

From (Re)Enclosure to Resurgence: Evaluating the Plains Bison Reintroduction Project

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The Buffalo Genocide



"Buffalo bones ready for loading on Canadian Pacific Railway boxcar, Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan.", [ca. 1887-1889]. (CU124759) by Buell, O. B. Courtesy of Glenbow Library and Archives Collection, Libraries and Cultural Resources Digital Collections, University of Calgary.

Buffalo once roamed across North America in the millions until they were systematically slaughtered to near extinction both by settler individuals and militaries in the 19th century. By destroying the buffalo, colonial authorities also aimed to destroy the foundations of Plains Indigenous political, social, economic, and cultural life. This can be understood as a genocidal act (Hubbard, 2014).

Mîni RHPa Mâkoche and Banff National Park



Banff Indian Days. [ca.1937]. Lloyd Harmon fonds, V108 / 582 - 589. Archives and Library, Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies.



Tipis at Banff Indian Grounds, Banff Indian Days. [ca.1930]. Peter and Catharine Whyte fonds, V683 / III / A / 1 / PD - 1. Archives and Library, Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies.

The Îyârhe Nakoda (Stoney) People have lived in the Rocky Mountain region since time immemorial in the area known as Mîni RHPa Mâkoche.

Rocky Mountains Park (now Banff National Park) was created in 1885 to set aside the area around what is now Banff Hot Springs for tourism development. This marked the creation of Canada's first national park.

Dominion officials used newly developed park legislation to restrict Indigenous subsistence practices and enforce territorial restrictions on a number of nations (Vranich, 2023).

After being forcibly removed from the park, Îyârhe Nakoda people were invited back as performers in Banff's annual Indian Days Festival (Mason, 2015).

The Pablo-Allard Herd and the Banff Buffalo Paddock



"Fifty head of buffalo after a forty mile run, getting close to the corrals," 1909. Luxton Family fonds, LUX1/V02/4/14. Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies

In 1907, the Canadian government purchased the last free-roaming herd of buffalo from Michel Pablo and Charles Allard, two ranchers of mixed Blackfoot descent.

The herd was transferred from their home on the Flathead Reservation in Montana to a contained paddock in Banff National Park, where they became a tourist attraction (Mamers, 2020). The paddock was closed in 1997 due to its impact on wildlife movement (Heuer, 2022).

This likely saved the species from extinction. Today, the majority of plains bison are descended from the Pablo-Allard herd (Markewics, 2017).

