



## DECLARATION 2

### **Through the Eyes of Buffalo: A Strategic Platform to Restore Relationship with the Natural World**

#### **PREAMBLE**

The intent of this document is to amplify and elevate Indigenous knowledge, wisdom and science with the purpose to restore and rematriate wild, free-roaming, genetically healthy populations of bison and their historic ecological and cultural roles across their original North American range and heal the reciprocity between people and Mother Earth. A working group consisting of 15 members convened over six months to identify opportunities and obstacles related to these twin objectives and propose an ambitious and Indigenous-led approach to conservation and buffalo rematriation at a landscape scale. This agreement came together as a part of the lead up to the 12th World Wilderness Congress, which convened in Hé Sapa (the Black Hills) in August 2024, on the sacred and unceded territory of the Oceti Sakowin. We honor all Buffalo Nations' origin stories and relationships, with specific focus on teachings shared with us by the Oceti Sakowin, in particular that of the Great Race when people and buffalo came together in the Black Hills to establish a new order and sacred laws for just and right living.

#### **THE CHALLENGE: The Trebled Crisis**

The world is facing a biodiversity crisis that will have cascading impacts on every aspect of our lives. With more than one million species facing extinction [1], biodiversity losses will have a ripple effect, impacting the ecological services people depend on, our economies, our diverse cultures, our health, and exacerbating climate change and social injustices globally. The world today is more at risk from social unrest and divides than it has ever been. The fault lines of politicized injustice, racism, and polarization are raw and exposed, and the biocultural [2] systems that sustain life are unraveling. Humanity finds itself at the center of a trebled, interrelated crisis—biodiversity, climate, and justice—which is at its root a crisis of relationship with ourselves, each other, and the planet.

The extraordinary juncture at which we collectively find ourselves also offers significant opportunity to spark much needed transformational change and elevate collaboratively crafted novel approaches that revitalize the relationship with nature and dissolve the barriers and

obstacles that divide us from the natural world and each other. These solutions require much more of us than just intellect, logic, or data. We need to remember what it is to live in reciprocity with our more-than-human relatives; remember what our tongues feel like when they speak Buffalo, [3] and regain fluency in the language of relationship: Respect. Reciprocity. Responsibility. Rematriation. Reconnection. Reconciliation.

Healing the planet calls for strategies that draw on the wisdom of the past, cognizant of the forces alive in the present, with a bold eye looking to a very different future. A future that breathes life into the principles of equity and justice, and charts a durable path to the restoration, revitalization, and stewardship of Turtle Island's [4] rich natural and cultural heritage. Globally, there is increased recognition of how critical Indigenous-led conservation and Indigenous worldviews are to meeting the challenges of the biodiversity and climate crises and healing the relational fault lines at their root.

#### THE OPPORTUNITY: The Future of Effective & Enduring Conservation is Indigenous-Led

On Turtle Island, beginning with the launch of Idle No More Movement in 2012, and the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) protests in 2016, the power of Indigenous-led conservation has not only been acknowledged, but affected everything from national policies, the focus and flow of philanthropic dollars, and the theories of change actioned by many of the world's largest conservation organizations. Foundational to the rise of Indigeneity on the land and catalytic movements across the continent, is the decades of work that went into the development and ratification of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples [5] (UNDRIP). Mexico ratified UNDRIP in 2007 as well as being a signatory to the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (ILO Convention 169); protections for Indigenous Peoples are articulated in its constitution. Canada launched a Truth & Reconciliation [6] process in 2008 as a response to truth-telling around the devastating, intergenerational and residual impact of Indian Residential Schools on Indigenous lives, communities and ways of knowing. A final report was issued in 2015, outlining 94 recommendations for governments, institutions and organizations, one of which recognized conservation as a path to reconciliation. Canada became a signatory to UNDRIP in August 2016, while the United States was the last nation in the world to ratify it and made clear that its support was aspirational and not legally binding.

