

# WORLD WILDLIFE

EXCERPTED FROM SUMMER 2016

## **BUFFALO PEOPLE UNITE**

Meet the residents of Fort Peck Indian Reservation as they fight for a bright future that incorporates their proud history and returns the bison to its central place in their lives.





# NORTHERN GREAT PLAINS

IN ONE OF THE WORLD'S LAST GREAT GRASSLANDS, AMERICANS OF EVERY STRIPE ARE RALLYING TO SAVE NATIVE LANDSCAPES AND WILDLIFE—AND A SHARED VISION OF A THRIVING, PRODUCTIVE WILD WEST.



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The people at the heart of the Northern Great Plains



# ECOLOGIES OF SCALE

The Northern Great Plains, or NGP, is an ecoregion—a large area of land or water that has distinct species, biological communities, and environmental conditions. At roughly 180 million acres, it's a particularly big one. And there's a lot happening inside its borders—ecologically, socially, and economically.

## CARBON CONTAINER

The NGP's grasslands store massive quantities of carbon. Keeping those grasses from being plowed under prevents that carbon from being released into the atmosphere.

## TRIBAL LANDS

More than 15 million acres of the Plains are under tribal stewardship; Native Americans are leading wildlife restoration efforts for bison, as well as for other species of cultural and economic importance.



**Greater sage grouse**  
These large, striking birds are famous for their elaborate mating dances. They live among and feed on the sagebrush they're named for.

## ECOSYSTEM ENGINEERS

Prior to the introduction of livestock, bison were the dominant grazers on the prairies of the NGP, and their behavior heavily influenced the ecosystem. Prairie dogs preferred to dig colonies in areas grazed by bison because the shorter grass helped them see predators. Many migrating birds built nests and raised young in taller grasses the bison left ungrazed. Myriad plants flourished in the soil these huge mammals disturbed with their hooves. And wolf packs followed the bison herds for food. These symbiotic relationships still exist to a lesser degree today.

## Sprague's pipit

This rare, endangered songbird winters in southern US states and migrates to NGP grasslands to breed. Males perform a courtship ritual that includes hovering and diving high above the prairie for long periods of time—sometimes more than half an hour.



## FEDERAL AND STATE LANDS

A balanced approach to the use of state and federal lands provides value to the public, while also ensuring that large patchwork areas owned by multiple stakeholders can be managed holistically.

## UNDERGROUND INFRASTRUCTURE

Prairie dogs also historically played a central role in the NGP ecosystem. Their underground colonies (called prairie dog towns) provided shelter for a host of other species, and they were a key food source for numerous carnivores—including endangered black-footed ferrets.



**Black-footed ferrets**  
They're one of North America's most endangered mammals, and rely almost entirely on prairie dog colonies for food and shelter.



**Pronghorn antelope**  
The fastest hoofed mammals on the continent, they can run at up to 60 mph.

## PRIVATE LANDS

Private landowners, including ranchers, own the majority of the Northern Great Plains—142 million acres. Ninety-three million acres of that land are still intact grassland.

## THREATS

Not all of the NGP's habitats and wildlife are thriving. Below, a few of the key threats to their well-being.

### Grassland Conversion for Crops and Biofuel

Plow-up of native grasslands has increased significantly in recent years. More than 1.4 million acres of intact grasslands were converted to farmland in 2014.

### Oil and Gas Development

New developments in oil and gas extraction—like fracking—have caused the industry's activity in the region to spike dramatically in the past decade. That expansion is fragmenting grasslands and threatening wildlife.

### Wind Energy Development

The NGP's high winds in many places have earned it the nickname "the Saudi Arabia of wind," and turbine fields are expanding throughout the region. Wind energy presents a more sustainable alternative to oil and gas, but it can also cause bird and bat mortalities and habitat fragmentation.

Learn more about how WWF is addressing these challenges on p. 44.

## PRAIRIE SANCTUARY

The NGP is biologically rich as well as huge: It shelters roughly 1,600 plant species, 95 mammal species, 220 species of butterfly, and an astounding 300 species of bird.



