

Historical and Cultural Connection to the Buffalo: Additional Information

Breeding and Calves

Female buffalo, known as cows, start having calves at two to three years of age. Breeding usually occurs from July to October, and calves are born from April to June. Female buffalo carry their calves for nine months just like humans. They nurse their calves for the whole first year. Calves can weigh between 25 to 40 pounds at birth, are born with yellowish red fur, and have no hump. As the calves get older, their fur starts to darken, and they grow horns.

The mother buffalo is very protective of her baby. To protect the calves from other animal predators, buffalo form a circle around the calves. The bulls stand on the outside, the cows stand behind the bulls, and the calves stand in the center. By age two, they are old enough to protect themselves.

Buffalo are sacred!

Over one million Native Americans shared the land of North America with the buffalo. Buffalo were very important to Native Americans and to their survival.

Native Americans honored the buffalo and lived in harmony with them. They treated the buffalo with respect, and the buffalo was very sacred to them.

The buffalo was an important part of many Native American cultures. They considered the buffalo as their relatives. This is because the buffalo gave them many gifts such as food, shelter, clothing, medicine, and tools.

The animal was honored in songs, dances, and prayers. Native Americans prayed everyday to the Buffalo Nation to ask them to watch over their people and to continue to help them survive. If a dancer wore a buffalo headdress or imitated a buffalo in dance, this was one way of honoring the buffalo. The skull of a buffalo was used in ceremonies. Many other buffalo parts were used to make sacred items.

Native American people learned many life lessons from the buffalo. As children learn from their parents' example, Native Americans learned from the buffalo's example of how to live a healthy and productive life. Some of those important lessons were: breastfeeding offspring, valuing both young and old, being physically active, respecting both females and males, healthy eating, and using grazing resources wisely.

Hunting the Buffalo

Native Americans hunted the buffalo by using buffalo jumps and a bow and arrow (by foot or by horse).

Buffalo were chased until they ran over a cliff, which was called a buffalo jump. By using horses to help with hunting, they were able to keep up with the fast running speeds of buffalo. Buffalo were usually hunted after they drank water because they couldn't run as fast.

After the hunt, Native Americans gave thanks to the Buffalo Nation for sacrificing one of their own for them. A feast was held to honor the hunters and the Buffalo Nation after harvesting the buffalo.

The women prepared the meat and the hides. They used sharp stones and bones as cutting tools. The meat was cut into strips and dried. It was then stored to be eaten in the winter. The dried meat was sometimes used to make pemmican. Pemmican is made with dried wild berries, tallow (animal fat), and dried meat. Both the berries and meat are crushed and shaped into small patties and dried.

The softer leather, known as the tanned hide, was used for moccasins, blankets, and tipi liners. The hide was stretched on the ground and fastened onto a frame. It was then tanned and scraped. Finally the buffalo's brains and fat were pressed into the hide to make it soft.

The Slaughter of the Buffalo

The massive slaughtering of buffalo in the 1800s worked to disconnect the animal from Native Americans. This had a substantial impact on Native people, physically as well as spiritually, emotionally, and mentally.

As more settlers began coming to North America, conflicts arose between them and Native Americans. Settlers and the US government wanted to take over their land. Native Americans did not want to give it up. The Government saw the Native American's strong relationship with the buffalo. They figured that if they killed the buffalo, the Native Americans would surrender their lands and become a "civilized people". The military was ordered to kill the buffalo to deny Native Americans food. They believed they could do more to harm Native Americans faster by hiring buffalo hunters, than by using the army itself.

The railroads were instrumental in the slaughter of the buffalo. First buffalo were killed for food during the building of the railroads. After they were built, buffalo were killed for safety reasons, because they were in the way and sometimes pushed the trains off the tracks.

Traders and trappers killed buffalo just for the hides and left the rest of the animal to rot. Hides were sold for about \$2.00 to \$3.50 each. During one winter (1872-73), more than 1.5 million buffalo hides were sent on trains to the Eastern part of the United States to be sold! The bones were also sold for use in bone china, fertilizer, and in sugar processing. A ton of buffalo bones sold for about \$8.00.

Train companies offered trips out west to the settlers. Tourists were about to shoot as many buffalo as they could from the train window, only stopping when they ran out of bullets. Because of this, buffalo killing contests were held. During one contest, a person from Kansas set a buffalo killing record, killing 120 buffalo in 40 minutes. Another man named "Buffalo" Bill Cody was hired to kill buffalo. Within two years, he had killed 4,000 buffalo.

Due to all the different reasons listed above, an estimated 31,000,000 buffalo were killed between the years of 1868 and 1881 with only 500 buffalo left by the year of 1885.

By the end of the 19th Century, the Native American population was only 237,000, down from one million a century earlier.

Saving the Buffalo!

Through the work of some conservationists, the Federal government and private herd owners, efforts to save the buffalo began. After the slaughter, the last wild buffalo herd living in the U.S. made its home in Yellowstone National Park in Montana.

To help preserve those few remaining buffalo, Congress passed a law making it illegal to shoot buffalo in Yellowstone. Several buffalo were also bought from private herds to increase the Yellowstone herd numbers.

Another effort began in 1905 with the start of the American Bison Society formed by President Theodore Roosevelt. Through donations and the support of the American Bison Society, the National Bison Range was set up on about 20,000 acres of land in Montana. In the beginning, it held 39 bison, and in 1999, it held about 350 bison.

These early efforts were instrumental in bringing more buffalo back to the United States and to Indian Country.