

BUFFALO and the Power of Privilege

by Chris Sullivan, President / Montana Bison Association

It is my humble opinion that if you reside in the U.S. you qualify automatically as a person of privilege. We have basic privileges that many people in this world admire and can only dream about.

Is it not privilege that we can direct our lives and goals in most any direction we desire? What determines who Americans are and what we do, besides our own most basic decisions?

In the winter of 2000 / 2001, I purchased my first bison. Since then I have discovered another world of privilege and satisfaction.

The status of the buffalo industry has tremendous potential... it is truly what producer's want to make of it. Nationally, high demand and moderate supply has created an agricultural upswing that is not paralleled by most markets. Mainstream America, and many parts of the world are discovering buffalo, as the healthy red meat alternative. It is a meat so rich in nutrition and so low in fat that it is quickly becoming recommended by many health and medical professionals.

Anyone is privileged to just have work during these difficult times, money is so tight. When I am done with a day job, I want more. I want recreation. I want excitement. I want to enjoy nature. Also, I want to eat well. I am able to succeed in these endeavors on my own acreage by raising buffalo.

There are many State and regional buffalo associations, as well as the National Bison Association, that help to educate the public on bison producing. I have found, over the last nine years or so, that almost everyone in this industry is enthusiastic and supportive. There is excellent written material offered by these organizations. But, more importantly, there are friends and alliances be made. There is experience and knowledge, when you need to call on it. Bison are not difficult to raise. I have worked ranches operating with beef animals, sheep, and even goats. Buffalo ranching is easier than any of them, and more satisfying. I am very privileged.

Bison ranching has some challenges, but, when you have a decent set of facilities and are able to supply their needs, you would be surprised how little the animal demands.

Here are some *don'ts* to pay attention to when thinking about starting a bison operation.

Don't buy animals from a ranch with large acreage if you have small acreage. They may never adjust to your small acreage. Bison from large acreage should really be sold to large acreage.

The one exception to this rule may be if weanling calves are what is purchased.

Try to purchase at least a half a dozen or so. Buffalo are born with a very strong herd instinct... they are more likely to be content with company. There is safety in numbers, and buffalo know it.

Don't try to make do with a feeble corral. Good working corrals are a must with buffalo. Bison, if content and acclimated, may stay in a somewhat feeble fenced pasture, after they have adjusted to their surroundings. Any area needs to be large enough that they are not stressed or crowded. At all times buffalo need fresh water and good grazing or hay.

It is not necessary to have more than a five-wire fence with a hotwire on the top. If the handler's judgment was in error and the individual purchased older animals that are accustomed to more wide open spaces, be prepared for a run for your money. I am ashamed to say that my buffalo have tolerated some four-wire fence on sections of my perimeter fence simply because they were trained by some of my better fenced areas. I also have some horse-fenced areas that are smooth wire that the buffalo have not tested in the last nine years.

Bison are independent animals. They want to be left alone to follow their herd instinct. Buffalo communicate with grunts, body motions, and horns. A simple shaking of the head, or a tail held slightly erect, gives you a hint that you should think twice about how to approach the animal. Although I can feed my largest bulls by hand, I don't particularly think it is wise. Always have a retreat plan if you are working with bison. Don't think that they will communicate any differently with you than they do among themselves. It is not usual to have Black Angus animals that behave less tolerant of people than bison. Still, don't take chances, have a way to protect yourself close by at all times.

Hormones play a big part in bison behavior. The tamest buffalo cow has some weeks when she first calves that will change her accustomed behavior dramatically. Behavior change is nature's way during calving time, and usually no human intervention is necessary. 99.9% of the time, buffalo mothers do not have trouble calving.

When buffalo learn to be accustomed to people, it is always tempting to make pets of them. This is unwise. Usually it is the pet that is the more dangerous of the animals in the herd.

Within a buffalo herd you will find your privileged animals. A bison that has an "attitude" can actually buffalo a larger and more powerful animal.

A new phrase has emerged within the bison industry. It is simply *The Bison Advantage*. Raising buffalo has certain advantages over ranching with traditional ungulates. The amount of winter feed for a mature buffalo cow is considerably less than beef breeds. Partly this is due to the metabolism of a buffalo, but also buffalo have more insulation in the form of wool and hair, than most cattle breeds. Bison do not require as much attention as cattle. The hardiness of

the bison minimizes or most times eliminates the need for ranchers to get up in the middle of the night to check new calves and mothers.

As a benefit of raising bison, my fascination with the regal, magnificent buffalo has left me with a positive, privileged attitude. Everyone has various attitudes toward this native American, though usually, buffalo command respect. Frequently, traffic is stopped or cars pull over on to the shoulder of the rural highway that borders one of my fences. People are just happy to view buffalo. For some, just watching buffalo graze, is a wonderful pleasure. The animals instill a wonder of nature where the observer can imagine what America was in days gone by. Perhaps some think of the great things that this country still is.

If you have interest in raising buffalo, eating the meat, or simply learning about the animal, contact the different buffalo associations in the various regions of the country. The National Bison Association is just completing a new “Bison Producers Handbook” that is available to order on their website. www.bisoncentral.com There is a lot of great reading at NBA’s Bison Central as a source for information and pleasure.

The Montana Bison Association, www.montanabison.org has a Myth Versus Fact sheet available for order that costs a mere \$2.00 along with sending a self-addressed stamped envelope. Get involved with buffalo as a consumer or / and as a producer and join the herd.