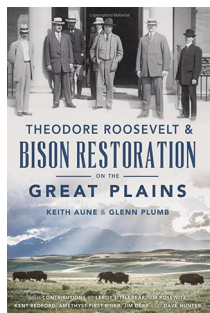


Hope is still a bison



Theodore Roosevelt & Bison Restoration on the Great Plains

By Keith Aune and Glenn Plumb

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The opening chapter of Keith Aune and Glenn Plumb's *Theodore Roosevelt & Bison Restoration on the Great Plains* states: "The plight of the American bison at the close of the nineteenth century was a shameful story in American history and became the catalyst for a new view of the natural world." Anyone familiar with American conservation history knows the story; tens of millions of bison roamed the prairies for centuries, contributing to the ecological health of the prairies and the subsistence needs and cultural identities of numerous American-Indian tribes, until white American greed, manifest destiny and government-sponsored subjugation of American Indians left fewer than 1,000 bison by 1900. Since then, federal legislation, non-profit conservation groups, tribal communities and conservation biologists have worked to re-establish wild bison herds and protect the species from extinction. Today, nearly 13,000 bison exist in conservation herds spread across 13 states and their future is cautiously optimistic. *Bison Restoration* tells the story of the bison, from their emergence as a unique species in Europe, to their near-destruction and the struggle to avoid extinction in the mid-nineteenth century, and their re-emergence as a conservation icon and symbol of hope.

Bison Restoration comes on the heels of Aune and Plumb's 2016 *Conservation Biology* editorial with Kent H. Redford titled 'Hope is a bison'. Indeed, a reader familiar with that piece will notice a few common turns of phrase in the book. The editorial focused on embracing hope in the field of conservation generally, using the bison's story as a central theme. *Bison Restoration* is both more expansive, considering the entirety of the species' history and future, and more focused, considering only actors and events relevant to the bison, and not the field of conservation as a whole. Both texts speak powerfully of bison as an inspirational story of hope and contribute

to a broader conservation perspective of ecological restoration, not just the protection of individual species. Each quarter, in my introductory biology class, I read 'Hope is a bison' to my students at the end of my conservation lecture and it consistently moves me to tears. Consequently, I had extremely high expectations for *Bison Restoration* and Aune and Plumb far exceeded them.

There is an emerging genre of books that seeks to explain the history of a nation, or even the world, around a single factor, frequently forcing factual events to fit the perceived influence of their narrative (for an example, see the [review](#) of *Origins: How the Earth Made Us* by Ryan Scarrow). *Bison Restoration* successfully circumvents this paradigm, drawing a compelling narrative that illustrates bison at the nexus of technological, cultural and biological factors, and avoids the deterministic pitfalls of many books of this genre. Instead, the authors clearly articulate the choices made by western American culture that led to the decimation of bison and the subjugation of native peoples who rely on them. *Bison Restoration* makes it clear that the near-extinction of bison was in every way avoidable and occurred entirely due to white American arrogance, ignorance and greed.

One of the most powerful aspects of *Bison Restoration* is the natural way the authors meld together seemingly disparate stories. Historical narratives are interwoven with individuals' personal connections to bison, scientific considerations such as genetic impacts of population bottlenecks, and even profiles of individual influential bison. Aune and Plumb contributed the bulk of the writing, but sections from six other authors are interspersed, providing a variety of perspectives and styles, including the role of women in bison conservation throughout history, the relationship between bison and the Blackfoot tribe (written by Blackfoot authors), and the titular Roosevelt's multi-faceted role in bison conservation, bison hunting, and assimilation and subjugation of American Indians. This variety not only illustrates the complexity of the bison's story by giving voice to the varied actors involved in their protection (including the bison themselves), but also engages a wide audience from general readers, to historians, conservation biologists and legislators. It would be easy for the bison's story to be told as one of loss and failure; however, the language throughout *Bison Restoration* is hopeful and forward-thinking; each author clearly speaks

from the heart and looks towards a future in which scientists, legislators and tribal leaders work together to re-establish bison in their role as powerful ecological and cultural actors.

There is only one criticism I can make of the book, and that is its title. The entire text considers the variety of people from numerous cultures, numerous time periods and numerous fields of study working towards a common goal of protection and restoration of the bison. The authors state that "no single person can be given credit for saving bison" (p. 132) and yet Theodore Roosevelt is included in the title and referred to as the "savior of American bison" (p. 52). *Bison Restoration* paints a powerful picture of the multiple communities of people that have fought together and separately for bison for over 150 years, a picture that is marred by the inclusion of a single name in the title. Roosevelt was certainly an influential actor in the bison's story and in American environmentalism, carrying the weight of the presidency behind his powerful charisma; however, even as president he could not act alone to protect nature. Indeed, the book highlights numerous other actors who influenced Roosevelt's conservation perspective and supported (or undermined) his environmental legislation, as well as other American politicians who attempted bison conservation measures as early as 1870 (more than 30 years before Roosevelt's presidency). To feature Roosevelt so prominently goes solidly against one of the foundational arguments of the book: the multi-generational, multi-ethnic, multi-purposed community that has existed around the bison and fought for their protection for centuries.

In *Theodore Roosevelt & Bison Restoration on the Great Plains*, Aune and Plumb bring the bison's saga to life and beautifully portray the bison as a keystone prairie species, a cultural touchstone and a catalyst of the American environmental movement. They plant in the reader a seed of hope; that with continued dedication and collaboration, wild free-roaming bison herds will once again cover the prairie. Hope has always been, and will forever be, a bison. □

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