Rematriation

It’s kind of hard to imagine it now when you drive across the Great Plains, but 60 million animals used to migrate across North and Central America. I find it easiest to imagine at night, sleeping under the stars as they grunted and muttered all around you for hundreds of miles. It took weeks for herds to pass by. The American Bison was once one of the largest free roaming herds on earth. Maybe that sounds like they’d leave behind a devastated landscape – but in fact, in their wake they left the soil richer and the land blossomed. Thanks to their aerating hooves and nutrient rich poop and pee, and useful fur, they attracted a huge diversity of life – microbes, bugs, birds, rodents, predators. But now imagine the sudden silence of the prairie at night without the herds passing by.

In three years alone – between 1872 and 1874, five and a half million bison were killed by the U.S. army. The decimation of these great herds as a tactic to halt the Plains Indians war parties brought a sharp end to this ecological fecundity. Now, that diversity is greatly diminished. And

that's why many Plains tribes want to see bison come back - not as crossbred livestock – but as a true wild migrating mammal.

To do that, there'd need to be an evolution in the way we interact with the natural world, Yufna Soldier Wolf says. You remember Yufna from our last episode? The gal who went toe-to-toe with the U.S. army to bring home the remains of her ancestors and rebury them the proper way? Well, Yufna, she didn't stop there. These days, she works as the Indigenous Conservation Advocate for the Wyoming Outdoor Council and is making sure her community is at the table in decisions about land and water and wildlife.

Rematriation

"Reciprocity is huge for tribes. So when you treat the land and Mother Earth the way that it's been treated throughout, what, for 500 years? It's obviously going to turn out the way it has. We're at a 30-by-30 climate change place where there's no going back. We've hit the industrial mark of ruining all of our water and air," Yufna says. What's she's referring to there is an international goal to protect 30 percent of the Earth's land and water by 2030. And because Yufna is Yufna, she won't stand by and let that goal fall to pieces. She's part of a growing movement in Indian Country that is often referred to as *rematriation*. You heard that right, not repatriation. That's a word we heard a lot about last episode in reference to returning artifacts and the remains of their ancestors to tribes. The dictionary definition of repatriation is the return of someone or something to their own country of origin. So what is *rematriation*? It's a nuanced idea so I'll let Yufna do the honors.

Melodie interviewing Yufna at the Wyoming Outdoor Council office.

CREDIT: Ana Castro

“The definition of *rematriation* comes from the idea of not a patriarchal system telling you how any of our ideas should be westernized, because as traditional people, we have our own teachings and it's called Traditional Ecological Knowledge. That traditional knowledge has been here for 1000s and 1000s and 1000s of years. That teaching of ecological knowledge has always been ingrained in Indigenous people. What does it look like if we were to do traditional healing, traditional repatriation, bringing back the things that we want as not just men, but women and two-spirit people?” she says.

Yufna says *rematriation* is a return to a more reciprocal relationship with nature. “You cannot be a part of the environment if you don't have women. And that's that connection that we've lost in society, and we disempower women in our environment so much that it's that patriarchal system. You see that every day, when we take and we take and we take something that doesn't belong to you. And that's that patriarchal system of taking minerals, natural resources, things

from the land that aren't supposed to be taken. And so an analogy, that's the same way Western men treat Western women in that colonial system," she says.

Once again, it's about healing a bloody history of exploitation built on ideas of ownership and power. *Rematriation* would turn that system on its head. But Yufna says that means environmentalists, politicians, corporate decision makers, they need to take a dose of humility and learn to listen. "When you talk about the plants, the water, the star knowledge, the stories, you know, all of these connections, that value comes from that matriarchal system. And so *rematriation* is huge when you're talking about conservation. I wish in like five years, I hope it's not being called conservation, or I hope conservationists realize that they need to let Indigenous people lead because they are the key to making sure that the environment is back in balance," Yufna says.

The Winter Party

I personally get to witness a project where women and gender nonconforming Native leaders are very much at the wheel. I take a trip in the middle of winter with my photographer Ana Castro to far northern Montana. It's there that we see over a hundred wild bison set free onto the high prairie of the Fort Peck Reservation. It's an unlikely spot for a winter party. On the high plains outside Wolf Point in the extreme northeast corner of Montana, people gather around a large quonset hut full of tractors, a couple industrial-looking trailers and a big corral. In every direction, blinding white snow blankets rolling hills. Bison skulls hang on the gates. Little girls in

pink snowsuits run around. Teenage boys start building fires. The question right this minute though, is where to put the fire grates.

