



Bison Fact Sheet “Myth versus Fact” Chris Sullivan, 2009 President MBA

The objective of these opinions and statements are to dispel some rumors that are perpetuated by individuals that have not had “first hand” experience raising bison. These pages are designed to familiarize people with bison ranching. There is no claim by the author or the MBA organization that the methods mentioned are the best. Bison ranching is a continuing episode of trial and error... just when you might think a method might be perfected, the behavior of the animal displays itself differently and the outcome may change. With bison, we are all learning together. The following pages are meant to familiarize the reader with some techniques. Myths are displayed as the first line of each section.

Myth: Bison are wild and are difficult to handle. **Fact:** Buffalo are wild animals that can become adapted to living and cooperating with humans. If a buffalo is purchased from a reserve or a large ranch, it is likely that the animal has not been handled or corralled very often. When that sort of animal is cornered or contained, more often than not, ***it will do it's best to escape.*** This is particularly true when someone brings an adult buffalo from a large acreage to a small acreage. Buffalo acclimate to a ranch. If you want buffalo that are acclimated to your acreage, buy your herd as calves. Also, if possible, buy them from a ranch that has been handling them. Buffalo that have been contained in a corral situation for a time are usually more cooperative than a buffalo that has never been contained in a smaller area. If you purchase calves from a ranch it is recommended that you contain them in a corral situation for a time, to let them get accustomed to the surroundings and the handlers. Once you have a herd established, it is easier to introduce new animals to the property.

Myth: Bison are worked and herded similar to cattle. **Fact:** If you like to watch an exciting or dangerous rodeo, bring some loud individuals over that have not worked with buffalo before. It is a recipe for disaster. ***Buffalo are not cattle.*** Buffalo have a different thought process than cattle. They are best handled quietly and calmly. A lot of bison

ranchers work their herd alone or with another person. There is usually not the need for a large crew of whooping individuals. Working buffalo, with a proper corral design, will go as fast and easily as in most cattle operations. Most buffalo respond to the physical position of the handler. There are key times when it may be necessary to be loud or aggressive. These times are usually after they are contained in an alley or chute. Do not expect to herd bison. “A bison will herd anywhere it wants to go”, is the old adage buffalo ranchers quote. Unless you have a poorly designed facility, you can work with the bison’s habits and instincts to your advantage.

Myth: Buffalo are difficult to corral. **Fact:** Many bison ranches have their buffalo come into the corral almost every day. Of course, this depends upon the size of the herd. Managing buffalo has been done many different ways. Some methods are extreme, some methods are simple. Buffalo that are rewarded with food and water each time they enter the corral will be eager for you to open the gate. The average buffalo operation in the U.S. has 60 to 100 animals. These size operations manage well by having buffalo that like to come into the corral to feed. When it is time to sort animals, or to give a yearly worming, these animals are much less likely to cause mayhem. The extreme to the above example is a ranch or two that used helicopters to try to achieve herd movement into a corral.

Myth: You need a six to eight foot high property fence to contain bison. **Fact:** There is small section of my boundary fence that has simply four strands of barbed wire. It has been that way for nearly 10 years. Most of the fence on this author’s land is made of five strands of barbed wire with one electric wire at the top. Seven foot posts are used that are approximately five foot tall when installed. As a general rule, bison that have good grass and good water are content. If buffalo are content with the feed, large bulls can appear as nearly docile. Each ranches fence will differ from one to the next. Fence designs are a management decision that will be based on the type and size of the operation you have. In the above quote I mentioned that my buffalo behave themselves around a small section of 4 wire fence. Don’t try to put buffalo in a four wire fence pasture. The bison here are accustomed to a hot wire on the top of most of my fences. The electric wire helps to instill a respect for wire in general. A lot of bison ranches have six, or seven foot high fences with metal pipe posts or fiberglass posts. Fences are a large part of your investment. Make certain that their design is fitting for your property size and your management style.

Myth: Bison are mean. **Fact:** Buffalo communicate with each other by grunts, gestures, and horns. Why would they communicate with humans any differently? Be it understood, bison are not “pets”. Even a “trained” buffalo can easily react to hormone drives or mood

swings. Adult buffalo that will eat out of your hand can turn on a dime and move quickly, especially if threatened. Always approach and handle bison with caution. More than one individual has suffered injury by trusting the “friendly” disposition of a pet buffalo. Many people walk among bison herds. If you are tempted to walk among bison, always have a plan of how to protect yourself if one of them is overly curious or aggressive. The author irrigates and performs field chores with a skidsteer or tractor nearby. As stated above, “Buffalo communicate with each other with grunts, gestures, and horns”. The animals will communicate with you in the same manner. Learn to read the gestures and the signals that are given when working and handling buffalo. Bison cows are extremely dedicated mothers. During the first few weeks of calving, they just want to be left alone. If a mother cow thinks that a calf is threatened, it will likely threaten the threat. Usually after a few weeks, the behavior calms and behavior is, once again, normal.

Myth: It is necessary to doctor bison in the same manner as cattle. **Fact:** Buffalo are extremely hardy. If a disease is not present on a given piece of ground, and if it is not introduced by purchased animals, it is unlikely that the buffalo will contract it. The resistance of a buffalo to disease is strong. Calves are usually not tagged or vaccinated until they are weaning age. Each animal in a herd should be treated at least once a year for worms and parasites. Usually, a yearly worming is done in the cooler weather during the fall or early winter. Sheep can introduce disease that can be devastating to a buffalo herd. Refer to the National Bison Association Handbook for specifics pertaining to disease and treatments. **Note:** If bison are not stressed or overcrowded, the health of a herd will excel with minimal treatment. Make certain you purchase disease free animals.

Myth: Similar to cattle, it is good to feed bison corn and alfalfa. **Fact:** Bison grow and maintain best on a grass diet. They are grassland animals. Corn and alfalfa are rich feeds that are somewhat difficult for bison to digest. An alfalfa hay diet is all that is available in some areas. Noted Veterinarians recommend feeding some grass to keep the Bison’s system healthy. Various grains fed minimally, are a good source of nutrients for bison, corn being the least desirable. A grass-alfalfa mix hay, heavy on the grass, is a good winter feed. Buffalo can maintain through the winter on lower protein feeds that cattle. If your land is suited with good winter grazing, there is little need to provide hay. The author uses range cake as a supplement and also as a tool to help manage the herd for sorting or other management.

For more detailed info please refer to the National Bison Association **NEW “Bison Breeders Handbook.**

or search the web at: www.bisoncentral.com , and the Montana Bison Association Website:

www.montanabison.org