Not surprisingly, consensus is growing that successful restoration of the American bison, both plains and wood bison, at meaningful ecological and cultural scales mandates a different conservation paradigm, one that recognizes buffalo as a keystone relative—a species with extraordinary restorative ecological and cultural effects on the social and ecosystem in which it lives. With buffalo's return, Indigenous culture and ceremony are revitalized as is the full sweep

of grassland biodiversity, from plants and insects to prairie dogs and large carnivores. To realize this cascade of ecological and cultural benefits, restoration efforts must draw on the full diversity of values, identities, and knowledge systems bison represent and embrace the tools that science, culture, law, economics, art, policy, and civic engagement offer. Further, this work must be fueled by collaboration that bridges boundaries, borders, and barriers of all types: political, cultural, economic, and psychological. Notably this work has been underway for nearly three decades on Native lands. Co-creation of a multi-dimensional, Indigenous-led conservation [7] strategy centered on the ecological and cultural restoration of bison at a continental scale can serve as a much-needed model for the future of North American and global conservation.

Not long ago, an estimated 30-60 million bison thundered across the land we now call North America. With them, they carried seeds and nutrients that replenished the land, sustaining vast networks of interconnected communities of life, and increasing primary productivity and biodiversity in their wake. Buffalo were the backbone of many Nations' food security, the center of circular, sustainable economies, and defined ceremony, cultural practice, and spiritual life across the continent. For a growing number of rural communities, the bison is recognized for having formed the rich grasslands that sustain the ranching industry. It is also important to note that the bison ranching economy is growing at a significant and sustained rate. Culturally, buffalo contribute to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous community and national identities. For example, the buffalo is recognized as a symbol of national identity as the National Mammal of the United States, a representation of "Unity, Resilience & Health."

Despite bison's tremendous cultural, ecological, and economic value, a calculated extermination campaign nearly extinguished its populations in less than a century. And by the late 1800s, less than 500 individual bison were left in its ferocious wake. Today, it is almost impossible to imagine, let alone feel, millions of hooves drumming in our stomach; smell churned earth and musky beast rising on hot prairie air; see the vast ocean of animals that fed us, clothed us, sustained a continental trade and economies, inspired the ceremonies, prayers, and art that defined our very identities and cultures. Brave visionaries are responsible for the recovery of the small, but growing, herds sprinkled across the landscape today. But neither humanity nor wild nature have recovered from the ravaging loss of this epic spirit who once nourished our bodies, hearts, and spirits. Although nearly half a million bison exist in North America today, more than 400,000 are in commercial herds. In contrast, only about 31,000 are in conservation herds managed by public agencies and environmental organizations and about 25,000 are in tribal herds. Among the conservation and tribal herds, fewer than 20,000 bison are considered free ranging.[8] The combined conservation and tribal bison populations constitute roughly 0.2% of the continent's historic population and, we estimate, occupy less than 0.2 % of their historic range. The American bison is ecologically extinct across nearly the entirety of their

former range and nowhere on the continent do bison express the full range of ecological, cultural, economic, or social values they once did [9].

Clearly, we need to move towards Indigenous-led conservation models that do more than prevent a species extinction or designate a Protected Area. While these conservation solutions were once fundamental in providing respite and recovery for bison herds, they are no longer bold enough to meet today's opportunities and challenges. Bison, and the Indigenous communities they have lived in reciprocity with since time immemorial, can help us define and lead the way to develop enhanced models to influence the next era of landscape conservation across North America. By framing conservation through an Indigenous biocultural lens, we can co-create a paradigm suited to the complex, systemic challenges of the 21st century. A model that embodies concepts like relationship and reciprocity, respect and reconciliation, equity and justice. There is no better frame for this critical work than the biocultural restoration of bison, which lays the foundation for a durable conservation approach able to work effectively across the complex matrix of land ownership and rights that fragment the continent—private, public, Tribal, Nation, communal—and deliver large-scale, resilient outcomes that address the crises of our times, while healing and renewing the fractured relationship at the heart of these crises.

Bison conservation is directly connected to our ability to protect and restore some of the most threatened, carbon-rich ecosystems in North America: grasslands. Grasslands store about a third of the global terrestrial carbon stocks, provide protection from flooding and drought, and help purify our water. They are also one of the most threatened and least protected biomes in North America.

Further, as keystone relatives, bison deliver a cascade of biocultural benefits for myriad communities and Nations, species and ecosystems, while providing powerful natural climate solutions. Buffalo creates a commanding platform for the elevation and emergence of Indigenous-led conservation initiatives that have the potential to advance conservation at ecological and culturally significant scales. The emergence of stewardship and guardian programs can reconnect Indigenous youth and communities to their homelands, cultural rights and responsibilities, their traditional teachings and more-than-human relatives. With dedicated attention, buffalo can bring urban and rural, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, communities together and restore a respect and understanding for rural life and greater appreciation for the rich cultural diversity that is undoubtedly one of Turtle Island's greatest strengths and sources of resilience in the face of change.