A bison skull on the quarantine facility gate at Fort Peck.

CREDIT: Ana Castro

“Hey! All the fires were supposed to be over here and not over there. We're out not supposed to light them till after the buffalo are in the corral. Bring them over here so we can get this one started.” That’s Jonny Bear Cub Stiff Arm, an older lady with a stylish salt and pepper haircut and a long colorful coat covered in geometric shapes. She’s an enrolled member of the Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux tribes. And Jonny’s running this show. “Poor guys, got so many bosses. Everyone's telling them something different,” says Jonny.

Jonny and I find a place to sit in the sun on plastic chairs inside the open door of the quonset and she fills me in on today's plan. "There's going to be two deliveries. The first delivery is going to be 30 cow/calf pairs. And there's going to be, I believe, seven bulls coming from Yellowstone Park. And they will be arriving later this evening. And then on Thursday, there'll be another group arriving. So altogether, there should be about maybe 60 or 70 in each group, so maybe about 120 to 140," she says. The animals that are on trucks headed our way are not the kind of bison that you see grazing behind fences across the West, identical to the wild version to the naked eye but grazing placidly behind fences that wild bison would tear to pieces. These are genetically pure bison descended from those enormous herds that once roamed the continent, never interbred with cattle. Their instinct to roam is still very much intact. And so when this year's brutal snows came along, large numbers of bison started leaving Yellowstone. Thing is, any bison that migrates out of Yellowstone is required to be killed. Or they used to be until the Fort Peck tribes created a quarantine program to rescue them. "They go through two phases of quarantine at Yellowstone Park. And once they have finished those two phases, they come to the Fort Peck tribes for their last and final phase. We keep them for a year. They arrive after they have been tested down in Yellowstone before they're loaded into the semis to bring up here. And then we keep them for six months, and we test them. And then we keep them another six months, and then we test them again. If all of their tests turn out to be negative, then we get them prepared and ready to be transferred to either other tribes – federally recognized tribes who want them and have the facilities and the ability to care for them – or we'll send them to other conservation herds," Jonny says.

Jonny Bear Cub Stiff Arm organizes the Pté volunteer group that's throwing this party for the release of the bison.

CREDIT: Ana Castro

Jonny is a semi-retired corporate executive working for an employee-owned company called Native that sets up carbon offsets. But these days, she's also involved with a volunteer group that works to educate the public about the cultural value of bison. They help the tribe's Fish and Game with grants and research and host events like this one. It's called the Pté group. "Pté is female buffalo in our language," Jonny says. You might be wondering why I keep calling these animals bison and Jonny calls them buffalo. That's because buffalo is the cultural name for this animal – for Indigenous people, it's a term that's endowed with much more significance than the scientific name that I'm using as a non-Native person. Jonny says that's why it was so devastating when the U.S. government killed off nearly all of them. "They provided everything for us. Robbie Magnum, our buffalo fish and game director, always says that a bison for the Indians in those days was like Walmart. It had all their household goods, it had all the food you could possibly need. The thing that wiped out the Plains Indians and put us in a position where we were almost extinct, was not only the diseases that we were not ready to deal with. But the other thing was they took away our food source, wiped out that food source, and starved us to death so we could no longer hunt buffalo,

because there were no buffalo. And it was such an integral part of our cultural and spiritual ways, that was like the final straw," she says.

And for the Plains Tribes, the pain left behind by genocide and the decimation of bison didn't go away over time. "That history is raw, it has never healed yet. I would say give it another 500 years," Jonny says. In fact, bison were reduced to such small numbers that Jonny didn't see one in person her whole childhood. "In all my life, I had never seen a live buffalo until I was in my late 20s. I'd only seen them in books or pictures. In my late 20s, I saw one at a zoo. And I always remembered I was just amazed and saddened because it was like us. They were in a cage like we were on the reservations," she says.

