

Buffalo in South Dakota

Imagine that you went back in time. You are standing on a hill. The land will become South Dakota. The year is 1850. What do you see?

Miles and miles of prairie are around you. Sounds in the distance become louder and louder. Soon thousands of big brown animals come into the draw below. Buffalo! The ground is shaking. There are many buffalo! Where have they all gone today?

Sixty million buffalo once lived in the Great Plains. Hunting killed millions of them. By 1889, when South Dakota became a state, the buffalo was nearly **extinct**. A few people acted to save them.

Today, once again thousands of buffalo live in South Dakota. Many people come just to look at them. Ranchers raise them for sale. The buffalo is a symbol of pride. It means strength for South Dakota. For American Indians, it is a sign of spiritual strength.

Natural History

The scientific name for the buffalo is *Bison bison*. Its true name is the American bison. It is an animal with hooves. It is a member of the bovine family. Beef cattle are also in the bovine family.

European explorers gave the American bison the name of buffalo. Spanish **conquistadors** thought they looked like cattle. French fur traders called them *les boeufs* (la buffs). *Les boeufs* is French for "the beefs." English explorers had a hard time saying the French name. They said "la buff" or "buffle." Finally, everyone was saying "buffalo." It became the animal's common name.

Zoologists believe that European bison came to North America long ago. The animals crossed a land bridge between Alaska and Russia. It was nearly 800,000 years ago. The buffalo can adapt to different climates and grasses. They learned to live anywhere in North America. They really

liked the grasslands of South Dakota.

Buffalo and beef cattle are alike but not the same. Buffalo get bigger than cattle. But they eat less food than cattle. Buffalo also like dry areas like the Great Plains. They can eat plants that cattle will not eat. Buffalo dig through snow to reach the grass. They can get their water from eating snow. They have thick coats. They can live through blizzards. A buffalo points its body into the wind. It lets bad weather pass it by.

Buffalo have not been **domesticated**.

They are still wild animals. They cannot be tamed like 4-H heifers or steers. Buffalo look lazy and slow. Not so. They can outrun and **outmaneuver** a horse. Remember this fact if you ever get close to a buffalo.

Vocabulary

conquistadors (n.), Spanish explorers of North and South America in the 1500s

domesticated (v.t.), tamed

extinct (adj.), gone forever

outmaneuver (v.), to outdo by dodging and turning quickly

zoologists (n.), scientists who study animals

American Indians and the Buffalo

The Dakota, Lakota, and Nakota (Sioux) Indians used the buffalo for food. They also used it for clothing and shelter. Because the buffalo was so important, it had a special place in their religion. An old story tells that the Indians once lived underground. They called themselves *Pte Oyate*, or the Buffalo Nation. One day, they came to the surface to live. Here, life was hard. A holy man named Tatanka came to them as a buffalo. He gave the people everything they needed. Today, one Indian name for the buffalo is *tatanka*.

The buffalo moved in herds. The Dakota, Lakota, and Nakota people had to move with them. They lived a **nomadic** lifestyle. They followed the buffalo to new grasslands or pastures. Hunting was hard before white people brought horses to the Americas. Most of the tribe had to help hunt the buffalo. The people would herd the animals into a canyon or corral. Hunters

killed the penned animals. One of these ancient "kill sites" is found near the town of Buffalo, South Dakota.

Sometimes the tribe forced a herd to **stampede** off a high cliff. This is called a "buffalo jump." Most animals died in the fall. Others were killed with spears and arrows. Then the tribe cut up the animals. There are buffalo jump sites in South Dakota. One is south of Lemmon. It is near Shadehill Reservoir. Arrowheads and bones from thousands of buffalo were found there. They were below a steep cliff.

Other times, hunters pretended to be wolves. They put on wolf skins. They crept close to the herd. They shot the buffalo with arrows. Buffalo were not afraid of wolves. They ignored the men in wolf skins.

It took fewer hunters to kill buffalo after the Indians got horses. Each hunter had a fast "buffalo horse." Man and horse chased the buffalo. The hunter shot it. The women cut the buffalo up. They hauled the parts

back to camp.

The Indians used almost every part of the buffalo. The tongue, heart, liver, and back fat were special treats. The muscle meat was cut into strips. The strips were dried to make jerky. They were hung on trees and branches in the sun. Jerky was an important food. It lasted a long time and was easy to carry.

The Indians used jerky to make wasna. The women pounded the dried meat into a fine meal. They mixed it with wild berries and fat. Sometimes they packed it into clean buffalo intestines. It was like a sausage. Usually they kept wasna in rawhide containers. These holders were called parfleches.