Finally, Indigenous-led buffalo rematriation and restoration presents a clear and much-needed path to reconciliation through the conservation of biodiversity. Bison restoration encourages us

to think more expansively about our relationship with the Earth and each other. Buffalo require large, healthy spaces, and the only time in history these spaces have existed on a scale to support 30-60 million buffalo was when Indigenous Peoples stewarded the land. It is clear that the restoration of the prairies and buffalo should be Indigenous-led and go hand-in-hand with investment in Indigenized/Indigenizing conservation models, organizations, and governing institutions at regional and national scales. On June 4, 2024, a rare white buffalo was born in Yellowstone National Park, and was named “Wakan Gli,” or “Sacred Return” in Lakota. The birth of this rare white buffalo has come at an important time when modern governments, Indigenous groups, NGO’s, private landowners, and other institutions and individuals interested in bison conservation must work together, to understand, converse and implement a more holistic form of managing bison for our collective futures.

### Overarching Campaign & Policy Goals

Recognize and support the inherent ability and responsibility of Indigenous Peoples to steward our more-than-human relatives and their homelands:

1. Indigenized approaches are proven and need to be reflected in policy and funding streams: 80% of the world’s remaining biodiversity and nearly a quarter of above-ground carbon stores are on Indigenous lands [11].
2. Indigenous Peoples have been in relationship with the land since time immemorial and thus, are the enduring stewards and guardians of keystone relatives and their homelands. The future of conservation needs to be Indigenous-led.
3. Indigenous Peoples will reclaim the responsibility of seven generation planning for our more-than-human-relatives and their homelands. A vision for the seven-generation horizon for our bison relatives will be created.

Rematriate wild, free-roaming, genetically healthy populations of bison and their historic ecological and cultural roles across their original North American range. Based on the ability of bison to readily double their population every five years, the collective Tribal/Nation, public and NGO bison population of roughly 56,000 could potentially grow to nearly one million wood and plains bison within 20 years. To make room for one million wild bison and other wildlife with which they share the land, at least 100 million acres of bison habitat are needed. Recognizing the challenges of assembling the land and coordinating the efforts among diverse bison managers, we propose a goal of at least one million wild, free-roaming bison inhabiting at least

100 million acres by 2050. Longer term, we propose a population of several million wild bison be restored to their historic range in North America. Realizing this goal will:

4. Restore and conserve grasslands and their rich biocultural diversity.
5. Reverse the accelerating rate of biodiversity loss and contribute to the Convention on Biological Diversity's goal of conserving 30% of lands and water by 2030 (and half, the science-based target).
6. Foster co-stewardship of biodiversity, including bison, across large, multi-jurisdictional landscapes.
7. Create a path for respect, reconciliation, justice, and equity through Indigenous and community-led conservation initiatives.
8. Launch a multi-faceted continental-scale conservation strategy that provides systemic solutions to the global biodiversity, climate, and social justice crises in partnership with First Nations, Tribes, NGOs, citizens, agencies, and all levels of government in Mexico, Canada and the United States.
9. Advance a trilateral "culturally important species" designation for buffalo that calls on Federal, State, Provincial and Municipal governments to work with Indigenous Nations and organizations to integrate cultural, ceremonial and cosmological considerations into rematriation and restoration plans for our more-than human relatives.
10. Elevate and amplify youth voices and engagement in buffalo restoration through investment in the design and development of a variety of youth initiatives, i.e., cultural camps, land-based trainings, and programs that support intergenerational mentorship and learning, etc.
11. Prepare for buffalo and land rematriation by supporting and investing in Indigenous communities and Nations remembering and renewing relationship with buffalo and buffalo culture.

#### Core Campaign & Policy Objectives

1. **Design and Implement Strategies that Advance and Demonstrate Multi-Jurisdictional Partnerships for Bison Rematriation and Stewardship:** Successful buffalo restoration efforts need to occur at scale, ideally a regional and/or continental scale. We envision

the expansion of public land acreage dedicated to bison/biodiversity restoration and conservation to at least 100 million acres by 2050. This is a vision critical to turning the biodiversity and climate crisis around and the requisite work across multi-jurisdictional landscapes will require the deepening and development of strategic partnerships between Indigenous leaders, Tribal & First Nations governments, national, state/provincial and local officials, agencies, private landowners, community organizations, and NGOs.