So in the early 2000's, the Sioux and Assiniboine tribes of Fort Peck decided to find out just how disconnected from bison they really had become. A group of war veterans got together and started asking hard questions. "You know, if we're getting these buffalo back, what are we going to do? And how do we let our people know? How do our people feel about it? And so our tribal community college, along with Montana State University, who helped them put together a survey and did a reservation-wide survey. They asked people if they had ever seen a live buffalo, they asked people if they ever had tasted buffalo meat. They asked them if they realized that the Fort Peck tribes had a herd of buffalo. And that was really a revealing survey because it indicated that there was a large percentage of our population who had no clue that we did have buffalo, they had never tasted buffalo, they did not believe they would ever have access to buffalo," Jonny says.

The survey was a catalyst. After that, the Fort Peck tribes got serious about reconnecting community members with the cultural significance of bison. This is where the Pté group got proactive. "It was at that point that we began to get together the effort of reaching out and spreading information into the community, encouraging activities to expose them to come out

here and visit the buffalo. We worked with the school teachers to help develop some type of curriculum. The tribe has passed a resolution so that every school on the reservation, including the border schools, you have an opportunity to come out and hunt a buffalo for educational purposes, and to use the meat for their fundraisers, for their clubs or to share with their community. So we do everything possible, to try to make sure that there's access," Jonny says. Like throw winter parties whenever wild Yellowstone bison are released onto the reservation. "Like at this event, you know, we'll be providing the evening meal for the truck drivers and other staff that are coming in with the buffalo. And the volunteers will make sure that we have breakfast burritos and that for them bright and early tomorrow morning when they release the animals at daybreak. So we try to make the experience as wonderful and as comfortable and as memorable as we can for those of them who are volunteering and helping us to work with our buffalo and to get them here and to get them out to other places," Jonny says.

Our time is up, Jonny needs to get back to work. The trucks loaded up with bison cows and calves are nearly here. Jonny yells to the crowd, "Well, I texted Chamois and I said, 'How far out are you? Are you on the rez yet?' She said, 'We're way past the bridge and we're about 10, 15 minutes out.' The semi, you shouldn't be able to see them coming right up here on that hill."

The teenagers now have a fire going and the little kids are roasting hot dogs and marshmallows. A mom says to her daughter, "You want a hot dog?" "Yeah, I want a hot dog. I don't want a burned up hot dog," she replies.

Sure, it's cold but the mood is festive, down right joyful. The adults stand around the fire, trying to stay warm. That's where I meet Kai Teague, the environmental science programmer for the American Indian College Fund and a member of the Pte group. Kai says the teens in the drumming group had to build the fire farther away than usual and they aren't sure if they'll be able to play the buffalo song until later because of how nervous this batch of animals seems to

be. “I think when they originally bring them in on the trucks and stuff, like we're going to be relatively quiet because Johnny was saying that this group was kind of skittish. And so I think tonight, they’ll just release them into the corral. I know in the past that when they've come up and released them, these boys have song and stuff, but I think we'll see,” Kai says.

Kai Teague is the environmental science programmer for the American Indian College Fund.

CREDIT: Ana Castro

Kai is Apache and Dakota and has a degree in sustainable agriculture. That’s why they’re here today. Wild bison, Kai says, is an example of the future of sustainability and tribal colleges are getting involved. “Nobody has curriculum around buffalo, how to manage the buffalo, how to

steward the lands where buffalo are, how to understand what the medicines around them are. This is an opportunity for them to learn with each other, develop it together. And then a lot of times what happens is one person will create it, and then another person's like, how would you do that, or they'll create it. But that's the other thing that they're looking at is, like, what are the plants and the medicines that are shared across the regions? You know, what are the effects on the water, because all those tribes are also looking at water, the health of water systems. And so it's an opportunity to look at, like, not just the buffalo, but the impact on the lands, the impact on the waters," they say.

Kai says that tribal colleges are also getting involved documenting the cultural and spiritual lessons that bison can teach. "Everybody's talking about healing and stuff like that, like, we need grounding, we need something to like ground to, to understand what strength looks like, and, and I'm not as familiar with the stories to be able to tell them, but I know that there are stories around the way that herds move. Like the children are on the inside, and a lot of times like the women are the matriarchs, and then the males, they circle around them. There's a way that they move through like snow and stuff like that, like one takes that lead and they turn towards the wind, they don't move away from challenges. So there's all these analogies in the way that they are, that we refer to that teach us how to be. And so we need that, because Western education, we thought it was going to do something for us and it eradicated our ways of knowing. And so, this is our education. This is our education right here. This is gonna show us how to learn," Kai says.

