

A bison range homecoming: Native tribes reclaim a Montana nature preserve

The Confederated Salish and Kootenai tribes celebrate the restoration of lands they had stewarded for thousands of years



Salish Pend d'Oreille elder Stephen Small Salmon expressed hope that the tribes would reclaim Big Medicine, a rare white calf born in 1933. His taxidermied body is at the Montana Historical Society Museum in Helena.

by Sarah Mosquera for Montana Free Press
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The sound of drumming filled the rolling hills of the National Bison Range.

Members of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai tribes (CSKT) and neighbors gathered under a large tent to sing and dance in celebration of a historic event: the tribes' reclamation of management of the bison range after more than a century of federal management and nearly two decades of negotiations.

"This all dates back to the treaty of 1855, when that agreement wasn't honored and this land was taken by the government," said Stephanie Gillin, wildlife biologist for the CSKT Natural Resources Department.



The National Bison Range was created in 1908 on CSKT land without tribal consent.

Without tribal consent, the federal government established the National Bison Range in 1908 as a 19,000-acre preserve in the middle of the Flathead Indian Reservation. Tribal members were excluded from bison management despite their involvement in the herd's creation.

According to the CSKT-produced film *In the Spirit of Atatice*, in the 1870s a man named Atatice noticed that the number of bison was decreasing in the Flathead Valley, and he hoped to build a herd on tribal land. Though Atatice's vision did not come to fruition, his son Latati later carried on his father's work.

While on a bison hunt on the eastern side of the Rocky Mountains, Latati decided to lead a herd of orphaned calves over the range and back to the Flathead Reservation. The animals flourished under his care and became the first managed bison herd in Montana's Flathead Valley.

"Today we are here to honor the vision, the foresight, the wisdom, the courage of your ancestors, and in particular Atatice and his son Latati," Lieutenant Governor Kristen Juras told celebrants on Saturday.



Dancers at Friday's celebration. The announcer urged guests to join dancers on the dancefloor, regardless of whether they were wearing regalia.

CSKT tribal chairman Tom McDonald said the restoration of the bison range to tribal control is about more than just land. By righting a longstanding wrong, he said, the transfer helps foster trust and encourages collaboration between tribal nations and government agencies, restoring honor to once-broken treaties and allowing tribes to steward the land as they had for thousands of years.

"It's a restoration of a piece that was missing. It represents a gift of what we may care for to protect and have something for future generations," McDonald said.



Jingle dancer Aspen Decker, 29, wearing yellow at right, said she has been dancing off and on throughout her life. Jingle dress dances are traditionally healing dances.

The three-day celebration began with a powwow on Friday and ended with half-price entry to the range on Sunday. The event featured appearances by Montana senator Jon Tester and Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland.

On Saturday, Haaland spoke before a crowd at Salish Kootenai College in Pablo to honor the resilience of tribal nations.

“With the loss of tribal homelands and the depletion of the buffalo herds, the plains tribes lost traditional connections with this beautiful animal. But despite that terrible tragedy and loss, we are still here. You are still here. And that is something to celebrate,” Haaland said.

After years of failed negotiations, the transfer was accomplished through enactment of the Montana Water Rights Protection Act of 2020, returning the bison range to CSKT management. The transfer became official on 2 January 2022.

“The return of the bison range to these tribes is a triumph and a testament to what can happen when we collaboratively work together to restore balance to ecosystems that were injured by greed and disrespect,” Haaland said.



During an emotional speech, Haaland said, ‘When our wildlife management and conservation efforts are guided by Indigenous knowledge, developed over millennia, we all succeed.’

From heartfelt speeches to rambunctious Native games, the event was full of life, joy and color. On Friday, an announcer repeatedly proclaimed, “It’s a good day to be Indian.”

Every elder who spoke reiterated the important role played by bison in Native culture, including a deep spiritual connection that makes the management transfer more than a matter of legal logistics.

At the announcer's urging, non-tribal members flooded the dancefloor during Friday's powwow, dancing alongside tribal members in full regalia, embracing a culture that isn't their own, and celebrating a victory they clearly regarded as shared.