Project Background

The Plains Bison Reintroduction Project

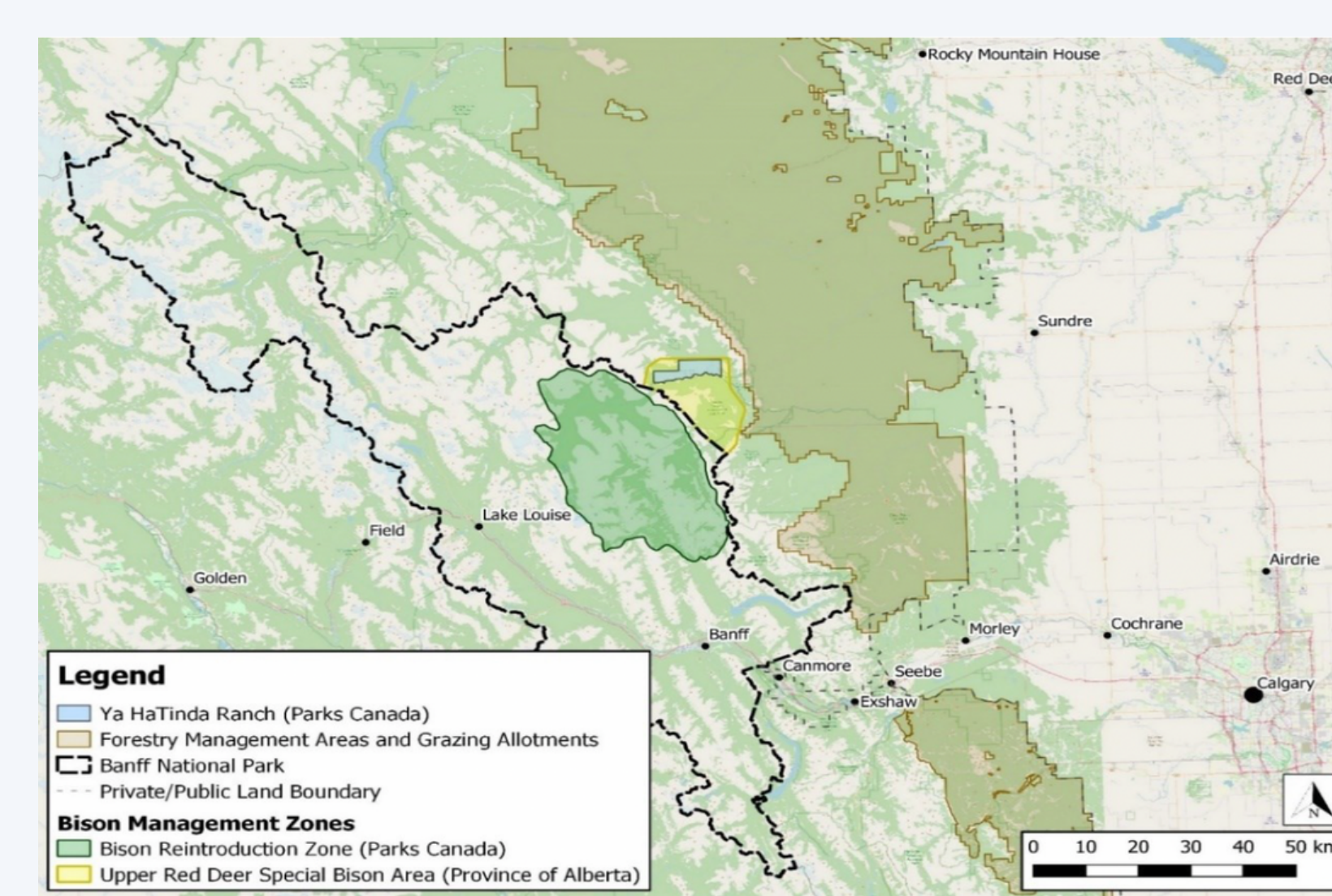
In 2017, Parks Canada announced the commencement of the Plains Bison Reintroduction Project in Banff National Park, and 16 Plains Bison (bison bison) were released into a contained reintroduction zone within the park.

The project began as a five-year pilot project. In 2023, after considering Indigenous, public, and stakeholder feedback, Parks Canada announced that it would continue. Today, the herd consists of over 100 animals (Parks Canada, 2023).

The Buffalo as a Cultural and Ecological Keystone Species

Keystone species are species that have a significant impact on their environment that is disproportionate to their abundance (Paine, 1995). Buffalo are not only a keystone species in the ecological sense but are cultural, political, and economic keystones for a number of Indigenous nations on the prairies (Crosschild et al., 2021).

"To designate something a keystone is to recognize its function as the main point locking its associated parts in place, or in the case of buffalo, their role in sustaining the interconnections of multiple beings and worlds on the prairies." (Crosschild et al., 2021, p. 6)



Parks Canada Agency. Banff National Park Bison Reintroduction Zone and Upper Red Deer Special Bison Area. Parks Canada, 2023.

Methods

This project uses a mixed-methods approach to connect the Plains Bison Reintroduction Project to a historiographical analysis of the buffalo in Banff National Park from the late 19th century to today.

Archival Research

Archival research was conducted at the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies in the city of Banff in December 2023. Additional research was done through the Glenbow Museum digital archives.