As I'm speaking with Kai, Jonny gets another text from the semi truck. The truck hauling all the bulls caught a flat tire and will be pulling in later. But the cows and calves are almost here. When Jonny talks, everyone stops to listen, even the little kids. "Okay, all of you guys. All you guys that can hear me, they're gonna be here in about five, ten minutes. When they come we have to be super, super quiet. So just stay here and be really quiet, watch from here. Wait until

they back up there and then watch until they unload. Once they get unloaded and get all of those calves into the crowds, then we can be noisy," she says.

Return of the Bison

The crowd hushes and we see the semi pull in. The Blackfeet Tribe does all the trucking for this program, another example of how collaborative this effort is. It backs up to the corral and starts releasing the cows and calves. After they're all out, two calves refuse to unload. "There's still two babies in there," says Jonny. "They can't get them out," responds a nearby woman. "They don't want to come out," says Jonny. "I can see them moving around in there," says the woman. "They'll move one way and then they'll run back to that corner again," says Jonny.

Bison cows and calves came on one truck while the bulls came in another. CREDIT: Ana Castro

The calves are still a little rust colored and fuzzy. Jonny and Kai stand at the fence, watching and talking quietly. "Oh, they're just so cute, those babies," says Jonny. "Seems like they're all okay, huh?" says Kai. "All good, nothing broken, nothing hurt," says Jonny.

Not long after, the second truck arrives with the bulls and releases them into the corral, too. Once the families have reunited, they'll all be released onto the

reservation's pastures. We'll come back to see that at daybreak tomorrow. In the meantime, Jonny says it's okay to celebrate. "She can whoop-dee-doo," says a woman. "She can whoop-dee-doo all she wants," says Jonny. "Grandma says she can whoop-dee-doo all she wants," says the woman. "Grandma gives the clear green light," says Jonny with a laugh.

The parents help the little kids climb the fence so they can see the baby bison. "Should I try to lift you up? Or you want to wait…" says a mother to her daughter. "If you want that s'more, you'll climb up there. Yeah! I'm not holding you up. There you go, good," she says. "I can't get up," says the child. "You're gonna have to try. Ready? Come on. 123. Come on," says the mother. "See the babies? Welcome home," says the child's father. "Welcome home! Welcome home! Welcome home!" says the girl.

The children at the bison release have interacted with animals their whole life – unlike Jonny who didn't see one until she was in her late 20's.

CREDIT: Ana Castro

Standing at the fence, I meet one of the teenage drummers, JonJon Williams. Unlike Jonny, JonJon has spent his whole life watching his tribe's wild bison herd grow in numbers on his reservation. "Makes me feel very happy in a way, I guess. Yeah, seeing the buffalo coming around and stuff like that. Like the fact that it's really an honor to see them come. And yeah, it's just a very spiritual moment, I guess, yeah," says JonJon.

Fort Peck tribal member Suzanne Turnbull stands with her elbows over the fence. Suzanne is also an active member of Pté. "That's the identity for our tribe is our buffalo. So they are our relatives. I always cry when they come. It's always really emotional when they come home. Because I believe that's going to heal our people. I really believe it. My granddaughter is here today. And she's been coming out here since she's been a baby to see," says Suzanne. "She's one of these little ones here," Melodie asks. "Yeah, she's one of my little ones," Suzanne responds. Suzanne says without the Pté group, the bison program wouldn't be as sustainable. "Well, we speak for them. And we pull together all the parties that are interested in their health and cultural language. Actually, we are actually more stable than our tribal government because it turns over every two years with elections. So our Pté group has been together since 2014. So we've seen a lot of buffalo come and go," she says.

