THE RIGHT CHOICE FOR MANAGING THE NATIONAL BISON RANGE

IN THE LATE 1800S, LATATÍ (LIT-
tle Falcon Robe), a Qlispé (Pend
d'Oreille) Tribal member, estab-
lished a wild bison herd on the Flat-
head Reservation as the species was
being wiped out across the Great Plains.
Latatí's heroic action helped save the
species from extinction and was pivotal
in the establishment of herds elsewhere
in the U.S. and Canada.

His heroism also led to the creation of
the National Bison Range.

Sens. Steve Daines and Jon Tester
recently introduced the Montana Water
Rights Protection Act, which would rat-
ify the Confederated Salish and Koot-
enai Tribes (CSKT) Water Compact and
restore management of the National
Bison Range to the CSKT.

We commend Tester and Daines for
introducing the bill, and we’re pleased
that this legislation will enable the
Tribes to manage the NBR. Because of
the CSKT’s long and impressive history
of conservation on the Flathead Reser-
vation and the Tribes’ profound rela-
tionship to bison, we can think of no
other agency or government entity more
qualified or more committed to manag-
ing the National Bison Range than the
CSKT.

The Tribes’ remarkable record of
wildland and wildlife protection is clear
in the reservation’s 400,000-acre con-
servation network – an astonishing size
given that the Flathead Reservation is
just over 1.2 million acres. The corner-
stone of that network is the 92,000-acre
Mission Mountains Tribal Wilderness
Area, the first actively-managed wil-
derness area in the U.S. designated by a
tribal government in 1972.

The wilderness area includes a buf-
fer zone around its west end and a des-
ignated primitive area around its south
end. Within it is a 10,000-acre griz-
ly bear conservation area, the first of
many examples demonstrating how
committed the CSKT are to wildlife
management.

The Tribes have set aside two large
areas intended to maintain the long-
term health of elk and bighorn sheep
herds, and have also taken the lead on
reintroducing trumpeter swans, pere-
grine falcons, northern leopard frogs,
and Columbian sharp-tailed grouse to
the Mission Valley.

Perhaps nothing so exemplifies the
Tribes’ dedication to wildlife protec-
tion and habitat preservation than the
reconstruction of Highway 93 through
the Flathead Reservation some 20 years
ago. The highway’s wildlife overpasses,
derpasses, and fencing have significa-
tlly reduced wildlife fatalities and
preserved crucial wetlands.

This highway design, the wildlife
conservation areas, and the reintroduc-
tions are a testament to the Tribes’ fish
and wildlife managers, as skilled and
qualified as any in the world.

Some question whether the CSKT
could properly manage the National
Bison Range. We believe, however, that
this is based on cultural biases rather
than valid concerns regarding CSKT’s
ability to manage the range.

Despite what some have claimed,
restoring management of the National
Bison Range to the CSKT, while keeping
the range in federal trust ownership and
accessible to all, has nothing to do with
the issue of lands transfer – and we say
this as representatives of organizations
that have been at the forefront of keep-
ing public lands in public hands.

Restoring management to the CSKT
is about doing what’s just.

The 1855 Hellgate Treaty reserved
the Bison Range land for the CSKT, but
in 1908 the federal government appro-
priated that land without the consent
of the CSKT. This was one in a long line
of injustices that the federal govern-
ment perpetrated against the CSKT and
other Indigenous nations in the U.S., a
line that included the wanton destruc-
tion of bison.

With their profound spiritual, cul-
tural, and material connection to bison,
the CSKT had the foresight to establish
a wild bison herd. If it were not for the
CSKT, there would be no National Bison
Range, and possibly no bison.

Let’s honor that connection and fore-
sight and enable the CSKT to manage
this national treasure.

“LET’S HONOR THAT CONNECTION
AND FORESIGHT AND ENABLE THE
CSKT TO MANAGE THIS NATIONAL
TREASURE.”

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