Media and Policy Analysis

A qualitative media analysis was conducted using inductive coding. Articles were identified using the keywords 'Banff,' 'Bison,' and 'Buffalo.' The analysis considered 111 articles from Canadian news outlets ranging from 2009 to 2023.

A constructivist approach was used to analyze the development of Parks Canada's policy concerning Indigenous relations. Additionally, Parks Canada reports on the Project were qualitatively analyzed using inductive coding.

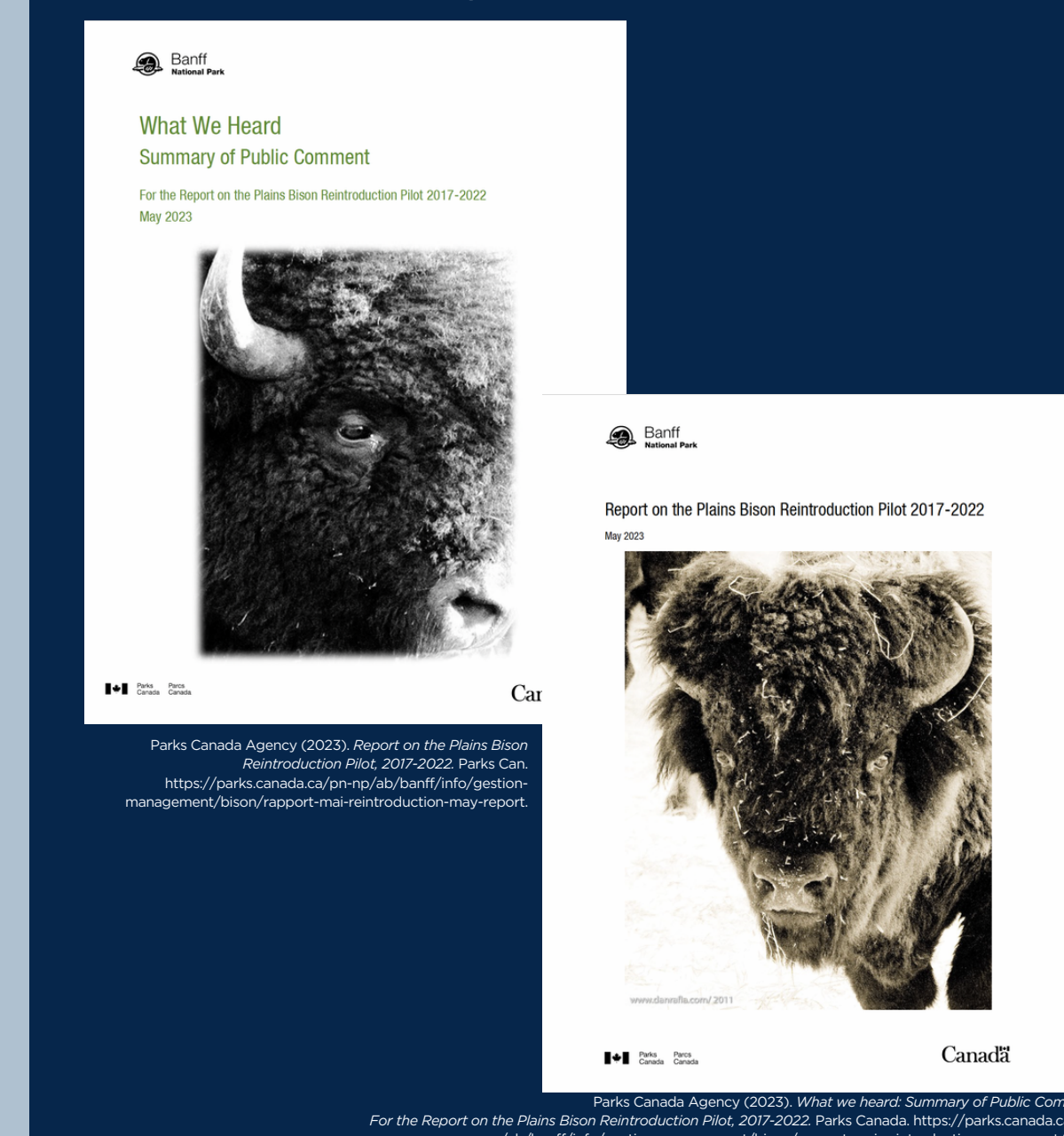
The Buffalo Treaty

The Buffalo Treaty was signed in 2014 between several First Nations and Tribes from the United States and Canada. The idea arose from a series of decolonial conversations on the impact of the loss of the buffalo organized by Paulette Fox and Leroy Little Bear (Crosschild et al., 2021).

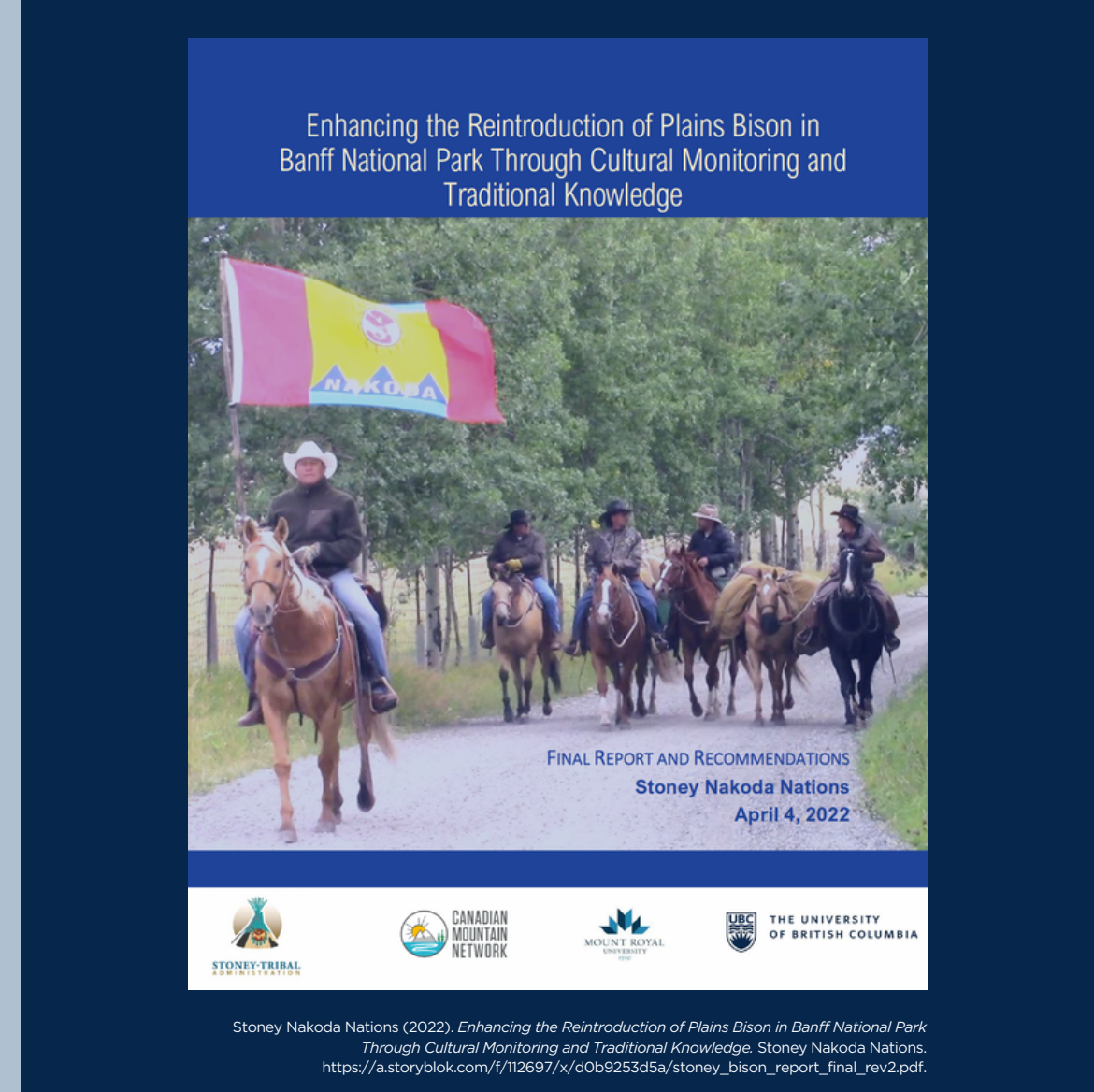
Its purpose and objective is...