Swift fox



Yellow bumble bee



Burrowing owl





**SOME ASSEMBLY  
REQUIRED**

Volunteers inspect newly built tipis at Fort Peck Indian Reservation on the night before the Buffalo People Summit.



## Buffalo People Unite

*Two tribes and a host of partners rally to restore the buffalo to tribal lands*

by **Sarah Wade**  
photography by **Thomas Lee**  
illustrations by **Dieter Braun**



AT 9:15 ON A CHILLY WEDNESDAY morning in September, the entire student body of Poplar High School is barreling along Montana Highway 13 in a fleet of school buses. There's little competition on the road, which slices cleanly through the center of Fort Peck Indian Reservation—a two-million-acre stretch of prairie in northeast Montana that's home to the Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes. Bright sunlight bounces off the landscape rolling by in muted golds and browns: shorn wheat fields, cattle pastures, twisting creeks lined with poplars.

The 11th graders in the first bus seem unenthused about the field trip that's removing them from class. In the seat in front of me, two girls sporting chunky black headphones slump against each other, cocooned in their own music as a Jimmy Eat World hit plays over the speaker system. Behind me two boys crack slang-laced jokes.

But when the bus turns off the highway—first onto a gravel road, then a mere track snaking between hills—heads begin swiveling toward the windows. We hit a deep pothole and the students shout with surprise. Suddenly, at the top of a knoll,



our destination appears in the distance: a cluster of tiny white cones poking from the prairie like teeth. They're tipis. And they're standing in the middle of the reservation's buffalo pasture, where a week-long "Buffalo People Summit" is under way.

Sixteen years ago, Fort Peck brought 100 buffalo (a colloquial term for bison) from another reservation to its own lands, ending a 130-year absence of the huge, shaggy mammals from the region. Since then, the reservation has become one of the biggest proponents of a new vision for restoring large herds of buffalo to tribal lands across the Northern Great Plains.

It's a vision that seeks to benefit not just the buffalo, but also the people who historically relied on them for everything from food and shelter to spiritual guidance—people such as the Assiniboine and Sioux. If managed well, the species that used to sustain them could answer various economic, social, and even health needs these tribes are facing today.

But only a small, dedicated group of leaders at Fort Peck is currently driving that vision forward. Most of the reservation's 7,000 residents have never even seen its buffalo herds. The summit aims to change that, starting with Fort Peck's elementary, middle, and high school students—the young Native Americans this effort will depend on in the future.



THE ECOREGION KNOWN AS THE Northern Great Plains stretches 280,000 square miles from Nebraska to Alberta—an area bigger than Texas—and encompasses vast quilts of prairie grass, low hills buffed smooth by millennia, and chains of craggy mountains. It contains much of the enormous Missouri River watershed and one of the last intact grasslands on Earth.

The American bison once moved across these landscapes in herds millions strong, and so dense they probably resembled gigantic inkblots from the air. Those herds were at the center of a busy kaleidoscope of wildlife: Prairie dogs often dug their colonies among grasses the buffalo cropped short. Wolf packs followed them, preying on the old and weak. After blizzards, pronghorn antelope used the trails the buffalo plowed through deep snow with their huge, boxy heads.

Humans, too, leaned on the buffalo. Native Americans have inhabited the area for thousands of years—and until the late

19th century, numerous Plains tribes followed the buffalo nomadically, hunting the animal for its meat, its fur, its hide, its bones, everything. "The buffalo were our entire economy," says Roxann Smith, a Native American Studies instructor at Fort Peck Community College and one of the summit's coordinators.

The animal's significance to Native Americans was one of the biggest reasons

their herds were nearly erased from the Plains—and the entire continent—in the late 1800s. While Western hunters shot bison for their hides or for sport, the US government deliberately slaughtered them to weaken Indian tribes who resisted surrendering their land and autonomy. By 1889, North America's buffalo population had nose-dived from an estimated 30 million to barely 1,000, the majority of them in captivity. The tribes that relied on them, meanwhile, were pushed one by one onto reservations.

