



Contemporary Tribal Bison Ranching on the Great Plains: Economic, Ecological and Cultural Restoration?

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Abstracts

Since the early 1970s, bison ranching has become an economic force on the Great Plains. To many Plains Indian nations, bison are traditionally sacred animals. Many reservations are building on the tradition and have established tribal bison ranches. Hopes are that these cooperatives will provide jobs and other economic opportunities, but also that the renewed connection to the animals will bring cultural restoration with it. In this short paper, I will explore how these local, indigenously controlled and conceptualized development projects can serve as a model for other such efforts.

One subject that is bound to come up in discussions of indigenous peoples in North America and their historic interactions with the environment are the bison or buffalo hunters of the Great Plains. Plains Indians have long come to serve as the incarnations of native North America, and one of the first images of American Indians that are usually invoked is a version of Bodmer's painting of a mounted warrior hunting a bison with bow and arrow. Contemporary interest in North American Indian human ecology issues focuses more on other animals: whale hunting and salmon fishing rights on the Northwest Coast, or caribou calving grounds in the Arctic National Wildlife Reserve, for example. In this short paper, I will use an abbreviated discussion of contemporary tribal bison ranching (see BRAUN 2004) to show how native communities put historically important ecological relations in a new context of economic development and sovereignty.

Return of the bison

Bison became important again in the late 1980s, but not so much in conjunction with Plains Indians as in the context of the so-called «Buffalo Commons» proposal (POPPER and POPPER 1987) and various offshoots (e.g. CALLENBACH 1996), which saw the future of the Plains as a bison grazing ground rather than a continuation of subsidized, irrigated, and ecologically questionable farm enterprises. These authors concluded that an economy based on intensive agriculture was not sustainable on the Plains, and reacted

to research indicating that cattle ranching was destroying the ecosystem in the arid and semi-arid western United States (e.g. DONAHUE 1999). They therefore proposed a return to pre-settlement ecology and an economy based on bison hunting and eco-tourism.

Bison ranching had become popular in the 1960s (RORABACHER 1970), coinciding with a growing tourism industry, ecological awareness, and romantic appropriation of the Indian past, which turned bison into symbolic commodities, valuable beyond the very limited specialty market for bison meat. Especially with the farm crisis of the mid 1980s, however, exotic animals, as which bison are classified in North America, came to play a larger role in the agricultural sector as farmers and ranchers were looking for niche market alternatives to the lower and lower prices they received for traditional products. Ostriches, emus, and other exotics boomed, and bison ranching grew into the «Buffalo Industry». This new interest in bison was also a reaction to the buffalo commons concept, as the new niche market was perceived as a potential economic savior for the rural population of the Plains. A bison industry, promoters hoped, would help to enable ranchers to stay in business and on their land, while at the same time preventing the plans of an ecological reversion to the pre-1860s.

The new prominence of bison coincided with growing numbers of animals not only on private ranches but also in national and state parks and game reserves. The federal and state governments were running out of space for the animals, and were looking for buyers. At the same time, activists on Indian reservations began to show increased interest in bison. The booming market at the time, as well as the traditional spiritual and economic importance of bison in Plains Indian cultures, seemed a perfect opportunity to initiate locally controlled, culturally and ecologically sustainable, holistic development projects.

Some Indian reservations, and individuals on reservations, had kept bison herds of varying sizes for a long time. In the early 1990s, however, a concerted effort began to increase tribal bison herds on reservations. With this goal in mind, the InterTribal Bison Cooperative (ITBC) was founded in 1992. In its first six years of existence, the number of tribal buffalo programs more than doubled, and the number of buffalo on reservations increased from 2,800 to about 8,000. Around 500 tribal jobs were created by the buffalo programs, either directly or indirectly (ITBC 1998: 9). Bison herds have since been growing on many reservations. The Cheyenne River Sioux



Reservation in South Dakota, for example, grew its herd to about 3,500 animals in 2002, although the number of animals has since decreased because of increased slaughtering. Many of these tribal herds were spawned and increased by bison from national parks, as the park system offered surplus bison to the tribal governments. While ITBC is placing emphasis on the sound economic foundations of tribal herds, the main goals of establishing tribal bison operations are not only economic but just as much cultural.