The Assiniboine and Sioux tribes have built an $800,000 dollar facility here so that they can serve as a clearinghouse to find homes with other tribes for rescued wild Yellowstone bison. Suzanne says they do this because they're returning the favor that the bison did for them. She tells the story from a viewpoint we don't hear much in history or science books, the bison's. "When the railroad came, and they wanted to just outright slaughter buffalo, for their hides and for their whatever part of them, that was a federal Indian policy to force the Sioux people onto reservations, who didn't want to go to live that lifestyle, because they were already starving on reservations with rations. But a small group of they say approximately 25 took themselves into the Yellowstone Park to save themselves. So they knew they were on the brink of

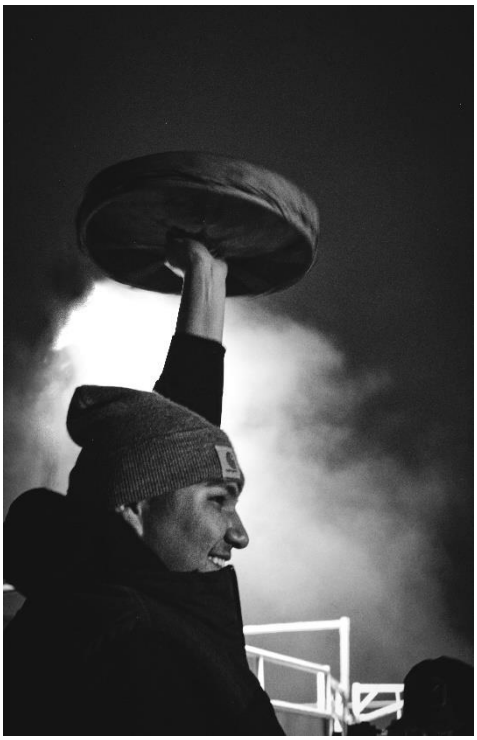
extermination. And we were fighting for our way of life as well. Our language, our cultural practices, our kinship, our families were destroyed and broken apart because of federal Indian policy and education policies. So there is intergenerational trauma. But I see the buffalo coming back to help us heal. So they took care of us. I wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for the survival of my ancestors, all that they went through because of our buffalo, and so now it's our turn to take care of them and protect them," Suzanne says.

One of the bulls refused to get off the truck so the drummers played a song to soothe him.

CREDIT: Ana Castro

Suzanne says she loves seeing the moms and babies released into the corral to roam around looking for each other. “It was just beautiful to hear them all start rumbling and talking when the other females came in that stock trailer. They all knew, it was just amazing. They just knew. So I've seen them out here, lead their little family groups off and I've come out to watch them when they're bright orange when they're first born. I've come out during that season at night and listen to them all. They're beautiful. I come out and get sheds in the summer, because they'll bring visitors out and their hide has no odor. They're the cleanest animals, buffalo. And we've cleaned their guts. We've cleaned their guts, and we like our *tanika*. That's in Dakota, we like our *tanika,* and that's the intestines and we've cleaned it and it just doesn't have an odor like cattle. Cattle have a really tough odor. But they're very particular about where they eat, they move on. You'd never know because they don't graze down to nothing,” she says.

Jonny told me that several prophecies have foretold that the bison would return and revitalize the Plains Tribes. Suzanne agrees. She believes that’s what we’re witnessing right now. “It's time now for us to regain what made our tribes so bountiful and plentiful at one time. And this is to me, this is the way back. And they do have that healing energy, their healing energy when they have that buffalo song those young men will sing. And they were little boys here in 2014.



And now they're, one is in college, they're in high school. And here they are still here singing that beautiful buffalo song to welcome them home. Oh, there it comes, there we go,” she says.

The drumming group plays buffalo songs

CREDIT: Ana Castro

Suzanne and I head over to the campfire where JonJon and the other drummers are playing the buffalo song. One of the bulls still won't come off the truck and they're playing a song to calm him down. "They're singing buffalo songs. What they just were saying was the buffalo come out dancing, the buffalo nation. So it's kind of comforting the buffalo right now, to get him to come off the trailer," says Reamy Growing Thunder. She's the Language and Cultural Director for the Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes of Fort Peck and some of the drummers are her sons. She's bundled up in a colorful coat and hat but her generous smile isn't covered up. It shines in the firelight. She says it's her job to help her tribe remember how interconnected they are with bison, even their nutrition. "It's good for our older grandmas and grandpas that are maybe diabetic, it brings down the blood sugar. It's really good blood thinner, and it's just really healthy to eat. Because you think about it, they graze off of the land, Mother Earth, we're close to her. And what the buffalo ingest, we ingest it in and in turn how our systems helps us sustain ourselves a little longer," says Reamy.