Over the next century, with the help of several conservation-minded individuals and, in a striking reversal, the US government, the animals made a comeback. But it was an incomplete one. Due to crossbreeding with cattle that occurred in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the majority of the 500,000 bison living throughout the continent today aren't genetically pure. Nor are they living in groups of adequate size. Of the 20,000 buffalo that belong to herds managed for conservation purposes, about 75% belong to herds of fewer than 400 animals.

"That's not big enough," says Dennis Jorgensen, WWF's bison initiative coordinator. He's lean, fair-haired, infinitely cheerful, and equally willing to talk about bison. "The species is losing genetic diversity every year because of inbreeding," Jorgensen says. "Geneticists recommend a herd of around 1,000 adults for them to remain genetically healthy in the long term."

But the average buffalo needs a lot of grassland to graze on—in this region, an estimated 75 acres per animal—and there aren't many 75,000-acre chunks of grassland lying around for huge herds to suddenly descend upon. That's especially true in the Northern Great Plains: The region's landscapes may conjure up romantic notions of vast, wide-open spaces, but in reality every last scrap of that land is owned by a complicated array of stakeholders, the majority of them private landowners.

Public support for buffalo restoration is equally hard to come by. Some ranchers in the Plains fear that the species could infect their cattle with brucellosis, a disease that causes cows to abort their fetuses, and that wild buffalo in Yellowstone have been known to carry. (There has never been a documented case of transmission from bison to cattle.) They also worry that the huge grazers—which can weigh up to 2,000 pounds—could compete with their livestock for grass, other costly resources, and general primacy. Other residents in the region simply dislike the idea of conservationists coming onto their home turf with a cause that sounds, to them, romantic and impractical.

That's where tribal lands could meet a critical need. "A lot of reservations want to see the bison come back, and they own or manage huge pieces of largely intact grasslands," Jorgensen says. "Fort Peck is one of the best examples."



ONE FRIDAY IN JUNE, several months before the summit, Robbie Magnan climbs into a pickup to give our WWF group a tour of Fort Peck's buffalo pastures. The hills look like green velvet. Magnan, a burly Army veteran who wears jeans, a black biker vest, and his hair cinched into a neat ponytail, could probably drive here in his sleep. In addition to directing Fort Peck's Fish

**Bison Anatomy**

**SIZE** Anatomically speaking, the American bison (*Bison bison*) is one big superlative: It's the biggest land mammal in North America, males can weigh up to 2,000 pounds, and females generally weigh around 1,000 pounds.



Patterned on the main rivers of the Fort Peck Indian Reservation, this stylized buffalo is a powerful symbol for the people of Fort Peck.



**A NATURAL STORYTELLER**

Lois Red Elk uses a bundle of sage as a prop when she performs one of the Sioux people's sacred stories in a tipi at the summit.







### TO THE BONE

Students from Fort Peck Indian Reservation swarm around Ernie, a taxidermied bull bison, at the Buffalo People Summit. Ernie was part of a buffalo anatomy presentation by veterinarian Don Woerner.





**PARENTAL GUIDANCE**

Adult female buffalo (called “cows”) stay close to their calves in Fort Peck’s conservation herd.



and Game Department, he’s been running the reservation’s buffalo program for 16 years, and either he or his staff members are out here almost daily to check on its herds.

It’s a big job that runs on a thousand tiny details, which occur to Magnan almost incessantly throughout the drive. When we reach the outermost fence to the business herd pastures, he mentions the constant vigilance required to maintain those fences and effectively protect—and cordon off—bison land. When we pass a wooden water trough for the bison, we pause so he can check the water quality. And when, at the top of a hill, we encounter a panorama of undulating green prairie, Magnan points out a distant plot of land he’d like to purchase and add to the buffalo pastures he’s been slowly expanding.

Magnan’s thoroughness is one of the biggest reasons Fort Peck’s buffalo herds now total more than 400 animals with 25,000 acres available to graze on. It also reflects a practical concern for his people: Alongside their historical connection to the buffalo, they have very real, very pressing needs. One such need is economic growth.

Native American reservations are home to some of the most economically depressed communities in the country, and Fort Peck is no exception. Jobs here are hard to come by, and often hard to keep due to high rates of drug and alcohol addiction among residents. In 2013, the reservation’s unemployment rate was higher than 50%, and roughly 75% of its children were living in poverty. “Bringing buffalo here just for history’s sake would be a luxury these tribes couldn’t afford,” Jorgensen says.