2. **Support the Indian Buffalo Management Act (IBMA):** Ensure broad awareness and support of the IBMA and the levels of funding needed to support Indigenous-led buffalo rematriation and stewardship efforts in the United States. Elevate this legislation at a continental scale as a model to guide parallel policy efforts in Canada and Mexico, along with policy-making that recognizes bison as wildlife as opposed to livestock.
3. **Sustain & Implement the United States Department of Interior's Commitment to the Bison Conservation Initiative (BCI):** Ensure ongoing policy support at the Secretarial and Bureau leadership levels, necessary levels of funding, and timely implementation of the Bison Conservation Initiative over the next 10 years in collaboration with Indigenous, NGO & ranching partners. Establish a Memorandum of Understanding or other interagency agreement(s) between DOI and key U.S. Department of Agriculture agencies (e.g., the U.S. Forest Service, Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), Animal Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), Rural Development and others), including efforts to coordinate science, policy, funding, and management across agencies, and expand the public lands footprint on which bison are permitted to freely roam.
4. **Engage in Strategic International & Transboundary Agreements & Collaborations:** Establish a transboundary collaboration with Canada & Mexico around parallel national BCIs; work to establish Mexico-Canada-U.S. partnerships to foster continental scale meta-population management; engage in policy arenas like the Convention on Biological Diversity, Convention on Migratory Species, Trilateral Committee for Wildlife and Ecosystem Conservation and Management, etc.
5. **Establish an Expanded Set of Protected Area Strategies & Designations that Help Define a More Equitable and Enduring Set of 30x30 Targets:** Develop policy and funding mechanisms that support the emergence of multi-jurisdictional bison restoration and conservation strategies; increase Indigenous and community-led conservation initiatives; incentivize private land stewardship and support the conservation value of working lands. We envision multi-million-acre protected areas, linked continentally through

biocultural corridors, sustained and stewarded by Indigenous and local communities, public agencies, NGOs, and others as appropriate.

6. **Recognize & Incentivize Bison Restoration as a Natural Climate Solution:** Invest in the research needed to establish the enabling conditions and best practices that maximize bison's contribution to soil carbon, grassland rewilding, riparian restoration, and the climate resiliency of vital North American landscapes and waterways.
7. **Increase the Social Acceptance & Political Will Needed for Scaled Bison Restoration:** Support the scientific research and story-based strategy needed to grow, diversify, and connect the constituency for bison conservation, overcome oppositional narratives, and catalyze the social embrace/license and political will needed to restore buffalo at a regional and ultimately continental scale.
8. **Establish Durable Funding Mechanisms that Reflect the Ecological, Cultural & Social Value of Continental Buffalo Restoration:** Successful continental bison restoration will bring enumerable social benefits and positive externalities. Realizing the vision will require a level of investment that matches this potential return. We call for a \$2 billion annual investment in a Buffalo Nations Fund that supports land acquisition for rematriation and public land expansion (objective 1) dedicated to bison conservation and the development of large Indigenous and public protected areas; establishment of conservation easements; core guardian/stewardship capacities and infrastructure needs vital to conservation of bison and other grassland wildlife. In addition to the Buffalo Nations Fund, bison recovery and stewardship incentives should be integrated into existing and future Farm Bill programs and the Land and Water Conservation Fund should be Indigenized in recognition of the critical role Indigenous Nations play in effective and enduring conservation. Perverse incentives, e.g., crop subsidies, that negatively impact on people and the planet should be identified and redirected to the Buffalo Nations Fund and efforts to restore bison and protect grassland biodiversity.
9. **Develop a Strategy for Conservation through Reconciliation:** Establish a platform that bridges, incentivizes, and actions bodies of work that link buffalo conservation with reconciliation and reparation processes for Tribal Nations and Indigenous communities, resulting in land rematriation and an increase in Indigenous-led conservation initiatives that can guide indigenization of conservation in North America and help redress our looming biodiversity and climate crises.