Reamy Growing Thunder has a dream of starting a place-based school in which children learn to care for bison.

CREDIT: Ana Castro

Reamy says they’re not waiting for children to come to the bison. They take the bison to the children. “We've actually created curriculum material, where we take the buffalo and we name every part of the buffalo and what it's used for, and we put it in our language, our Dakota and Nakota language. And then we have this really cool buffalo box. We labeled every part in that box in the language. So we're not only reconnecting the children to the buffalo, and the significance there, but also to the language,” she says.

Reamy has dreams of going even farther with this curriculum. “My long term goal is to create a tribal school. And within this tribal school, have it at an area, a facility that can house some buffalo so that our youth, our students can go to these buffalo and learn how to take care of them and to have that connection with them every day and to pray with them. And also, just to hold reverence with them, to reconnect truly instead of hearing about it and not really looking at the buffalo themselves versus like just from a book. There's a big difference. It's placed-based learning,” she says.

And it’s this kind of creative approach to education that might begin healing the long history of boarding schools. It’s plum dark now, the photographers turn off their flood lights and the campfires are the only light around for miles. As the party dies down, I wander over to the corral and listen to the bison snuffling and grunting to their young. It feels so important, what the Fort Peck Tribes are doing here. But tribes across the nation are focusing on more than just bison. They’re making sure they’re at the table in heated discussions about how to allocate the Colorado River, bringing back the endangered black footed ferret, figuring out how to manage grizzly bears, wolves, and lots of other issues. Almost any environmental or wildlife issue these days has tribes getting involved. You might remember that Yufna called this sharing Traditional Ecological Knowledge.

Owning the Table

That's actually a very technical term. And the Biden administration recently committed to including more of that knowledge in its natural resources decision making going forward. It's helped a lot that U.S. Interior Secretary Deb Haaland is a member of the Laguna Pueblo. Here's how she phrased it: "In this time of climate change bearing down upon us Indigenous knowledge about our natural world will be extremely valuable to all us, not just the Department of the Interior. Indian tribes have been on this continent for millenia, tens of thousands of years. They know how to take care of the land," Secretary Haaland says.

I talk to Kai, the environmental steward with the American Indian College Fund, a lot about all this over the phone when I get home. They tell me this work is very personal to them. They're working to regenerate their grandmother's land on Fort Peck piece by piece, planting native grasses and trees and growing a garden. Already they've seen more wildlife returning. "One day, I was standing outside and I remember thinking like, what can I do? Like, what can I do in my life? What can I give back? And I think sometimes restoration or participation in supporting stewardship of your lands can seem really unrealistic, it can seem really hard. And, and I was like, well, I'll start with one small area, and I'll see how it goes. And then I'll go to the next area and see how that goes. And then when you add it up over 10 years of time, I can restore our family's land," they say.

Kai started attending the Native American Church with their son's grandfather and, through ceremony, has been learning a new way to connect with the natural world in which every species is a relative. "I've been taught that we ask for things. If we want something from someone, we go, and we give them something, and we ask them, and they can still tell us no, and that's not going to change that we give them a gift. We do the same thing when we harvest. Whether we're handling the soil, or we're harvesting carrots, or turnips or buffalo, you know, or

we're managing something with fire, we're taking care of fire in our ceremonies. Like we talked to them, we talked to those things like those are our relatives," they say.

This approach to interacting with nature is very different from a scientific one. And Kai says that as someone working for tribal colleges, that's been a challenge. "We have to acknowledge that education was not created as a healing space. Education was created to create a labor force primarily for people of color. And it was a space of assimilation. And educational spaces and especially in the sciences, right, oftentimes, Indigenous peoples' knowledges have been disregarded as myths. And I think that tribal colleges, when there isn't space made in any college in any educational institution, when there isn't space made to have an honest conversation about that, it continues to push people of color and Indigenous people away from those fields, from science fields, from education in general. Because it kind of puts the blame on the victim, right? Like, you're not good enough, you're not smart enough, when really it's like, the system did this," Kai says.