To honour, recognize, and revitalize the time immemorial relationship we have with BUFFALO, it is the collective intention of WE, the undersigned NATIONS, to welcome BUFFALO to once again live among us as CREATOR intended by doing everything within our means so WE and BUFFALO will once again live together to nurture each other culturally and spiritually (Buffalo Treaty, 2014).

Parks Policy



Indigenous Guardianship and Recommendations



Bringing Back the Buffalo pamphlet. Ottawa: Department of the Interior, Canadian National Parks Branch, ca. 1926. 04.2 B77 Pam. Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies.

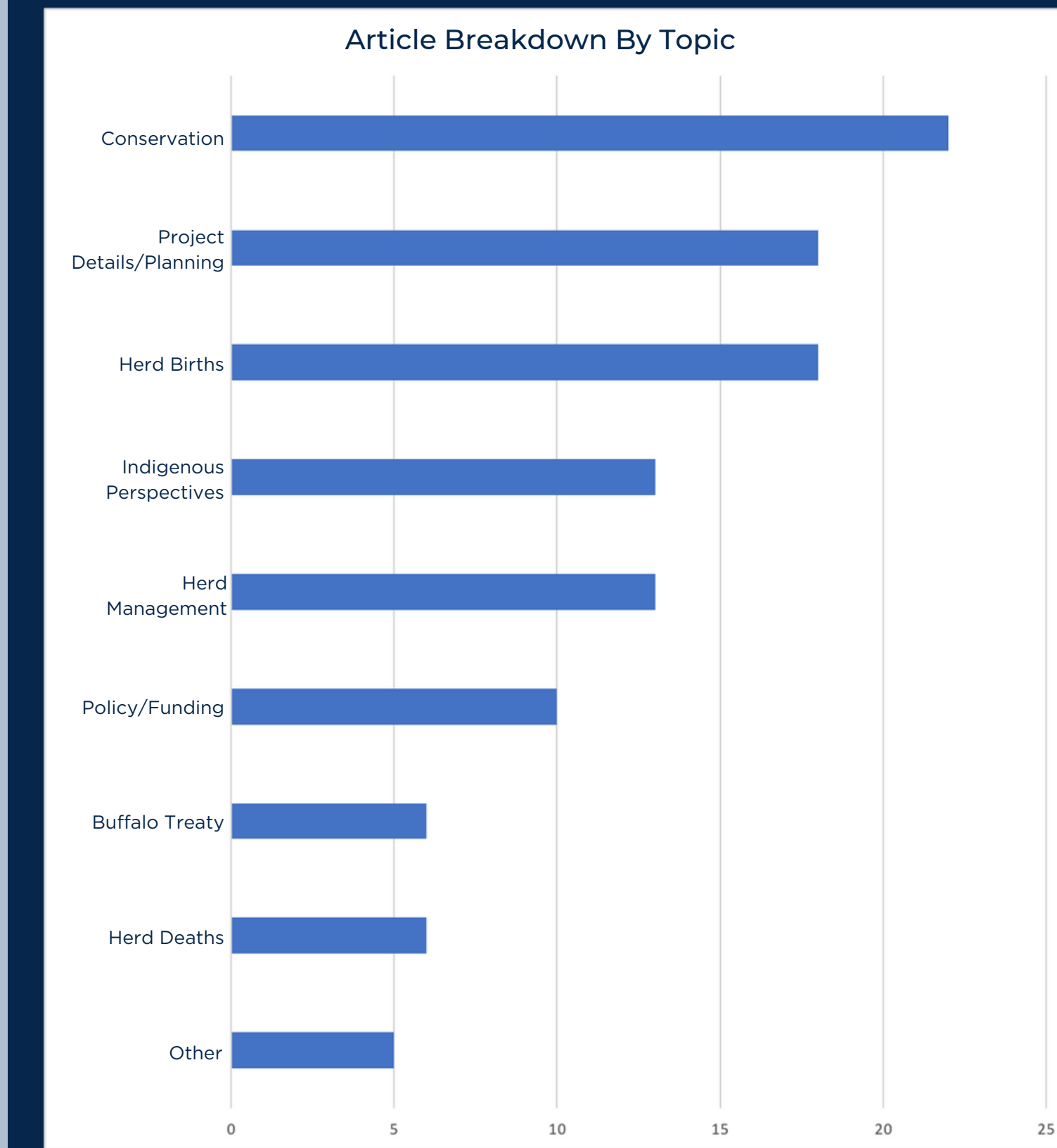


Buffalo, 1924-1966. George McLean fonds, V422 / PA - 62. Archives and Library, Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies.