Instead, Magnan has been working to turn the buffalo into a financial asset for Fort Peck.

To do so, he’s helped develop a system that divides the animals into two separately run herds. One is a business herd that can be used primarily to generate revenue through live animal sales, meat sales, and a small number of trophy hunts each year. The other is a more wide-ranging conservation herd that can support tourism and provide meat for cultural events and community programs—everything from powwows to school lunches.

Both herds have a lot of growing left to do, and the program isn’t making any money yet because it donates about 25 buffalo a year to the community without compensation. But if all goes smoothly, it could generate \$250,000 annually for the reservation by 2019, according to a new management plan Magnan just completed with help from WWF.

Halfway through the drive, Magnan hops out of the pickup to inspect a gleaming wire fence that several men are busily erecting around a hilly rectangle of pasture. It’s the boundary of a 320-acre quarantine facility. Fort Peck’s conservation herd is made up entirely of bison from Yellowstone National Park—one of only three places in the country where genetically pure bison now live. Because those animals can carry brucellosis,



**SPEED** Buffalo are faster than their bulky frames suggest: They can run at up to 40 miles an hour. (The average horse, in comparison, can run at up to 30 miles an hour.)



any that leave the park must be quarantined and tested for several years before they can inhabit other sites.

The reservation's first group of Yellowstone bison, which it received in 2012, was quarantined at Stephens Creek Capture Facility on the edge of Yellowstone; the second group, which arrived in 2014, was held first at Stephens Creek, then at one of Ted Turner's bison ranches. And now that the fence is finished, Magnan will be able to quarantine more bison right here. And not just for this reservation: He's planning to turn Fort Peck into a source of disease-free, genetically pure buffalo for other tribes that want to start or expand their own herds.

Eventually, after more driving, we see lone bulls dotting the hillsides. Then we round a curve and find the main group: chocolate-colored females grazing and lounging in the grass, downy calves nosing their mothers' flanks, and juvenile males with scraggly chin fur wandering about. As the truck inches closer, we hear a pig-like grunt here and there.

This is the conservation herd—the Yellowstone animals with a direct genetic link to the buffalo that frequented these hills in previous centuries. They gaze at us for a moment before losing interest. Then, after a few minutes, they move. A few begin to trot, then gallop, and the decision ripples from bison to bison like a domino sequence. It's a smooth, almost liquid run, surprisingly fast for such a heavy beast. A minute later they're clustered on a distant hillside.



BY MID-MORNING ON the day of the high schoolers' visit to the summit, the skies have clouded over and a cold, aggressive wind beats against the 20-odd tipis, making the canvas of each one jump. But the interior of Ramey L. Escarcega-Growing Thunder and Darryl Growing Thunder's tipi feels cozy thanks to the fur-covered buffalo hide lining the ground and door flap.

Ramey, the director of Fort Peck's Language and Culture Department, is leading a buffalo anatomy lesson—not about how the various body parts work, but how they were used by her Sioux ancestors. Sitting cross-legged beside her husband Darryl, she takes out a box made of buffalo hide and passes the tools inside it to the students seated around them. There's a glossy horn (used for spoons and headdresses); a dried,

crumpled-in bladder (for water containers); hooves (wind chimes and rattles); and a bushy-tipped tail (fly swatters). "We used everything," Darryl says.

Their tent is decked in traditional colors: handprints punctuating the canvas in bold reds, yellows, and blacks; brilliantly patterned rugs over the ground; and Ramey herself, wearing beaded blue moccasins and a skirt made entirely of rainbow-hued ribbons. It's

an aesthetic that contrasts oddly with the students' black jeans and hoodies, neon shoes, and—in one case—vivid blue hair. But a connection sparks between them when Ramey holds up a necklace bristling with what look like golf tees. "These are buffalo teeth," she says, grinning. "Would you guys wear this?" "Totally! It looks cool!" says a girl in skinny jeans.

It's a moment that speaks to the summit's larger ambitions. For the past three days, inside these tipis, the reservation's cultural leaders have been using demonstrations, stories, and songs about the buffalo to get Fort Peck's young people excited about their heritage.