Kai saw many young people start to recognize this problem when they attended the Dakota Access Pipeline protests at Standing Rock Reservation in 2016 and joined the efforts of the water protectors. "I think Standing Rock showed a lot of us what was possible. Like, in my generation, I've never seen anything like that. I've never seen tribes come together like that. And I'm sure that there's a million different reasons that people have for going there. But like, I was able to go there once. People were setting up schools, they were setting up language schools and in schools about medicines and they were just creating it all themselves. They had governance, they had means of protecting one another," they say. Kai says part of this growing movement means more room for a feminine perspective. "There is a very intentional intersection, in terms of violence against women, LGBTQ two spirit, people, and land. And so when I think about *rematriation*, like I think about giving back and taking back and, and like remembering the power of women, the power two spirit people, the power of the land, and

removing that patriarchal that patronizing voice, and narrative, and all the things that come with it, that has been laid down on top of it," they say.

The Fort Peck Reservation in wintertime

CREDIT: Ana Castro

Every square inch of this nation once belonged to Indigenous peoples, although many tribes didn't adhere to concepts of property ownership. Throughout this story I've talked about how Native Americans are finding a place at the table to share their traditional ecological knowledge. But Kai takes issue with that analogy. "I mean, I think the table should be ours. Like, I think the table should be ours. And I think that we should be able to invite people. We are constantly trying to figure out how to fit in that shape, or that structure, or to fix or repair this shape, or structure. It's like an architect attempting to build a house or to repair a house whose foundation

is a sandbank. Because there has still yet to be an acknowledgement that that table is built upon colonization and assimilation and genocide and appropriation. There's still nowhere in a conversation, like a larger collective conversation in this nation, an acknowledgement that that table was built on the backs of others," Kai says.

Talking to Indigenous leaders and thinkers, over and over, I've had people ask me to imagine. To imagine what it was like to experience a massacre or to have your children taken or to have a family member murdered. So maybe more than anything, my job here is to pass along that request. To imagine what it would look like for Indigenous nations to own the table where we sit down to discuss how to care for land and water and animals. Standing at the corral in the dark listening to the bison families reuniting, it felt like I was already at such a table.

The Buffalo Treaty

The next morning, we get up before dawn and drive out to see the bison officially set free on the prairie. It's bitterly cold and a dense fog makes a blur of the landscape. While we wait, I get to talking to the Fort Peck Reservation's game and fish guy, Les Bighorn. He tells me that in six months, they'll round all the animals back up for another round of brucellosis testing. "We bring them in here. A vet from APHIS comes and Doc Warner, our vet, comes. And then we run them into this big silver thing here. But then we have everybody has a position and we put them in there and one at a time. When you do that squeeze chute stops, it squeezes them. And he lifts their tail, takes blood and does whatever he has to do, then releases them. And wait for six months, and then do it again, six months, and then we get them in. And once we get at the one year mark, and we get the okay, everything's good, round them back up," Les says. That's when their quarantine in Fort Peck's facility is over and other tribes can adopt them.

Les Bighorn is the Fort Peck Reservation’s game and fish warden.

CREDIT: Ana Castro

The first time they adopted out bison it was to the Bronx zoo. The craziest adoption they ever did was to a tribe on an island in Alaska. “They made special containers for them. We had their three big bulls. And we got them in here, we loaded down their special container on the semi, the Blackfeet tribe’s trucking company to come from here and they went all the way to Seattle. We got to Seattle, then they loaded up on the big old FedEx plane, loaded them up in there and they flew into Anchorage. Then from Anchorage to get to the island where the tribe was, they had to get on the ferry. So they got a boat ride across. They released them on there with all their others, their herd. What this does, a lot of this does is just the genetics. See, we send the bulls, people want bulls because they already have herds but you're going to keep your bulls so much so you don't want to get inbreeding, just like cattle,” Les says. All this quarantining and testing of

these animals, it makes it seem like they're riddled with disease. What they're testing for specifically is brucellosis, a bacterial infection that causes cows to abort their calves. So I ask Les, "do you guys ever when you're testing, do you ever find anything? Is there ever any disease?" "No, no, they have to stay down there two years, so that you know that they're tested more than twice a year? Not first two years, phase one and phase two. It sounds like they're testing you know, constantly. Yeah," he says. "And even down there, do they find anything?" I ask. "No, no," Les says.