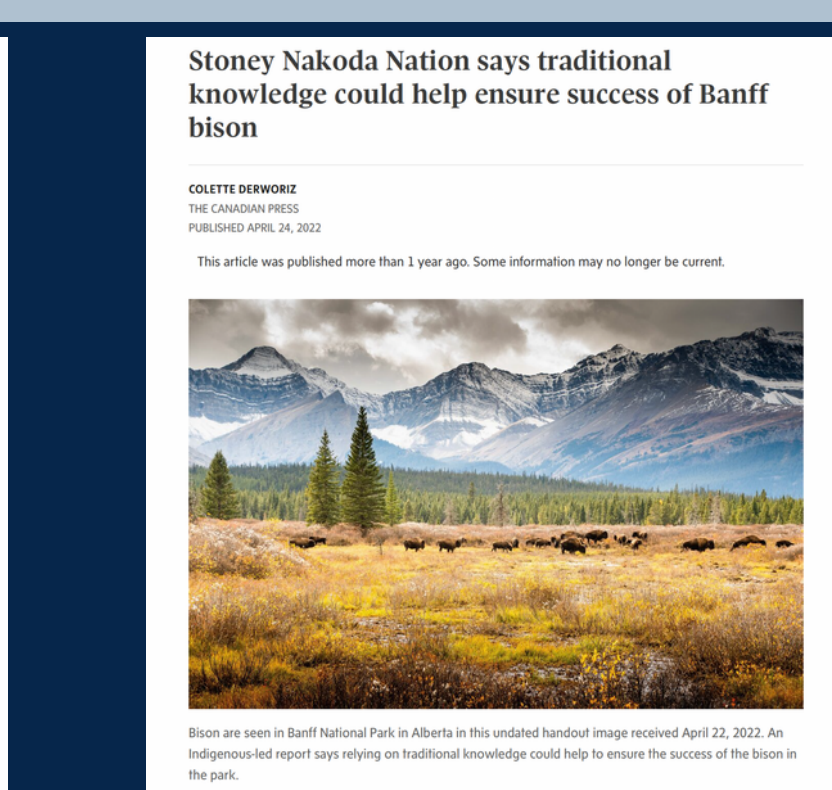
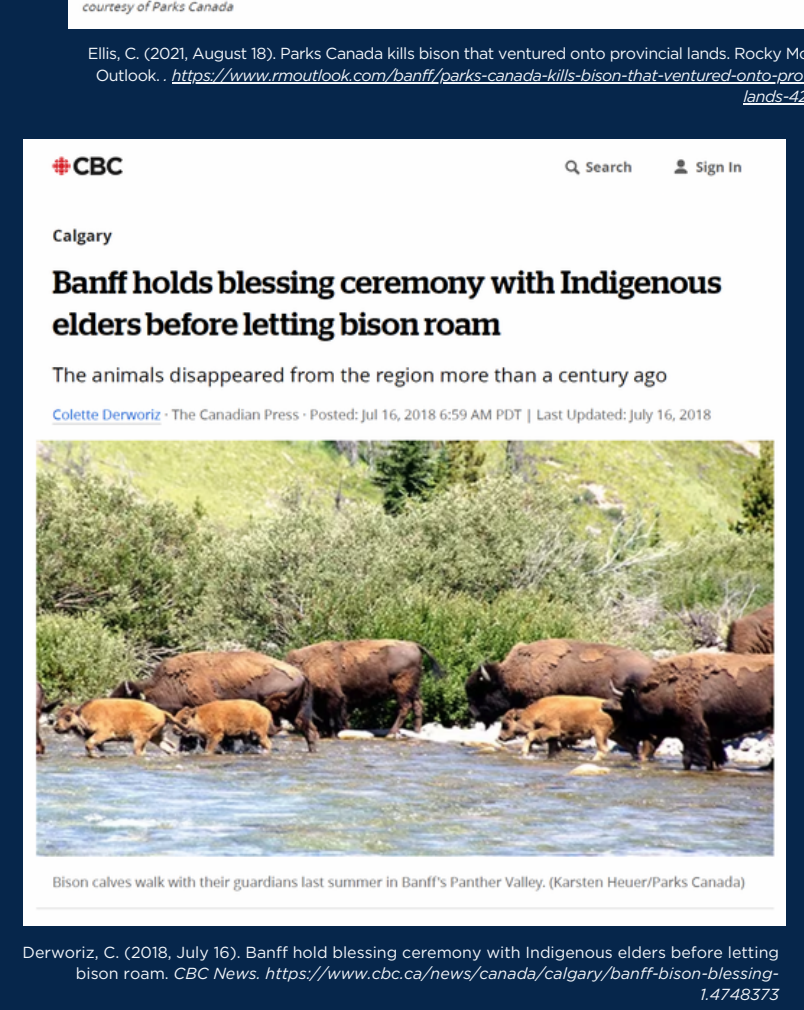
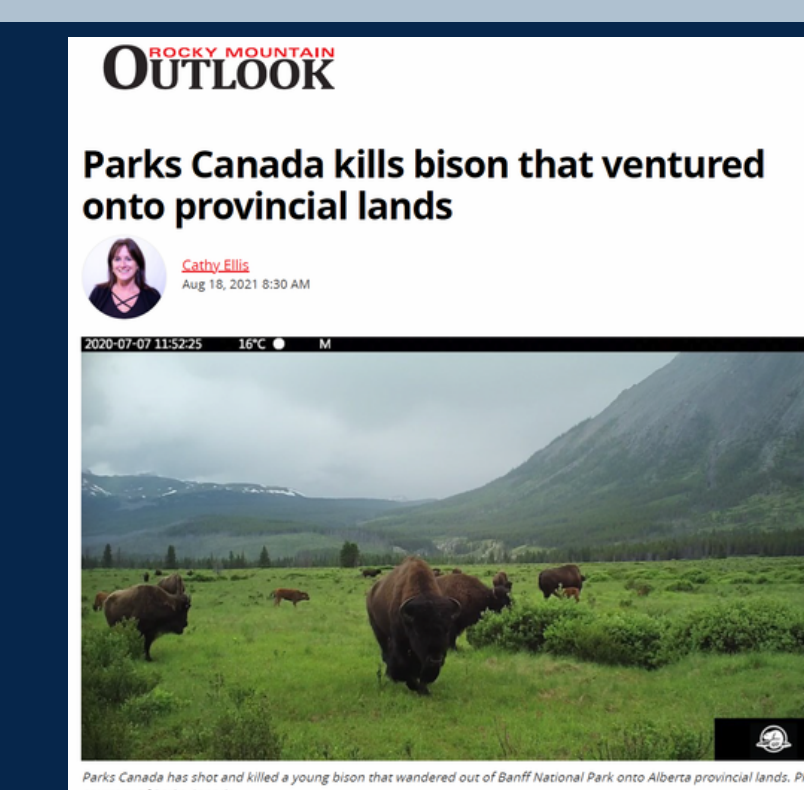
Keuer, H. (2020). The Parks Canada capture team departs the meadow where bison remain after being radio collared in the previous hours. Parks Canada. <https://parks.canada.ca/pn-np/ab/banff/info/gestion-management/bison/biog>