**10. Recognize the Inherent Responsibility of Indigenous Peoples to Steward Buffalo and Grasslands by Honoring Treaties and Enforcing Traditional Territorial Treaty Boundaries.**

The total area of all reservations held in trust by the United States government is approximately 2.3% of the surface area of the country (56 million acres). When we add to this treaty lands (the Oceti Sakowin's 1851 and 1868 agreements with the government of the United States include nearly 60 million acres of land, and this is just one tribe) the potential to meet 30x30 targets through the combination of Indigenous-led efforts and the honoring of treaty obligations potentially multiplies ten-fold.

<sup>[1]</sup> In 2019, the United Nations' Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) warned that our impact on the Earth is "unprecedented in human history." Our home planet is fast approaching an irreversible tipping point, a point where nature can no longer heal herself and life as we know it is untenable. According to the research, one million known species will disappear by 2050 unless radical measures are taken. More than 500,000 species are in effect "dead species walking": not yet extinct, but with no chance of survival because of the expanding human footprint. Wild mammal biomass has plummeted by 82%; humans and farm animals now make up 96% of all mammalian biomass on Earth.

<sup>[2]</sup> The field of biocultural conservation is grounded in the reality that diversity in nature (biodiversity) and diversity in culture (cultural and linguistic diversity) are interconnected and interdependent facets of the diversity of life. Biocultural conservation thus adopts integrative strategies that do not separate work to sustain the vitality of nature from efforts to sustain the vitality of the world's Indigenous cultures and languages.

<sup>[3]</sup> This document switches back and forth between 'bison' and 'buffalo' intentionally; bison the scientific term, buffalo a cultural one: a word signifying kinship, a relation.

<sup>[4]</sup> Many Native people refer to the continent of North America as Turtle Island, a term that emerges from Indigenous creation stories that tell of a turtle that holds the world on its back. Referring to the continent as Turtle Island begins to shift the conceptualization of North America from an exclusively colonial perspective.

<sup>[5]</sup>

[https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP\\_E\\_web.pdf](https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf)

<sup>[6]</sup> <https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1450124405592/1529106060525>

<sup>[7]</sup> Indigenous-led conservation entails leveraging the enduring connections that Indigenous communities have nurtured with landscapes and wildlife as a source of guidance amid the imminent challenges posed by the biodiversity and climate crisis. Drawing upon the intricate tapestry of Indigenous cultures, societies, economies, and scientific knowledge, this approach advocates a holistic approach to conservation. It is rooted in the weaving of multidimensional alliances, the wisdom accumulated over millennia through observational data, and a reciprocal bond with the natural environment. This conservation paradigm is fundamentally grounded in principles of abundance and stewardship. The five main pillars of Indigenous-led conservation are: 1. Place-based knowledge. 2. A value system of relationship – constantly thinking about how things relate and influence each other. 3. Requiring people to be a part of, instead of separate from, the natural world. 4. Longstanding generational knowledge. 5. Integrated into cultural practices (i.e. language, ceremony, food systems, etc.)

American novelist Thomas Pynchon wrote, “If they can get you asking the wrong questions they don’t need to worry about the answers.” Arguably, Western conservation has been asking the wrong questions. An error that increasingly is leaning to fatal, as the collective forgets what our Indigenous ancestors knew and lived, and what our Knowledge Keepers are desperately trying to remind us about Natural Law and indigenous systems of governance, about the relationship and responsibilities we have to the Earth. And most importantly, about how we can live and act in ways that honor this sacred relationship that is vital to life and our collective physical, material, and spiritual well-being.

<sup>[8]</sup> Aune, K., D. Jorgensen, & C.C. Gates. 2017. Bison bison. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species 2017: e.T2815A45156541. <https://www.fws.gov/species/plains-bison-bison-bison-bison>

<sup>[9]</sup> Sanderson, E.W., K.H. Redford, B. Weber, K. Aune, D. Baldes, J. Berger, D. Carter, C. Curtain, J. Derr, S. Dobrott, E. Fearn, C. Fleener, S. Forrest, C. Gerlach, C.C. Gates, J.E. Gross, P. Gogan, S. Grassel, J.A. Hilty, M. Jensen, K. Kunkel, D. Lammers, R. List, K. Minkowski, T. Olson, C. Pague, P.B. Robertson, and B. Stephenson. 2008. The ecological future of the North American bison: conceiving long-term, large-scale conservation of wildlife. *Conservation Biology*. 22:252–266.

<sup>[10]</sup> <https://soe.dcceew.gov.au>