Culture, economics, and management

The simple physical return of buffalo to native lands by itself is seen by many of those who work towards traditional goals as an irreversible trigger for cultural revitalization. Bison represent the traditional society and its ways of life; they also represent traditional virtues, such as respect, responsibility, and generosity. With the current social problems on most reservations – unemployment, systemic poverty, alcoholism, violence, drug abuse, and epidemic diabetes – a return to certain aspects of traditional culture and a revival of traditional virtues, then, seems to avoid the downfalls of total assimilation and its negative consequences. In this vein, bison have been and are used by some reservations and tribal courts as teachers for negligent parents and drug users. In accordance with traditional notions that bison brought Plains Indians their culture, long-term observance of the animals and their social behavior as a model instills responsibility in people. Bison meat, which is very low in cholesterol, may also alleviate the spread of diabetes. Many reservation residents blame the disease on changes in diet. A return to the traditional diet, they hope, will make people healthier.

Economic opportunities linked to bison start with the direct marketing of meat and byproducts, which vary from hides and robes to painted skulls. The development of local arts cooperatives might also potentially provide marketing opportunities for artists working with other materials. Tourism is another market that reservations would like to grow. Wildlife tourism is on the rise in North America, and bison, as one of the national symbols, are a main attraction on the Plains and elsewhere. These activities, it is hoped, will create much needed jobs on reservations, and provide income. In this sense, then, the bison would continue the traditional relationship of providing for the people. In a more practical sense, however, and for the time being, the people have to provide for the bison. The emphasis on cultural revitalization, and long-term improvement of the overall social health situation on reservations, is in fact taking a heavy toll on some bison projects, because they refuse to get involved with industrial agriculture practices, perceived to not treating the bison with the appropriate respect. This, in turn, creates conflicts within tribes, as many of the more business oriented tribal governments refuse, and cannot afford to subsidize projects that might turn a profit if managed differently.

The traditional assumption that bison are relatives, a related nation or people with their own culture and

social order, and their role as bringers of culture to the people implies that their treatment should not include ranching practices such as branding, hot prods, chutes, feedlots, and narrow corrals. The total potential economic value is not exploited, because the relationship is more than economic. With most reservations being split between so-called «traditionalists» and «progressives», and the latter being mostly ranchers on Plains reservations, this can create problems for bison operations. The progressives, who advocate for economic development by adoption of mainstream economic strategies, often see the revitalization of aspects of traditional culture as a hindrance to the future well-being of their reservations. They see tribal bison operations that advocate for traditional management practices as wasting resources instead of streamlining productivity. Indian cattle ranchers also fear that, with the spotlight on bison, they might receive less attention and resources for their venues. Opposition to lean bison on reservations runs fairly high and thus mirrors off-reservation society, where people have become used to the fatter beef. Many non-tribal bison producers have started to feed their bison corn in order to make the meat fatter, and, it is hoped, more acceptable to the average consumer. This runs counter to the efforts of some traditionalists on reservations to reduce diabetes by replacing beef with lean bison meat.

Local development projects

Although many tribal bison operations have developed growing pains, they can be considered a success as locally controlled development projects. Over recent years, development efforts have changed from the global to the local, and as such also toward revitalization of traditional cultural and ecological knowledge and an emphasis of ecological, cultural, and political sovereignty. As SMITH (1994: 187) points out, there has been, in the last fifteen years, a realization that «although tribal enterprises and entrepreneurial activity must be competitive in the global or local marketplace, the goals of those activities need not be the same as those of non-Indian businesses.» LOAYAZA (2000: 19) says, «the cultures imposed on us have so far brought us nothing but problems: first poverty, then division, and now individualism. But with our own culture, we will regain strength. [...] It is our firm belief that we are not mistaken and that development must be based on local cultures !» Over the last years, attempts to achieve this have increased in numbers, and the tribal buffalo programs are but one example of this trend.

There are numerous examples of North American indigenous communities that have started projects whose goal is economic independence, «but mainly so that the community can fully restore cultural continuity and a holistic interaction with the land» (STRANG 1997: 106). Makah, Inupiaq, and Inuit whale hunting are examples of cases in which societies are trying to rebuild communities based on traditional relations to animals. Whaling is explicitly linked to religious activities, and the hunt is portrayed as a spiritual, not only a subsistence relationship (FREEMAN *et al.* 1998: 53-56).



