
STATUS REVIEW AND CONSERVATION INITIATIVES FOR AMERICAN BISON: A CONTINENTAL PERSPECTIVE

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Five hundred years ago, there were tens of millions of American bison (*Bison bison*) roaming free on the plains of North America from Alaska to northern Mexico. The decimation of the American bison in the late 1800s inspired the first recovery of bison and an entire conservation movement that protected wildlife and wild places across North America. As of 2008, there were ~ 400,000 bison in commercial herds in North America, some 93 percent of the continental population. There were 61 plains bison conservation herds containing ~ 20,500 animals, and 11 conservation herds of wood bison, containing nearly 11,000 animals. Little progress has been made in recent decades to increase the number of animals in conservation herds. Many factors affect survival of bison populations, including limited habitat and severe winters. Yet, the greatest challenge is to overcome the common perception that the bison, which has had a profound influence on the human history of North America, socially, culturally and ecologically, no longer belongs on the landscape. The key to recovery of this species is recognition that the American bison is a wildlife species and needs to be conserved as wildlife. Recently a new conservation strategy was developed by the IUCN bison specialist group and a new vision for the ecological restoration of bison was described by the Wildlife Conservation Society under our American Bison Society initiative. A new Continental vision for the American bison is inspiring a second recovery and helping to restore functional grassland ecosystems.