

THE RIGHT CHOICE FOR MANAGING THE NATIONAL BISON RANGE



FLATHEAD BEACON

APRIL 8, 2020 / FLATHEADBEACON.COM

p. 21

IN THE LATE 1800S, LATATÍ (Little Falcon Robe), a Qlispé (Pend d'Oreille) Tribal member, established a wild bison herd on the Flathead 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 ratify the Confederated Salish and Kootenai 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 the legislation will enable the Tribes to manage the NBR. Because of the CSKT's long and impressive history of conservation on the Flathead Reservation and the Tribes' profound relationship to bison, we can think of no other agency or government entity more qualified or more committed to managing 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 conservation network – an astonishing size given that the Flathead Reservation is just over 1.2 million acres. The cornerstone of that network is the 92,000-acre Mission Mountains Tribal Wilderness Area, the first actively-managed wilderness area in the U.S. designated by a tribal government in 1972.

The wilderness area includes a buffer zone around its west end and a designated primitive area around its south end. Within it is a 10,000-acre grizzly 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, peregrine falcons, northern leopard frogs, and Columbian sharp-tailed grouse to the Mission Valley.

Perhaps nothing so exemplifies the Tribes' dedication to wildlife protection and habitat preservation than the reconstruction of Highway 93 through the Flathead Reservation some 20 years ago. The highway's wildlife overpasses, underpasses, and fencing have significantly reduced wildlife fatalities and preserved crucial wetlands.

This highway design, the wildlife conservation areas, and the reintroductions 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 keeping 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 appropriated that land without the consent of the CSKT. This was one in a long line of injustices that the federal government perpetrated against the CSKT and other Indigenous nations in the U.S., a line that included the wanton destruction of bison.

With their profound spiritual, cultural, 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 foresight 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.”

John Todd is deputy director at Montana Wilderness Association. Amy McNamara is Northern Rockies director at the Natural Resources Defense Council. Scott Brennan is Montana State Director at The Wilderness Society. Tom France is the regional executive director of the Northern Rockies, Prairies, and Pacific Regional Center at the National Wildlife Federation.