«Resistance to changes in the traditional relationship with the land», SCHREIBER (2002: 375) points out in expanding her discussion of salmon fishing on the Northwest Coast to include the James Bay Cree, «is associated with individual well-being and notions of health and prosperity.» Whales and salmon have become a symbol of cultural affirmation, and fill a very similar role to that of buffalo on the Plains. However, symbols of cultural resistance and sustainability used in development projects do not need to center on animals. In the case of the Menominee Indian Tribe, the focus is the forest. Sustainability is again defined through community participation: «One tenet of Menominee sustainable development stresses the importance of maintaining communal ownership of the forest and the Menominee environment.» (DAVIS 2000: 53)

As KALSTAD (1998: 243) argues, the choice of a knowledge system to be applied in resource management «is a practical as well as a political issue.» In the case of tribal bison operations, the traditional people argue for hands-off management, and try to leave the bison as wild as possible. They argue that to do otherwise would change the bison culture, and would domesticate the bison in the same way that Indian societies were changed by being forced onto reservations and into assimilation. Progressive ranchers, on the other hand, argue for the application of typical ranching practices to the bison, which they see as wilder, furrier cattle. Resource management might not be the most important debate in this dispute, however; the symbolic aspects in development debates need more attention. What is at stake in this discussion over resource management and ecological knowledge might not be economic productivity, or even the well-being of the buffalo, but the identity of Plains Indians as distinctive cultures. In other words, for traditionalists the buffalo and how they are treated have become icons of cultural difference between Indians and the American mainstream.

Conclusion

It would be a mistake to see these debates over goals of development projects only in terms of identity politics, however. Rather, I would suggest that bison operations represent local debates over the directions of a long-term approach to economic development and resource use that include debates over the meaning and direction of the involved communities. As such, tribal bison operations also represent locally conceived, locally controlled, and locally managed development projects.

Even though it might not contribute to direct subsistence or economic gain, bringing a community together is the basis for all other activities because it shows people, or at least makes them reflect upon, who they are as a community. This is most important in societies whose history, culture, and knowledge have been challenged by colonial powers, often in direct conjunction with forced assimilation into a capitalist economy that runs counter to traditional values. Reinstating pride in one's culture and a feeling of self-worth and knowledge that one can achieve complex tasks is fundamental to community health, and only healthy communities can achieve long-term economic success. Tribal bison operations showcase the problems, but also the possibilities of true community-based development projects. Symbolically powerful animals such as reindeer, whales, salmon, or buffalo or plants such as trees or corn can not just be a resource to be exploited but a catalyst on which the community as such can build. This is true just as much for Plains Indians as it is for other indigenous societies.

Zusammenfassung

Seit den frühen Siebziger Jahren haben sich Bison-Ranchen auf den Grossen Ebenen zu einer ökonomisch erfolgreichen Industrie entwickelt. Die meisten Plains Indianer hielten Bison traditionellerweise als «heilig». Viele Reservationen bauen heute auf diese Tradition indem sie selbst in das Bison-Geschäft einsteigen. Ihre Hoffnung ist dass die Kooperativen den Reservationen Arbeitsplätze und andere ökonomische Chancen einbringen werden, aber auch dass die erneuerte Verbindung zu den Tieren eine kulturelle Revitalisierung fördern wird. Dieser kurze Artikel gibt einen kurzen Überblick auf diese lokalen Entwicklungsprojekte als Model für ähnliche Anstrengungen.

Resumen

Desde los años setenta, la ganadería de los bisontes pasó a ser una fuerza económica para la región de las Grandes Llanuras. Tradicionalmente, los indios de las Llanuras consideran los bisontes como sagrados. Varias reservas, calcadas en la tradición, establecieron ranchos para la cría de los bisontes. De esa manera, esperan lograr nuevas oportunidades de trabajo y también que su nueva relación al bisonte llegue a crear una renacimiento cultural. Este artículo examina la posibilidad de que esos proyectos de desarrollo local sirvan de modelo para proyectos similares.



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