

Mid-1860s buffalo hide

Traditional Relationship to Bison

For thousands of years, throughout the Northern Rockies and Northern Great Plains, the relationship between bison and humans was at the heart of the Native Americans' traditional ways of life. Bison have long provided for the tribes both spiritually and materially, and that relationship continues for many tribal people today. The stories, ceremonies, songs, prayers, and way of life of all tribes in the region reflect that deep and powerful connection and will for generations to come.

Millions of these enormous animals, commonly called buffalo, roamed the plains. In the past, tribes lived sustainably on this landscape based on a set of values ensuring the bison's survival by never taking more than was needed, never wasting what was taken, and making sure there was always abundance for future generations.

Tribes strive to maintain those same values today so that bison will always be at the heart of their cultures.



Northern plains buffalo moccasins

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BISON RESOURCES:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
fwp.mt.gov

Yellowstone National Park
nps.gov/yell/

Bison education online resource
ibmp.info/bisoneducation.php

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BISON AND TRIBAL PEOPLES

Traditional Uses of Bison

Everything needed for maintaining the health and well-being of the tribes came from the bison. Every part of the animal was utilized, whether for food, clothing, shelter, tools, or ceremonial purposes.

Bison are a high-quality source of both protein and fat that enabled people to survive long, harsh winters. A single bison could feed an entire family for many months.

In preparing for the winter, the meat would be sliced, dried, pounded, and then packed into parfleches (rawhide bags).



Kootenai parfleche

From the time a bison was harvested to the time it was stored for later consumption, all tribal members—hunters, skinners, dry meat cutters, tool makers—were called upon to bring their greatest skills to the process.

They used the hides to construct tepees—that was the primary use—as well as to make dozens of everyday necessities, including blankets, buckets, straps, ropes, dresses, and winter robes. The robes in particular were regarded as the most important of all personal items, to be treated with great care and respect.

The bones alone were used for as many as 19 purposes, including tools for hide tanning, painting, saddle trees, sleds, splints, and toys. The ribs made excellent hide scrapers. Even the dung left by the great herds was used as fuel in winter.



Bison roam the Lamar Valley, Yellowstone National Park



Left: Chief Charlo (Small Grizzly Bear Claw), head chief of the Bitterroot Salish from 1870 to 1910, wears a splithorn buffalo horn headdress. Below: Salish tribal elders Pierre Pichette and Paul Antoine twirl buffalo hair into rope.



Did you know? Many uses...

Tribal people could use bison parts to make bowstrings, combs, arrow points, pipes, toys, paint, bridles, sausage, glue, blankets, and more.



Scan this code for a comprehensive list of traditional uses of a bison

Bison Management Today

Today, as in the past, the tribal relationship with bison is fundamentally important. As resource managers, tribes continue to combine traditional ways of understanding with the best science and technology to expand habitat and increase tolerance for bison. As one tribal leader put it, buffalo have provided for Indian people since the beginning of time, but now the animals need help. He said it is time for tribal people to give back to the buffalo by protecting its habitat and, where they can, restoring the herds.

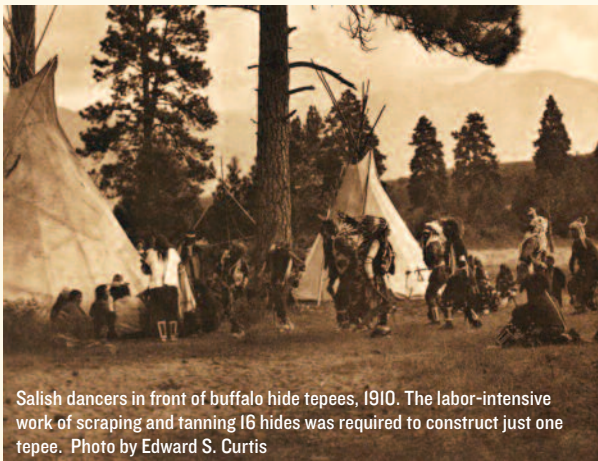


Tribal treaty hunters on a modern buffalo hunt in Montana

Treaties: Promises Between Nations

Treaties are legally binding contracts between sovereign nations. Article VI of the U.S. Constitution holds that treaties “are the supreme law of the land.” Indian treaties have the same force of law today as they did the day they were signed. When most of these treaties were negotiated, the tribes ceded vast amounts of land to the United States in exchange for certain assurances. They also reserved expanses of lands, known as reservations, for themselves and future generations.

Like the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights, treaties do not expire with the passage of time. They uphold certain rights for tribes including fishing and hunting, sovereignty, and religious freedom.



Salish dancers in front of buffalo hide tepees, 1910. The labor-intensive work of scraping and tanning 16 hides was required to construct just one tepee. Photo by Edward S. Curtis