Earning Their Keep: Bison Ranching Fights the Battle for Conservation

FIGURE 1: *Bison cows and calves making their way to the bed of hay on Rancho Picante Montana Bison. Both male and female bison have horns.*

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A MILE UP IN THE Bridger Mountains in south-central Montana, 64-year-old J.B. Gans climbs down from his tractor; his breath coming out in small puffs of white. The brisk chill clouds the September morning with the smell of wet earth. He bends down to rub the scruff of Isabel, his Rottweiler of advanced age and mild temperament. He waits, watching from the bottom of a tree-lined hill.

"I grew up milking cows," Gans says. Minutes before, his tractor tossed a 700-pound hay bale off its forklifted teeth, the ball of golden grass tumbling down the hill like a yellow brick road leading to feeding time. "Dairy cows are on auto-pilot, they see the light and they walk towards you. And you milk," he says, recalling his childhood days on a dairy farm just north of Seattle, where he grew up. "I did that for sixteen years. I couldn't wait to get outta there."

He sighs, squinting his crinkled brown eyes to look off in the distance, waiting for his stubborn herd to come down the mountainside to grub the alfalfa he set out for them. Soon, an outline appears, hidden in the trees, watching and wary. The massive frame is outlined in black and brown. Slowly, a young cow approaches, her short black horns wet from the soppy drizzle. Others begin to follow. Step by step, they arrive to the road of hay with what seems like ambivalence. The graceful scavenge for food to fuel their 1,500-pound frames is eerily quiet. Hardly a twig is snapped, barely a snort is uttered, and the only sound is hay being chewed.

Rancho Picante Montana Bison is not the typical ranch-land of buttery green pastures. Located about twenty-five miles northeast of Bozeman, Gans's ranch was named by his fifth-grade class of gifted and underrepresented Hispanic children.

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FIGURE 2: *(Left) Rancho Picante Montana Bison sits on 360 acres of rugged land in Livingston, Montana. The all-natural operation sells to individuals and restaurants nationwide. (Right) Rancho Picante's bison feed on native grasses. Bison graze over long distances and are not picky eaters.*

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Before his ranching days, he taught fourth and fifth grade for almost ten years in Miami. The bison ranch sits a mile up on a mountainside with a freshwater stream. His herd of 300 bison range freely on 360 acres of rugged land. As an all-natural operation, he raises the hormone- and antibiotic-free bison on mountain grass, regional alfalfa, and barley. For almost a decade, Gans has been in Montana raising reining horses (horses that compete in a show arena to demonstrate their athletic ability), running a bed and breakfast, and ranching bison at Rancho Picante.

"It takes a certain kind of person to ranch bison," he says. "Someone who is a little rough edged," he laughs, knowing he's describing himself. "A little bit of an outlaw, an outlier." To raise bison as a cash crop a rancher has to be comfortable as an outsider. Conservationists argue bison have to be wild to be valuable. Scientists argue they have to have DNA free of bovine genes to be wild. But bison ranchers and their allies say that in order to keep North America's iconic furry beasts of the plains in the picture, you've got to let them earn their keep. To save them, they argue, we need to eat them.

Since Europeans arrived to stay in North America, the number of wild bison fell from more than 30 million to a low of 325 in 1884—including just 25 in Yellowstone National Park,

FIGURE 3: *(Left) Bison bull roams during the twilight hour on Antelope Island State Park in Syracuse, Utah. The island's herd of 550–700 is rounded up every year for a health check and an auction. (Right) Bison bull settles into the sun in Antelope Island State Park in Syracuse, Utah. Bison share the 42-square-mile island with pronghorn antelope, bighorn sheep, and coyotes.*

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reports the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.[1] But in the late twentieth century, bison ranching soared in popularity. In 1970, the number of bison being raised on ranches exceeded, for the first time, the number of bison in herds managed for conservation.[2] Some people, including Gans, say this shows the power of ranching as a tool for conservation.

Privately owned herds helped to form the nucleus of bison everywhere today. Domestic bison reinvigorated the herds that currently roam in Yellowstone and played an important role in establishing herds in the National Bison Range in Montana, the National Zoo, Antelope Island State Park in Utah, and many other refuges across the United States. Today, there are approximately 500,000 bison in the United States, reports Defenders of Wildlife. Of those, 480,000 are privately owned.[3] Because of ranching, there are more bison in North America now than there have been since the rock-bottom days of 1884. What does this say about the future of the lord of the plains? Are we eating them to save them?

"A lot of consumers eat bison to save them," says Jim Matheson, the assistant director of the National Bison Association (NBA). "Conservationists get it too. For example, the Brookfield Zoo in Chicago has a bison grill as part of its renowned bison exhibit with signage that supports this approach to bison restoration. So zoo goers can go see the bison, then have a bison burger. It works."[4]

Formed in 1975, the National Bison Association aims to unite different stakeholders to celebrate and honor the heritage of North American bison, and to create a sustainable future for the bison ranching industry through education and outreach. The nonprofit association has over 1,100 members in the United States and foreign countries.

"By supporting bison ranchers consumers are helping local food systems, restoring an iconic species to its native landscape, and providing healthy, clean, natural food to the public. Unlike cattle production, bison ranchers don't artificially inseminate or milk bison. They don't castrate, and they don't use growth hormones," Matheson explains.[5] The NBA has jokingly suggested that the best way to save a bison is to sink your teeth into the tasty, low-fat animal. With people pounding the table for more, the demand has helped restore bison in North America. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Livestock Slaughter Summary, in 2014 approximately 60,000 bison were processed compared to the 30 million beef cattle slaughtered.[6] "We're a tiny sliver of the overall protein industry and we don't want to become a commodity. Ever," Matheson says.

