearly to all members.” Narrative responses to the open-ended question, “Please tell us about any concerns you might have about how the buffalo herds are currently being managed,” largely confirmed the implicit criticism of the Tribes’ buffalo program management. While 23 comments expressed appreciation for current management of the herds, 85 expressed criticisms and an additional 16 respondents said they didn’t know enough to comment. Criticisms referenced the need for better communication about the management practices (17 comments), the need for greater management transparency (3 comments), concerns about meat distribution (14 comments), concerns about hunting opportunities and sale of such opportunities to non-tribal members (6 comments), other concerns about management (35 comments), and a handful of concerns about public education, economic development, and the herds’ location and how this affects the Fort Peck people’s ability to enjoy the buffalo’s presence. Tribal members believe the “cultural herd” should be managed to:

- ▶ Provide for the ceremonial needs of tribal members (71%)
- ▶ Provide food for tribal members (69%)
- ▶ Earn money from tourism (58%)

It is clear that tribal members would like to eat buffalo more than they do now. Only 5% currently eat buffalo daily, weekly, or monthly, though an additional 59% responded that they do eat buffalo when offered. In contrast, 45% would prefer to eat buffalo daily, weekly, or monthly; 34% said they would prefer to eat buffalo when offered. Only 7% said they would never eat buffalo (a mark of acculturation of tastes).

Finally, 76% of tribal members agreed that “the buffalo herds and the land they graze on the reservation should be expanded,” and 70% wanted the Fort Peck Tribes to “establish a herd for viewing that is more accessible,” i.e., more easily seen and watched.

Discussion

The findings show that buffalo culture remains strong among a portion of the Fort Peck populace, particularly concentrated among the older generations. At the same time results show that many more of the Fort Peck peoples would like to engage with buffalo culture, including knowing the stories, songs and ceremonies, watching the herd, hunting buffalo, eating the meat, and contributing to decision-making about the herds’ management and the distribution of buffalo products.

Not evident from the data are the processes and relationships that have made each of these four strands of The Buffalo Project possible and successful. The collaborations between FPCC and other tribal members, including the Fish & Game Director, with non-tribal institutions – MSU and WWF – were key; collaborations and partnerships are integral elements of successful community-based participatory research. The *Ceremony of Research* project, funded through MSU, facilitated articulation of the motivating questions and funded the 2013 qualitative research. MSU personnel visits to Fort Peck to discuss strategies for further research generated the admonition from author Red Elk, "Let's not just talk about this. Let's do it!" ---

i.e., generate the connections with the buffalo that the Fort Peck partners were concerned were missing in their communities. The partnership between WWF and the Fort Peck Fish & Game Department gave rise to Summit organizing funds as well as the survey, which was integrated with the Summit organizing. MSU personnel raised most of the other funds that supported the Summit and helped the Pté Group to leverage significant contributions from FPCC and the Tribal Executive Board. Author Smith commented on the roles of other partners: “[Author]Jorgensen has been an *incredible resource for us.*” The organizing skills of author Bird offered a role model and momentum for completing the Summit organizing: “*We wouldn't have done this without her being the [taskmaster], caring yet driven, such a blessing to us.*” The MSU and WWF partners will always be considered *koda/kona* (friend) to the Assinibone and Sioux.

The elders and cultural experts on the team were critical as motivators and resources, reflected in comments about the process:

- [Author] Red Elk, I have never worked with someone like her before. She is knowledgeable educated and wise.
- [Author] McAnally’s pessimism made us think hard about what we were doing... His fear was that the Council would not be on board. We found out that communication was essential and that we could do a better job with that next time.
- Ramey Growing Thunder (Director of the Fort Peck Language & Culture Department) and her crew took a political risk but the project gave her program a boost as well.
- John Morsette [an original PAB member who motivated The Buffalo Project] - his wisdom and prayers have always been with us [despite recent illness].

College administrative personnel were also critical to our success, as were the many elders and knowledgeable community members who contributed presentations during the school field days and the adults workshop. Our hearts are proud at what we accomplished.

Much inspiration for the way the Buffalo Project evolved came from the 2013 focus groups and interviews. The beauty of some of the responses was described by one author as “out of this world,” as they were responses that we wouldn’t have expected within a research project. We think of people who have passed away since we started this project: how much they contributed to this inquiry, and how they would be proud of what we pulled off. The process of asking our questions and listening carefully to the answers touched our hearts. We are deeply grateful these individuals opened their hearts and minds to us; a successful community-based participatory research project depends on this kind of openness.

This kind of research project often leads to the development of contacts, relationships, and interactions that go beyond standard researcher/participant relationships. In addition to the people we talked to through the initial work in 2013, we met so many incredible people along the way who have made significant efforts and sacrifices to be of assistance to the Buffalo Project. The gatherings prior, during, and after have melded friendships with a variety of people. We were honored to have been able to work with wise elders and very knowledgeable, energetic, and caring people --- people like Chief Robert Fourstar, who gave us his blessing for the buffalo summit, was on board from the beginning, and continued to support the work through the ups and downs of planning and listening to the critics. His blessing was heartfelt and gave us a much-needed boost. He passed away recently, but not until after playing a critical role in the school field days and Northern Buffalo Treaty reunion.

Anecdotal evidence of the impact of the Buffalo Project, as well as data from Summit evaluations, suggest that the school students were excited about being at the Turtle Mound Buffalo Ranch and learning about buffalo culture and that they want to come back, that many more individuals would have participated with the Treaty gathering and the adults workshop but hadn’t been aware of or registered on all the

publicity and invitations (we heard expressions of consternation such as, “why wasn’t I invited to speak?”), and that those who did participate expressed strong support and appreciation for the events. There were some naysayers who felt the events did not reflect all reservation clans and communities but the Buffalo Project has demonstrated that there is a strong core group of buffalo supporters, and many more people who want to learn and be involved.

Conclusion

We are impressed and grateful that, finally, for the first time in this century, there was a coming together for an important common cause, of FPCC faculty and staff, grassroots Indian people, tribal politicians, tribal agency personnel, as well as Montana State University and WWF. We were united and determined to work for the benefit of all reservation people and our relatives, the Tatanga/Tatanka Oyate. We believe that real change and real progress will come to Fort Peck, and indeed to all of Indian Country, only when the people themselves, not just the governments, band together for the common good. The Fort Peck Pté Group did become the catalyst for such common good and change because when united together, the group members and associates put aside their personal and historical issues (Assiniboine v. Sioux, East end v. West end, etc.) to work toward their goal of community education with regard to the meaning and importance of the return of our relations, the Tatanga/Tatanka Oyate. We believe that the Pté Group, with dedicated and educated leadership, could grow into giving the *Ikece Wicasa* (common man) a vehicle to directly address the serious social and cultural issues on Fort Peck Reservation. It is evident that, through this community-based, participatory research project --- its goals, questions, methods, and data gathered --- focused on the return of the buffalo to Fort Peck, important relationships have been forged that will continue to sustain the

Buffalo Project and its broader goal of connecting and re-connecting the people with their relations.

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