And yet, Jonny told me there's a lot of pushback from Montana lawmakers about the Fort Peck quarantine program. The local ranchers are concerned that wild bison will spread brucellosis. That's why Yellowstone bison are required to be killed as soon as they migrate out of the park. If you've seen that latest season of the TV show, Yellowstone – spoiler alert – the ranch decides to move their entire cattle herd to Texas because wild bison migrate onto their ranch, leaving behind dead bison calves. But Jonny and Les both say this isn't an accurate depiction. "What I understand from the science and from the history and the record keeping is that it is an elk that are bringing the brucellosis to the cattle and not the buffalo because as far as we know, there is no record of a buffalo passing brucellosis to pregnant cows. But there are records of elk doing that," says Jonny.

Yet elk are allowed to migrate as a wild animal while bison are not. Even Yellowstone National Park Superintendent Cam Sholly recognized this contradiction. In a recent New York Times article he said "It's hard to claim bison are presenting an imminent threat to livestock while thousands of brucellosis-infected elk are literally side-by-side with livestock … and there is no strategy to manage *that* interface." And anyway, as a rancher friend of mine pointed out recently, there's already a vaccine for brucellosis that protects cattle. Jonny says underneath all the accusations about bison spreading brucellosis is really a fear of what she calls rewilding the prairie, that there will be less farm and ranch land if bison are allowed to be wild again. And

there’s another reason, "I will say I believe the conflicts will always be there. Mostly because of racism. I think there's a thing such as white guilt. And no matter how you couch the language for certain things, that will always rub someone the wrong way. And they will have a reaction against that that is negative. And so I think the conflict will always exist there,” Jonny says. In other words, there’s a knee jerk reaction to defend the history of colonization, a painful guilt for that history that we as a nation can’t face and so instead we double down on our reasons for decisions like annihilating bison as a species. But Jonny and Les both say that tribes are moving forward anyway. Les says these days, lots of tribes are signing onto a buffalo treaty.

“We all got together, we had our second one here, we had tepees and all the tribes came and they signed documentation and paper, like a constitution that we all try to work with to bring the buffalo back to our lands.” Les says. 29 tribes in the U.S. and Canada have now signed the buffalo treaty and committed to, “welcome buffalo to once again live among us as Creator intended by doing everything within our means so we and buffalo will once again live together to nurture each other culturally and spiritually.” Les says they’re working to adopt out wild bison to Canadian tribes as well. “But the red tape to get them across the border is what kind of holding things up. But the red tape is getting less and less,” says Les.

And Jonny says they’re in the beginning stages of creating short migration corridors too. She says the Blackfeet have been working to create one with their allies across the Canadian border. And she wonders, “will there be a potential for a corridor between northeastern Montana and the Saskatchewan area? I don't know. No one can really know, there's a lot of legalities involved in it. You know, I would like to see, at least within my lifetime, our tribe, and other tribes similar to ours, to designate these buffalo pasture areas, as tribal parks and sanctuaries for the animals and the plants. I think that's the first step.”

The bison are released into the wide open pastures on a cold, foggy morning.

CREDIT: Ana Castro

Les and the other animal handlers head off to release the bison out of the corral. The children climb the fence and we all line up to watch. The fog still hasn't lifted and when the gate opens, the animals gallop out into the pasture and disappear almost instantly. It feels almost anticlimactic. Where do they go? What do they do next? We don't know. Since I visited Fort Peck, the winter only got harsher, making it hard for the animals to get down through the deep snow to graze. So Yellowstone's bison started migrating out of the park in search of food, and that meant they were required to be killed. Normally about six to nine hundred bison end up getting taken by hunters from eight approved tribes each year. But this year, many more bison left the park than usual, leading to a huge hunt that took almost 12-hundred animals. When I read about this in the newspaper, I remembered standing at that corral at night with the lucky ones, the bison that the Fort Peck tribes rescued from slaughter. And I like to think of them now, out there roaming the prairie, wild and free.

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