"Some producers can play a very important role in the conservation of the species. And that can play a part in genetics. For example, Ted Turner has the important Yellowstone genetics captured in a commercial herd at his Vermejo ranch. That's important now and could be important in the future as a seed stock for public herds or other commercial herds," says Keith Aune, a senior conservation scientist and bison coordinator for the Wildlife Conservation Society.[7]

Ted Turner is the second largest individual landowner in North America, with 15 ranches that accommodate his 51,000 bison. All the bison meat produced goes to his restaurant, Ted's

Montana Grill, with 46 locations across 16 states.[8] Turner claims the bison industry is a viable meat business, which serves to ensure the survival of the species.

"Consumption is a fundamental part of this story, it is part of reconnecting human culture to bison," Aune says. "Besides, it's a healthy red meat and possibly the perfect cow of the North American continent. And we probably should consider this animal as far as its value for red meat production. It's part of the reason we want them."

FIGURE 4: *Blue Cheese Bison burger with fresh-cut fries served in Ted's Montana Grill in Bozeman, Montana.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY KRIS HEITKAMP © 2013

Beyond conserving bison on the land, Aune stresses that navigating the social and political arenas is where a lot of the heavy work needs to be done. He has been campaigning for the National Bison Legacy Act for four years. Electing bison as the national mammal will help to increase the knowledge and understanding of the species and why we value them in the United States, Aune says. Finally on April 28, 2016, the bill passed Congress and the North American bison will be named the National Mammal of the United States. "The history, the cultural, the archeology, paleontology and spiritual—it's all those different threads as to why it should be our national animal. Bison transcends so many different cultures and parts of our human history on this continent and we couldn't think of any other animal that is better suited for the job," Aune says.

Back on the mountainside, J.B. Gans watches his herd slowly saunter down the hill. The early morning misty air turns a shade of gray and the sun remains motionless behind the clouds. Isabel, the Rottweiler, chases her younger companion, Beckham, a mixed breed with strong herding instincts adopted from a Bozeman shelter. "This is the last stop," Gans says, looking around at his ranch, his bison, and his dogs.

The summer after his freshman year at Northwestern University, Gans journeyed cross-country on a motorcycle, exploring and adventuring. When he reached Montana, Gans says he knew Bozeman would be the end of the road. He fell in love with the beauty, the mountains and landscape. Eventually he made it to Big Sky country after a few stops along the way: teaching in Miami, foreign policy

FIGURE 5: *64-year-old J.B. Gans watches his sub-herd of bison on his ranch in south-central Montana.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY KRIS HEITKAMP © 2013

FIGURE 6: *Bison cow poses during feed time on Rancho Picante Montana Bison.*
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analyst in New York, directing an export markets company in Kentucky and in Palestine as a director of legal aid for the American Friends Services Committee. It took him a few years, a few degrees, and a few kids to get his slice of pie in the big sky, but he got there. And he doesn't plan on leaving.

"Neither of my kids nor my mom understands what the hell it is that I'm doing or why I'm doing it (ranching bison). They are just baffled," Gans says. He reaches in his tractor and lifts a 30-pound bag of nutritional protein nuggets called cake. Dessert is served. He laughs as a nearby cow turns to look at him. He reads her expression as a question, "That right there, that look. She was asking, *Do you have cake?*" He smiles as he empties the bag. The herd quickens their pace as cake is sprinkled onto the ground. Isabel sniffs a nugget and walks away from the cattle treat.

"Much of the satisfaction of handling and raising bison is intangible—it's a connection I feel with the animals. I am often quite close to them when feeding, unrolling a large round bale or opening up a sack of cake," Gans says.

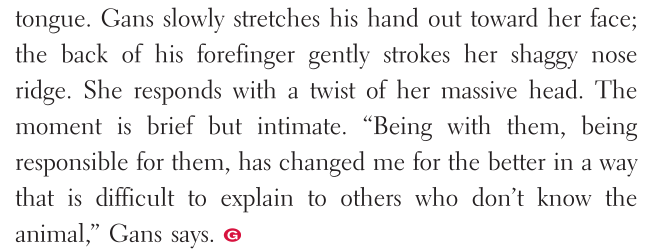
He stands surrounded by at least 10,000 pounds of massive muscle. The scene is an uncanny mix of curiosity, comfort, and intensity. Beckham inches toward an adult cow, sniffing

a piece of cake near her. She looks at him and stomps her woolly hoof as a warning—back off, you're too close. Beckham obliges without an argument.

Most of the twenty-five bison in this sub-herd make it to the feed and cake, except for one. Buster, the blind four-year-old bull. He is usually the last one out, but he eventually makes his way and the other bison seem to always leave some cake for him, Gans explains. Up near the top of the tree-lined hill, Buster stands in the shadow of a tree. He seems to be sniffing the air.

"Each one is an individual with a distinct personality. You have to slowly earn their trust, move respectfully among them, never be threatening, and when you do have to handle them, you do it quietly. They are animals that want to be left alone 99 percent of the time, but when you are in their midst you want them to know and respect you as well. I'm always learning things about their behavior and manner," Gans says.

A cow standing down the path from Gans looks back at him, almost like she is searching for more cake. Gans stares back. Both stand facing one another. He bends at the hip, putting his hands on his knees and tilts his head, getting down to her eye level. She licks the air with her black-gray



tongue. Gans slowly stretches his hand out toward her face; the back of his forefinger gently strokes her shaggy nose ridge. She responds with a twist of her massive head. The moment is brief but intimate. "Being with them, being responsible for them, has changed me for the better in a way that is difficult to explain to others who don't know the animal," Gans says.

NOTES

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