They're working with a sense of urgency. While these kids dress like they could be from anywhere in the country, Native American youth struggle with higher levels of poverty, substance abuse, and school dropout rates than the national averages for their age group. Suicides happen among them at twice the rate of the national average. "In one year we lost four kids," says Suzanne Turnbull, a former teacher who directs Student Support Services at Fort Peck Community College. "I can remember those students as clear as day."

Ramey sees these problems as part of a continuum that began with the tribes' confinement to reservations and continued through a string of damaging federal policies—from the forcible shipment of Native children to boarding schools in the late 1800s to voluntary assimilation programs in the 1960s. "There's a deeply embedded depression that our tribes suffer from," she says. "It gets passed on through generations. We call it historical PTSD."

Her response has been to advocate a return to cultural roots. It's a philosophy that germinated during her own childhood—she grew up singing in traditional ceremonies with her father—and developed into a full-time career. A tall, striking woman who wears her dark hair sleeked into a bun, she left Fort Peck to earn a master's in language and literacy from the University of New Mexico. Since returning, she's helped institute everything from Native language classes to tipi camping trips to the Language and Culture Department itself. Between work, pursuing a doctorate in education, and raising three boys, she stays busy. "I haven't had a summer off since 1999!"

Since March 2015, she has also been working with a handful of other culturally fluent tribal members to plan this summit in collaboration with Montana State University and WWF. They call themselves the Pté Group. "'Pté' is the Dakota and Nakota word for 'female buffalo,'" says Lois Red Elk, a wavy-haired poet in the group. "Females are the matriarchs of the herds. They basically run them. They even adopt orphaned babies as their own."

"Watching those females lead inspires me in my own work," Ramey says.

At the end of the anatomy presentation, Darryl picks up a drum made of buffalo hide. "Who knows how to say 'buffalo' in our language?" he asks. "Tatañka," several students say. Darryl nods, looking pleased. "We're going to sing you a song about our thankfulness for them," he says. "You'll hear that word in it."

He begins striking the drum with a heartbeat-like rhythm. Then he starts singing—a high, clear voice with a tremolo that

**FUR + HIDE** Bison fur is much warmer than sheep's wool—and so well insulated that snow often just sits on it without melting through. Their hide is so tough that in the 1800s, England, Germany, and other European countries began using it to make industrial factory belts.



**GOOD NEIGHBORS**

"We need to find more room for bison," says Robbie Magnan, manager of Fort Peck's buffalo herds. "And manage them well."

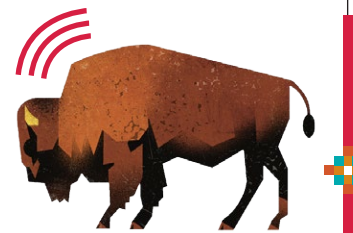


jumps athletically to the beat. Ramey joins a full octave higher, and together their voices swoop and rise, filling the tipi until the buzz of students and presenters outside becomes inaudible.



CULTURAL REVITALIZATION ISN'T the only benefit of the buffalo program being highlighted at the summit. Ask Cheyenne Foote about what the program is achieving, and you'll hear a story of health benefits. "I used to weigh 225 pounds," says Foote, a slight woman with graying hair and large, earnest eyes. When Fort Peck received the initial business herd of 100 buffalo in 2000, she cut beef from her diet and switched to buffalo, which contains more protein and significantly less fat.

Foote says eating buffalo—along with other leaner meats such as elk and deer—helped her shed more than 100 pounds. The weight loss, in turn, helped her gain firm control over her diabetes, an illness that 16% of American Indian and Alaska Native adults suffer from—nearly double the rate for the US adult population. "Now I walk three miles a day," she says. "Last year was my second Thanksgiving feeling like I was diabetes-free."



**STRENGTH** With their huge, front-heavy bodies and muscle-packed humps, buffalo are built for power. An adult can easily toss a grown man in the air with a flick of its head—and sometimes it can do the same with a one-ton bale of hay.

