# Bison Conservation

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Midwest Region

## A Vision for 21st Century Bison Conservation in the Midwest Region

### The American Bison (*Bison bison*) is one of the preeminent wildlife species in North America and a Great Plains icon.

Native peoples in North America have long had a close relationship with bison, relying on them for food, clothing, tools, and shelter, until bison were nearly driven to extinction after European settlement. Although their status has improved, bison still face conservation challenges and are no longer the ecological force they once were on the landscape.

Today bison are unique in American culture because they are considered both as wildlife, in conservation herds on public lands, and as livestock, in the growing number of commercial herds. This dichotomy is actually a logical and healthy restoration of the traditional link between people and the animal, and meshing these two purposes is key to restoring bison as an ecological force in North America. National park herds continue to play a pivotal role in the expansion of bison across the landscape.

**Bison conservation in the Midwest Region of the National Park Service dates back 100 years.**

Four Midwest parks currently support bison—Badlands, Theodore Roosevelt, and Wind Cave National Parks, and Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve.

The oldest herd in the Midwest Region was established in 1913 at Wind Cave. In 2009, that park provided animals to the newest herd at Tallgrass Prairie. Badlands, Theodore Roosevelt, and Wind Cave support some of the largest (400-700) brucellosis-free and genetically healthy herds left in the world.

These three parks have provided nearly 9,000 live bison to at least 50 American Indian tribes, 8 state parks and zoos, as well as a handful of federal and non-profit conservation herds. In all, bison from these parks have gone to 19 states and Mexico, and many more have established new bison herds. These animals have helped the total number of bison in North America climb from 100,000 to over 500,000 in the last twenty years. By any measurement, Midwest Region parks have played a pivotal role in bison restoration in North America.

**The 2008 Department of the Interior Bison Conservation Initiative and the 2011 National Park Service initiative, *A Call to Action*, reaffirmed what the Midwest Region has been doing for decades and raises bison restoration to a major national conservation issue.**

The Conservation Initiative sets a target of 1,000 animals for department herds in order to preserve long term genetic integrity. *A Call to Action* established a goal of three new bison herds within the National Park Service by 2016. The Midwest Region parks offer the best opportunities within the agency for achieving these goals. But these parks are looking at opportunities for bison restoration far beyond the relatively modest goals of these two documents.

**Restoring bison in significant numbers that will return them as an ecological force on the Great Plains will require the National Park Service to look beyond traditional wildlife management practices and existing park boundaries.**

## A Vision for Bison in the Midwest Region

*In the 21st century, parks of the Midwest Region will collaborate with partners and stakeholders to conserve the genetic integrity of bison, manage bison as wildlife with minimal intervention by managers, and expand bison herds across land ownership boundaries, so that bison will once again be an ecological force on the Great Plains.*

## Bison In Your National Parks

### Badlands National Park

Badlands National Park is currently pursuing land acquisitions and an exchange with the US Forest Service and a private land owner which would allow the park to expand bison range in the North Unit to meet the 1,000 animal DOI Bison Conservation Initiative goal.

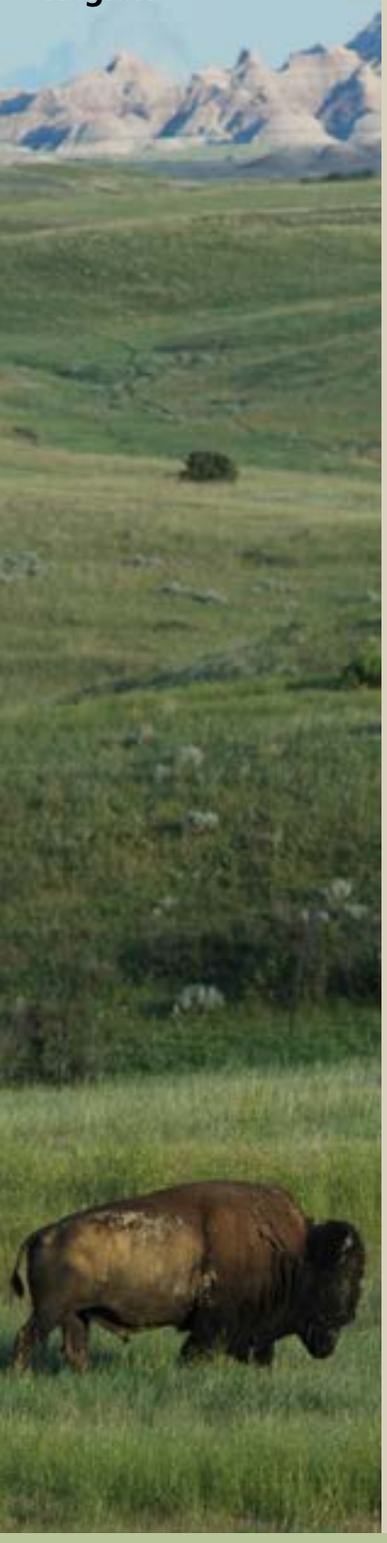
The park's South Unit, located on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, is planned to become the nations' first Tribal National Park. The Midwest Region is working with the Tribe to reintroduce bison to the South Unit and other tribal lands in order to establish another conservation herd of 1,000 animals.

### Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve

After an absence of 150 years bison were reintroduced to Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve in the fall of 2009. The herd originated with 13 bison from Wind Cave National Park. The Wind Cave herd was chosen as the parent herd for the preserve because of its high levels of genetic diversity, and no evidence of cattle gene introgression.

Bison at Tallgrass Prairie are part of a unique and innovative public-private partnership. The animals are owned by The Nature Conservancy, the primary landowner within the park's boundary, and are co-managed by both the National Park Service and the Nature Conservancy.

## Ten Principles of Bison Conservation and Restoration in the Midwest Region



To advance the 21st Century Vision, the parks in the Midwest Region are committed to these 10 principles:

**1) Within the Parks, Bison are Wildlife.**
The parks will continue to manage bison as wildlife to the extent possible within legal, political, and ecological constraints imposed on managers. Whenever feasible, parks will avoid actions such as supplemental feeding, vaccinating, and branding that add to domestication of bison. The herds will continue to be managed as conservation herds emphasizing natural demographics, population structure, and behavior to the extent possible.

**2) Midwest Region Bison are Unique.**
The bison herds in the Midwest Region have a unique and irreplaceable history and lineages. The parks will not introduce or mix bison with these herds unless there is a compelling science-based reason to do so and only if such mixing or introduction will aid in enhancing their genetic health or conservation of the herds.

**3) Science-based Management is Essential.**
The parks will use the best available science to manage bison and conserve the genetic integrity and diversity of the herds. When there is significant scientific doubt regarding an action the parks will use the "precautionary principle." This science based approach will guide agency actions within the parks as well as in collaborating with our partners throughout North America.

**4) Adaptive Management Will be Utilized.**
The parks will incorporate the principles of scientifically-based adaptive management to continually develop, test, and refine bison management. Research and monitoring will be conducted to improve management and in a way that complies with these 10 principles.

**5) Capture Operations are a Necessity.**
The parks recognize that, because of boundary fences and the absence of top-level predators, continued bison capture and herd reduction operations—tailored to individual park situations—are necessary for sustaining healthy bison herds and ecosystems. Such operations support tribes and other partners in advancing bison restoration throughout North America and require cooperative partnerships for success.

**6) Humane and Ethical Treatment is the Foundation.**
The parks will continue to incorporate best management practices for humane, ethical, minimally invasive, low stress, and aesthetically benign practices in all bison management activities, and will comply with all relevant laws and policies regarding such treatments.

**7) Integrity of the Species Throughout Its Range Must Be Maintained.**
Recognizing that large scale bison restoration in the Great Plains can best be accomplished by collaboration with commercial bison herds, the parks will support bison producers with a common goal to maintain genetic integrity, avoid "grain finishing" and selective breeding, and use field slaughter techniques so that bison are kept "bison" and not managed as cattle.

**8) Partnerships Will Be Formed Across Boundaries.**
The parks recognize that restoring bison in significant numbers in North America will require strengthening existing partnerships and building new relationships individually and regionally, including partnerships for land acquisition and cooperative management to advance bison conservation and restoration across the landscape.

**9) Leadership, Communication, and Collaboration are Essential for Success.**
The parks and regional office will establish a Midwest Region Bison Leadership Team to facilitate effective communication and collaboration among the parks, other regions, the national office, other agencies, partners, and the public for bison conservation.

**10) The Public Will Be Engaged.**
The parks will support broad-scale bison restoration by educating the public about the importance of bison to native prairie ecosystems, the value of conservation and commercial herds, and the potential for bison as a healthy food alternative.

## Bison In Your National Parks

### Theodore Roosevelt National Park

Re-introduced to Theodore Roosevelt National Park in 1956, bison share the rugged Little Missouri River Badlands with several other successfully reintroduced components of the park ecosystem including elk, bighorn sheep, and pronghorn. Similar to substantial elk and feral horse populations in the park, bison numbers are maintained conservatively low to allow for sufficient forage for all species in drought years and to provide maximum vegetative diversity that in turn promotes wildlife diversity.

### Wind Cave National Park

In 2011, Wind Cave National Park added 5,556 acres. Rough estimates of the forage on the new property indicate that an additional 100 – 150 bison could be added to the existing park herd.

In the past few years the park has been working with managers at The Nature Conservancy preserves, in Kansas, South Dakota, Iowa, and Missouri to create satellite herds with only Wind Cave bison. This strategy effectively expands the size of the park bison herd and creates a safety net for the park in the event a disaster occurs that would cause the loss of the park herd.