

The Story of Mass Murders

Biologist Victor Scheffer once said, "Although nature needs thousands of years to create a new species, man needs only a few dozen years to destroy one." (Scheffer, 1983: NP) This quote describes the time when this image was taken in 1892.



Fig. 1. Anonymous. 1892. Rougeville

This photo conveys the mass killings of American Bison. Showing settlers of the west standing proudly on top of a massive pile of Bison remains, flaunting their horrific conquest. I chose this image to research because I feel strongly about Bison conservation, I feel it's important to confront the pain settlers in the west conflicted on the animals in the past, to realize that history is repeating itself, and to begin executing ideas that would protect the species.

“Large-scale Bison slaughter resulted from increased expansion into the West. The killing was accelerated by the demand for hides and bones on the market. Most herds were eradicated from 1850 to the late 1870s. There were between 30 and 60 million Bison on the continent toward the end of the 18th century. Only 456 wild Bison were remaining within the population at the time of this photo.” (Mamers, 2020: NP). For many species, Bison made the Prairies hospitable. Bison are a keystone species, meaning they have a significant impact on ecosystems. When one of these species goes extinct, the ecosystem shifts as a whole because no other species can take its place. The skulls in the picture symbolize not just the demise of Bison but also the upheaval of the whole ecosystem. With every Bison slaughtered, the grazing, wallowing, and migration activities that made the area habitable for other species came to an end, for instance, certain bug species can be found in Bison dung, which serves as food for bats, birds, and turtles. The wallows that Bison make as they roll in the soil are filled with spring rain and serve as habitats for frogs and tadpoles.

Bison were not only killed for their meat and hides but also for their bones, up the right edge of the photograph, there is a building in the background, the Michigan Carbon Works processing plant, which had been founded in 1873 by Deming Jarves and William Hooper. The company was founded to distill animal bones into bone black, which could be used to filter sugar, to fulfill the quick demands of a

growing sugar industry. “The Rougeville photograph is often used to illustrate the scale of bison extermination. Appearing in conservation publications, magazines, films and recent protest memes. The photograph has become an icon of this animal’s slaughter.” (Mamers, 2020: NP).

Bison are still being unfairly hunted and killed today. Indigenous hunters have been flocking to Yellowstone National Parks’ borders, particularly to the secluded location, Beattie Gulch, close to the park's northern boundary.



Fig. 2. Yellowstone Voices. 2019. Map of Beattie Gulch and Yellowstone NP border.

Yellowstone N. P’s plan for Bison management refers to tribal treaty rights. When challenged to explain which treaties and tribes have such rights, Park asserts that it’s beyond the plan’s scope to objectively show that such rights legally exist. Just because the tribes assert, that they have such rights doesn’t mean they have any legal standing to kill Yellowstone Bison. Critics point out park Bison's restricted range, claiming that the Bison are not given the same pursuit as other hunted animals, are confined in a narrow area, and express no natural fear of humans. “The killing field is across the street from my driveway entrance,” said Bonnie Lynn, the founder of Yellowstone Voices, “The area is crowded with hunters, who have taken the Bison meat and left the waste behind, with internal organs and hundreds of skeletons scattered about,” she said, “We have wolves coming to the gut piles, coyotes coming to the gut piles, mountain lions in the area, and we have bears coming out of hibernation to the gut piles.” (Robbins, Hanson, 2023: NP)

Hunters line up between the park and Beattie Gulch and wait for the Bison to migrate across the slim boundary then the killing frenzy begins. This occurs three to five weeks before the calving season so full-term pregnant Bison are killed as well as young calves being orphaned. The Montana livestock business is the main target of the opponents of the Bison proposal. Because worries concerning brucellosis spreading to domestic animals, the Montana legislature is against Bison restoration in the state. “It’s hard to claim Bison are presenting an imminent threat to livestock while thousands of brucellosis-infected elk are side-by-side with livestock in the Paradise Valley and there is no strategy to manage that interface,” Mr. Sholly, superintendent of Yellowstone N.P stated. (Robbins, Hanson, 2023: NP) When Yellowstone N.P was established in 1872, estimates put the number of Bison in the park at 1000. Due to poaching, market hunting, and other human-caused mortality, the number of Bison dropped to 23. “In 2023, a

minimum of 1150 Bison were killed by tribal members almost as soon as they left the protection of the park. Despite the protection offered to Bison while in the park, human-caused mortality is still the biggest fatality for park Bison. Over the past decades, more than 11,000 Yellowstone Bison have been killed. This represents a huge loss to the Park's ecosystem." (Wuerthner, 2024: NP)

In conclusion, this photograph depicted an important message in the past and still relates to conservation efforts today. Mammers states "A close reading of the Rougeville photograph demonstrates that the scale of bison loss is dramatic. Relationships on the Prairies were forever changed by the extermination of the species in its wild, free ranging form" (Mammers, 2020: NP) The demise of Bison affects more than just the species, ecosystems will be changed by the over hunting of Bison and eventually lost. There is no excuse for the brutality inflicted upon the species and the continued genocide. As conservationists, we need to advocate for the animals and explore ways to keep the Bison population safe, managed, and healthy.

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Image References:

Fig.1. Anonymous. 1892. "*Men standing with a pile of buffalo skulls,*" *Michigan Carbon Works, Rougeville Mich., 1892.* (Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library). Handwritten on the back: "C.D. 1892 Glueworks, office foot of 1st St., works at Rougeville, Mich. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20241203-the-bison-skulls-photo-revealing-americas-dark-history>
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Fig. 2. Yellowstone Voices. 2019. "*Map of Beattie Gulch and Yellowstone NP border.*"
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