While a small diabetes program at Fort Peck currently receives a donation of buffalo meat each year to share with its participants, it's still difficult for most people on the reservation to access the meat. The herds' relatively small sizes mean only 25 animals can be used for meat each year, and many tribal members aren't aware that the option is even available. But as the herds grow, and awareness, access, and distribution systems improve, the animals could eventually become a regular source of lean, affordable protein.

Thursday evening offers a glimpse of what that could look like. It's 5 p.m. in a wood-floored auditorium at Fort Peck Community College. After a day of presentations on everything from the nutritional value of buffalo meat to the story of the White Buffalo Calf Pipe Woman—a divine figure in Sioux culture—the summit's organizers push several long, white tables together to make a buffet. The closing event of the week, a buffalo-themed potluck open to the reservation community, is about to start.

People trickle into the auditorium and begin filling the long tables in the room: mothers with toddlers on their hips, an elderly woman in a tie-dye T-shirt, small boys and girls chasing each other in circles around the adults. Foil-covered plates and bowls, meanwhile, proliferate over the buffet until it's completely filled.

After a man stands up to offer a prayer of thanks, the foil comes off to reveal salads, potatoes, veggie casseroles, fry bread, and, of course, the buffalo dishes. Spaghetti with ground buffalo. Buffalo tongue soup with rice. Green, spongy-looking



#### SACRED STORY

At the summit's opening ceremony, 13-year-old Jacinda Hernandez plays the role of White Buffalo Calf Pipe Woman—a divine being believed to have saved the Sioux from starvation.



buffalo tripe. Fat slivers of buffalo steak. And a pan of buffalo enchiladas, which disappear almost immediately. All of this meat came from the reservation's own herds.

Once everyone is seated again, a young man named Bryson Meyers, dressed in baggy jeans and a baseball cap, stands up and encourages people to get seconds. "Or if you have loved ones at home, take some to them," he says. "We have plenty." To drive the point home, he and several other volunteers walk around the tables to hand each person a Styrofoam takeout box. Soon the food is gone.



DURING THE FIRST DAY of the summit, when Fort Peck's elementary school students visited the buffalo pastures, I spotted the conservation herd on a nearby hill and pointed them out to several girls. "Those aren't buffalo, they're cows!" one said chidingly.

Clearly, there's a lot of work ahead if Fort Peck's economic, cultural, and health champions want these herds to benefit their people and their land in a long-lasting way. But as Ramey L. Escarcega-Growing Thunder says, the summit felt like a big step in the right direction.

For one thing, it's already inspiring action in the larger community. "One of the fifth-grade teachers who came to the summit," she says, "started a door decorating contest for her whole school the very next day. It was all about buffalo!"

There's also new evidence of community support for large herds of bison at Fort Peck. On the summit's final day, Jorgensen presented the results of a buffalo survey, which WWF funded and helped design, and which Roxann Smith, one of the summit's organizers, distributed to residents. Of the nearly 300 tribal members who responded, 86% felt that the tribes should encourage their people to reconnect with the buffalo through native traditions; 76% said they thought buffalo pastures should be expanded.

**JUMPING ABILITY** Bison can make standing jumps of up to six feet high.



For her part, Escarcega-Growing Thunder wants the summit to become an annual event. She's already brainstorming features to add next year—a prayer booth, for example, and a few bison herded closer to the tipis so the kids can see them. "And also a celebration," she says. "I want people to dance out there in the pasture."

That's what the Yellowstone bison did when they were first brought to Fort Peck in 2012, she says. "When they got here, they ran out of the trailers and against the fence. Then our singers started singing a buffalo song. As they were singing, the buffalo lined up beside each other. And the legs of this one big bull started moving to the beat. He was dancing. Then they were all dancing. So they knew the song, and they probably knew they were going to be OK. And that they were home." 🦏

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Bison play a vital role in their habitat. Find out how at [worldwildlife.org/bisonrole](http://worldwildlife.org/bisonrole).



**BUFFALO FAMILY**

A solitary bull grazes at Fort Peck. The Dakota call themselves the *Tataḡka Oyate*, or "Buffalo People," says Ramey L. Escarcega-Growing Thunder, director of Fort Peck's Language and Culture Department.