Media Analysis



Themes

- Containment
- Cultural Revitalization
- Spirituality and Ceremony
- Homebirthing
- Ecological Science and Traditional Ecological Knowledge
- Wild Versus Domestic
- Responsibility
- Reconciliation



Theoretical Perspectives Reconciliation Recognition

The politics of recognition refers to the state's approach to recognizing and affirming Indigenous culture—addressing Indigenous claims under minority rights to maintain settler colonial domination. The state is ultimately invested in the control of the land (Coulthard, 2014).

One perspective of the Reintroduction Project is that it emphasizes the buffalo's cultural significance to Indigenous nations while Parks Canada maintains its vested colonial interests over the herd and Indigenous land (Kramer, 2020).

Reconciliation emerged in the 1990s alongside the politics of recognition. It advocates forgiveness as a means for resolving state-sanctioned colonial violence. This functions to place settler colonialism in the past (Coulthard, 2014). Parks Canada emphasizes reconciliation as a key goal of this project. However, popular and official discourse around the project fails to mention Parks Canada's role as a structure of dispossession. Kramer (2020) argues that the Reintroduction Project perpetuates the colonial relationships it claims to address. Here, reconciliation politics stabilizes a regime of colonial violence (p. 152).

Resurgence

Tully and Borrows (2020) call for reconciliation-based relationships empowered by Indigenous resurgence. These resurgent relationships involve the renewal of "life-sustaining ecological and social relationships of reconciliation" (p. 16). Reconciliation between human beings and the earth requires reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous peoples, and vice-versa.

Indigenous resurgence challenges structures of dispossession by renewing a network of relationships grounded in land-based practices. The Buffalo Treaty is an example of a resurgent act that aims to rekindle and renew relationships with the buffalo to promote community health and well-being (Corntassel, 2020).

Buffalo resurgence is only truly reconciliatory when genuinely engaging with and centering Indigenous resurgence.

Key Takeaways

- References to the near-extinction of the species, the history of the park or the Buffalo paddock in the media largely fail to acknowledge the colonial violence associated with these events. Only one article substantively connects these to settler colonialism.
- Parks policy is consistent with the federal government's approach to Indigenous relations through reconciliation, while the media's emphasis on cultural relationships reflects a politics of recognition.
- Applications for Indigenous guardianship over the herd and Banff National Park have not been approved. Park's Canada is considering allowing Indigenous harvesting of the herd *if* the population requires management. These restrictions limit the political and economic relationship between the herd and Indigenous nations.
- The decision to keep the herd enclosed is tied to concerns about its impact on private property and livestock, revealing a set of overriding colonial-capitalist interests.
- However, Indigenous communities are able to engage ceremonially with the herd on their traditional territories, signalling a renewal of land-based relationships. While Parks Canada still dictates access to the herd, the discourse around the project signals a critical Indigenous-led renegotiation of state-facilitated conservation efforts in Canada.

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