

# OPINION

The MONTANA STANDARD

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## GUEST VIEW

# Bison Range approval backed

## Sierra Club backs plan for tribal management in water bill

The Montana Sierra Club unequivocally supports the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes' rights to manage and care for the National Bison Range, which sits fully within their ancestral and treaty-reserved lands, and we support the Montana Water Rights Protection Act, S. 3019, which would provide for the transfer of the range to federal trust ownership for the tribes.

For several years the Sierra Club and other environmental organizations have supported the tribes' efforts to regain the stolen land and the bison they have deep cultural and historical connections to, but today's racial reckoning in the U.S. demands an even deeper assessment of the environmental movement and the origins of what has historically been a white-dominated field. We must work to reinvent what it means to be a conservationist, in part by prioritizing efforts that support the conservation and stewardship vision of tribal nations and front-line communities.

The lands taken for the National Bison Range had human inhabitants, people who lived and breathed and loved there.

People who were forcibly removed from their lands, deprived of traditional foods and the freedom to carry out their own cultural practices or even speak their languages. As stated in S. 3019, the facts and history regarding the tribes, the bison, and the federal government's treatment of the reservation land are exceptional circumstances that warrant action by Congress. Restoring the land to its original status under the Hellgate Treaty is the right solution to this unique situation. For too long, our national narratives around land protection and wildlife management have ignored, discounted and excluded the presence, practices and connections of Indigenous inhabitants.

The lands of the National Bison Range were treaty-reserved lands that were taken without the tribes' consent in order to create the Bison Range. When the lands were stolen, the tribes did not even receive adequate compensation from the government. The National Bison Range thus presents the ideal opportunity to practice an approach to conservation that aligns with the stewardship vision and rights of tribal nations, where a return of land is doable and right.

While many of us hold dear to places like the National Bison Range, we don't see their return to the Tribes as a loss. Rather,

it is one step towards making reparations and making a place — and people — whole again. Moreover, the Montana Water Rights Protection Act specifically protects public access to the bison range and provides that the return of the land does not set a precedent for any other transfer decisions, but will be recognized as a restoration of lands and wildlife under the care of the Flathead Indian Reservation and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. We look forward to seeing the lands returned to the tribes, and to visiting the bison range someday soon to witness the tribes' thoughtful, skillful and holistic approach to managing the range for bison conservation and public access.

Let's work together as people who care about conserving wildlife and promoting social and racial justice to right the historic — and present — injustices imposed on tribal nations, including by supporting the Montana Water Rights Protection Act and its provision for returning the National Bison Range lands to federal trust ownership for the tribes.

This opinion is signed by Summer Nelson, Sierra Club Montana chapter director; Stacey Hellekson, chapter chair; Len Broberg, chapter vice chair; and Bonnie Rice, Sierra Club Greater Yellowstone Northern Rockies Campaign representative.