

OPINION

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An opportunity to plan a better future for bison

SCOTT CHRISTENSEN

Guest columnist

Seven generations ago, 30 million to 60 million bison freely roamed across North America. And yet, the fact that bison exist today is a miracle. Tens of millions of bison were systematically exterminated in an act of war against Native American Tribes that depended on them. By 1902, only two dozen wild bison remained in the bastion of Yellowstone National Park. Today, the park is the only place in the world with large, unfenced herds of wild American plains bison.

Despite this inspiring comeback story, Yellowstone bison management is one of the most complex and politically charged issues in our region. This past winter, the tribal hunt of bison brought national attention to Yellowstone and underscored the challenges of managing bison while navigating the many

different opinions on the issue.

I've spent a lot of time reflecting on this winter for two reasons: Many of the factors that led to the events of this winter were independently positive, and because Yellowstone National Park is currently updating its Bison Management Plan.

Consider the factors that contributed to this winter. The deepest snowfall in recent memory brought needed precipitation to the ecosystem and pushed record numbers of bison along ancient migratory routes out of the park and into the Gardiner basin. This is positive.

The large out-migration was spurred by the fact that at roughly 6,000 animals, the Yellowstone bison population was as large as it's been in 150 years. Also positive.

This winter the park entered more bison than ever into the Bison Conservation Transfer Program and made good on a commitment to move away from

the ship-to-slaughter management tool. This exciting program helps manage Yellowstone's bison population at the same time it supports herd restoration on tribal lands. Another positive.

Tribes with treaty rights exercised these rights and their sovereignty, which is also positive. It's not the tribes' fault the only place to hunt bison is a cramped piece of land near Gardiner.

While the park and tribes were catching flak all winter, the state of Montana was quietly avoiding criticism despite being responsible for many of the reasons bison management is so intractable.

Montana refuses to allow wild bison into the state, forces Yellowstone to slaughter bison each winter, confines the tribal hunt to a dangerously small area, and insists the species be managed as livestock instead of wildlife. All negatives.

Which brings us back to the park's new Bison Management

Plan. As Yellowstone sets its eyes on the future, you can bet the state of Montana will try to drag us back into the past. Don't fall for their misinformation.

Here are the facts. By taking such an uncompromising stance regarding bison management, the state has essentially refused to participate in the process, excluding itself from collaborating on the complicated issues involved with managing our national mammal.

There has never been a documented case of bison transmitting brucellosis to cattle (a disease also prevalent in elk, which are managed like wildlife), bison grazing improves range quality, and the bison population is below Yellowstone's ecological carrying capacity.

And a recent poll of Montana voters found overwhelming bipartisan support for the idea that bison should be managed as wildlife with a population objective based on science and

suitable habitat, not politics.

Kudos to Yellowstone's leadership for updating the park's bison management plan. When the draft plan is released soon, please join the majority of Montanans in supporting provisions that create a better future for bison. A future where bison have access to quality habitat outside the park during cold, snowy winters. A future where productive collaboration and problem solving between the park, tribes, state, and conservation advocates is the norm. A future where these widely loved animals can safely coexist with communities through successful conflict mitigation measures and where Yellowstone bison are increasingly used to restore herds on tribal lands across North America instead of being shipped to slaughter.

Scott Christensen is the executive director of the Greater Yellowstone Coalition.