**SAFE HAVEN**

A Swainson's hawk leaps into flight in northern Montana. Protected grasslands and ranches shelter these birds when they migrate to the region every summer.

## Unexpected Allies

*How WWF helped assemble a broad coalition of people to protect the Northern Great Plains*



ONE AFTERNOON IN SEPTEMBER 2014, during a WWF Advisory Committee trip to the Nebraska Sandhills, Gordon Orians made a surprising connection. “I met a rancher who was extremely skeptical of environmentalists,” Orians, an emeritus WWF Board member and professor emeritus of biology at the University of Washington, says. “But then we started talking about prairie dogs. He told me how much he loves the ones on his ranch and wants to protect them. We suddenly saw the incredible degree to which our interests overlapped.”

Their conversation, and the partnership that resulted from it, reflects one of the core philosophies behind WWF's Northern Great Plains program. In a part of the country where environmental issues are often hotly disputed by a disparate array of stakeholders, WWF has developed a flagship conservation program that thrives on unconventional alliances.

It's been more than a decade in the making. When the Northern Great Plains (or NGP) program was established in Bozeman, Montana, in 2002, its mission was simple enough: to protect and restore a grassland ecosystem that was once biologically rich and remains vastly important to the nation's history and heritage.

“Prairie grasslands in the US and around the world were not really on the conservation radar screen,” says Brenda Davis, a WWF Board member and chair of the NGP's Advisory Committee. “And those grasslands were disappearing due to crop conversion and energy development,” she adds. “Today, only four major temperate grasslands are left on Earth.”



WWF's first move in the region was to help start the American Prairie Reserve, now an independently run prairie conservation project focused on acquiring lands for a wildlife reserve. Recognizing the need to achieve impact at scale in the vast region, NGP program staff began looking for partnerships with other landholders who value the grasslands—ranchers and tribal communities emerged as the most important ones.

“In mapping the biological diversity of the Great Plains, we recognized that an awful lot of it was on private ranches,” says Orians, who helped establish the NGP program. Additionally, after the federal government authorized the Renewable Fuel Standard program in 2005 (and then expanded it in 2007), farm operations eager to plant corn and other crops for renewable fuel began gnawing up larger and larger chunks of native prairie. “WWF realized,” Davis explains, “that ranchers were among our most important allies.”

To build trust and relationships with those ranchers, WWF created the Sustainable Ranching Initiative in 2011. Since then, WWF's NGP team has frequently met with ranchers to hear their insights, needs, and concerns; conducted beef sustainability workshops for local ranchers and their corporate partners; audited numerous beef sustainability programs; and completed 38 grassland bird surveys on ranches in the region to document their ecological value.

Tribal nations have also emerged as essential partners for WWF's work in the NGP—particularly wildlife restoration. “There is great interest on many reservations in bringing back bison and other native species, including black-footed ferrets and prairie dogs, that once thrived in the Northern Great Plains,” Davis says. And many reservations have ample land to host new populations of those species. To bring those animals back, WWF has partnered with several tribes in the region to offer the technical support needed—from grant applications and wildlife management plans to training and capacity building for native biologists.

In a way, those partnerships are increasingly critical in the face of evolving threats. The rate of grassland conversion remains dire: In 2014, more than 1.4 million acres of native prairie were plowed up for farmland. With the advent of fracking, oil and gas development have turned vast swaths of the Plains into glittering industrial complexes rife with environmental risks. Even the wind farms proliferating across the region as an alternative to oil and gas energy can threaten delicate bird and bat populations, and degrade the habitats of numerous other species.

Given those pressures, what will success for the NGP program look like in the future?

Davis says success will require reversing some of the harmful policies that have fueled grassland conversion, including federal policies that incentivize the plow-up of native prairies and growing crops in marginal soils. Orians says it will mean establishing more landscape connectivity so that species can move and migrate, and making the ecosystem more resilient to sudden stressors. He also notes that success will require continued scientific research to guide management decisions—such as already-proposed win-win plans to meet renewable energy goals and save the areas of richest biodiversity. Both agree it will also certainly require even stronger partnerships with the people who call the Plains home. 🌿