The Indians used the tanned hide of the buffalo to make tipis, clothing, and bedding. First, the women stretched the hides. Then they scraped them to clear away fat and flesh. Next they worked in a mixture of cooked brains. Then they let the skins dry in

the sun. They soaked the hides and dried them again.

Two women pulled a hide back and forth over a tree branch. They were making it soft. The hide was then ready to be made into clothing or tipis. Rawhide, or hide that was not tanned, was used for shoes, or moccasins. It was also used for shields and ropes.

Buffalo hair was made into horse ropes and the lining of clothes. From bones, the Indians made arrows and scrapers. They also made knives, axes, and hammers. Flat bones made good cutting boards. Even toys were made from bones!

Horns became spoons, dippers, and bowls. Teeth and hooves became necklaces, door rattles, and glue. Buffalo bladders made good containers for liquids.

Another important buffalo product was dried dung. It made good fuel. It burned without much smoke. It did not smell either.

Vocabulary

nomadic (adj.), wandering without a permanent home

parfleches (n.), rawhide containers

stampede (n.), a sudden charge of scared animals

tatanka (n.), Lakota name for buffalo

wasna (n.), dried meat pounded and mixed with fat and dried fruit

Preservation of the Buffalo

In the 1800s, millions of buffalo were killed by Indians and non-Indians. Their hides were made into clothing or blankets. Their tongues were sold or traded as **delicacies**. By 1890, the buffalo was nearly extinct. Something had to be done.

The American Indians needed the buffalo. It gave them food, shelter, and clothing. Some Indians were the first to try to save the buffalo. They saw hunters shooting the animals from trains. These Indians chased the animals away from the railroads. They tried to herd them north. Their plan did not work.

In 1883, a rancher saved five buffalo calves. His name was Frederick Dupree. He found the calves along the Grand River. In fifteen years, the five calves became a herd of fifty-seven animals.

After Dupree died, James (“Scotty”) Philip bought the herd. He moved the buffalo to his ranch. His ranch was near

Fort Pierre. He built a fence around the herd. By 1914, there were four hundred buffalo on his ranch.

South Dakota bought thirty-six buffalo from Philip. The state wanted to start a herd. The animals were put in Custer State Park. Other people bought buffalo from Philip, too.

William Hornaday also wanted to save the buffalo. He worked in New York City. Hornaday came to the Great Plains. He was looking for buffalo. He wanted to take them back to the East. He was able to find only a few animals.

Hornaday worked for **preservation** of the buffalo. He started the American Bison Society. The members were **conservationists**. They raised buffalo. They sold them to parks. Fourteen buffalo came to Wind Cave National Park in South Dakota.

Now almost two hundred fifty thousand buffalo live in North America. Many are **descendants** of the buffalo that Scotty

Philip bought.

Vocabulary

conservationists (n.), people who preserve
or protect wildlife or nature

preservation (n.), keeping or protecting
from harm

descendants (n.), offspring such as children
or grandchildren

delicacies (n.), foods that are not eaten
often; treats

The Buffalo Today

Thousands of buffalo are alive today.

They are no longer **endangered**. No one needs to worry about the buffalo. It will not become extinct as long as people protect them.

There are many herds in South Dakota.

A large herd lives in Custer State Park.

About one thousand buffalo roam the park.

New calves are born in the spring. The herd grows to fifteen hundred animals then. Each fall, park workers round up the animals.

They **vaccinate** them. Then extra buffalo are sold to ranches or parks.

Buffalo live on the grasslands at Badlands National Park. They are also at Wind Cave National Park. Each park has over three hundred buffalo.

The Oglala Sioux Tribe owns over five hundred animals. They live on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. Over two thousand buffalo roam the Cheyenne River Indian Reservation. There are herds on

other South Dakota reservations, too.

People also raise buffalo as a business.

The Triple U is a famous buffalo ranch. It is northwest of Fort Pierre. There are about three thousand buffalo there. This herd was in the movie *Dances with Wolves*.

Buffalo are raised mostly for food. The meat looks and tastes like beef. It is low in fat. It is good for people.

The buffalo is important to the United States. Four states use the buffalo on their flag or state seal. It is also on stamps and money. Sports teams use the buffalo for their name. It shows off their strength.

In South Dakota, many places are named after the buffalo. There is Buffalo County and the towns of Buffalo, Buffalo Gap, and Bison. Buffalo Lakes is named in honor of the buffalo. Many creeks, hills, and streets are also named for the buffalo.

Vocabulary

endangered (adj.), threatened with becoming extinct

vaccinate (v.), to give shots to protect from
disease