

January 27, 2020

Attn: National Geographic Editorial

Ref: Prairie Divide (February 2020)

Dear Editor,

Give me a break – Mars Vista! Is the American Prairie Reserve (APR) going to rename all of the creeks and buttes of eastern Montana for their ultra-wealthy corporate benefactors - like sports stadiums? Those of us who live here are unfortunately used to colonization by billionaires and their accompanying vanities. APR is just another iteration. No one asked for them and no one particularly wants them.

Your correspondent got it wrong. The cattle and sheep producers of eastern Montana are not opposed to “free roaming” bison. APR’s bison should be free to roam wherever they wish on APR’s property. What we oppose is the bison being designated as wildlife, in which case they would be legally allowed to graze on the neighbor’s pastures and, should they become infected by disease, veterinary mitigation would become a political football mired in gridlock. On the other hand, APR’s bison are free to remain designated as livestock, where the law says that the owner is responsible for their wanderings and health status.

APR’s vision is pseudo-scientific babble. Bison as “ecosystem engineers” is nonsensical. Who says that some mythical point in the past should be restored and protected under a bell jar? After all, in 1805 when Lewis and Clark met with Sacagawea’s people at the headwaters of the Missouri River, those people were starving.

Today, eastern Montana is highly productive; feeding the nation and supporting our communities while hosting unprecedented numbers of wildlife. Visitors are already free to enjoy the bounty and vistas of the short grass prairie. Under the stewardship of Montana’s ranchers, farmers, and the Bureau of Land Management, eastern Montana has never been more fecund and beautiful. The APR brings nothing new or useful to the prairie.

Sincerely yours,

Gilles Stockton

Grass Range Mt.

#### The Word We Are Looking For is Colonialism.

I was happy to ignore the American Prairie Reserve (APR) until they petitioned the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to convert their grazing permits from cattle to bison and from summer only - to year-round. Just previous to petitioning the BLM, the APR had purchased the Two Crow Ranch in northern Petroleum County, which is directly adjacent to my summer pastures. That petition got my attention. The APR has not been coy about their long-range plans to convert all of the working ranches from Glasgow to Winnifred to a buffalo commons. Their web site is full of information justifying this notion.

I remember reading something published in the early days of the APR that claimed that they needed to intervene in order to stop the destruction of the native prairie of eastern Montana. The meta message is that someone is destroying the native prairie and those people could only have been me and my neighbors. At the time, that did not set well, but people often have strange ideas and as long as they confine their activities to their own land, it is none of my business. The APR was paying for the ranches that they purchased, what they did on them was not my direct concern.

It looks like the APR has modified their thinking about the prairie. They no longer claim that it is in the process of being destroyed from overgrazing. Instead, through their published documentation, the APR alleges that the prairie's status is not quite ideal for all of the animals that have historically live in it. According to their web site, the way to make the prairie perfect for all of these creatures is to allow a large herd of bison to migrate back and forth across it. If they are being chased by wolves, the buffalo will go back and forth even faster which according to their theory would be better.

The central documentation justifying all of this seems rather dubious. Comparing the grazing patterns of buffalo to that of cattle they found that buffalo travel more and that cattle tend to be rather lazy and eat twice as much. There is a good reason for this finding. We have selected our cows to eat a lot so that they will wean big calves. We also know that if the cattle have to travel far between water and pasture, the energy expended in walking is energy that is not going into the growth of the calves.

To make this workable, ranchers have built numerous water points and adjusted pastures and grazing rotations so that the cattle utilize the available grass uniformly. We are raising food and central Montana's contribution to this country's food base is not insignificant. Fergus County has the fifth largest cattle numbers in the nation. The APR, however, is oblivious to the calving rates and weaning weights of their buffalo. There is no plan to profit from the bison other than to sell a small number of rights for an occasional token hunt.

The motivating idea, from a ranchers' point of view, is to pay the bills while not harming the main resource base – the grass. The APR is insensible to the idea some of us might need to be teasing a living off of the prairie. Their business plan is to raise operating money from rich donors in perpetuity. And interestingly the APR's priority is not even the bison themselves, but the birds that may have been more numerous in the past.

I doubt that anyone really knows the prevalence of Baird's sparrows two hundred years ago. I have only been here for the past seventy-three years and one of the things that intrigues me is how the numbers of wildlife seem to come and go and come back again. When I was a kid there were no foxes and racoons. Instead there were plenty of coyotes and bobcats. Coyotes are still with us and bobcats after having declined in numbers are being seen again. Mountain lions and bears were not here in great numbers before and now are numerous. Birds species disappeared only to return. Some animals like elk were introduced and protected. Now they are a plague. Deer are a plague too but that is because the hunters, obsessed with getting a trophy bull ignore the big Mule Deer bucks standing between them and their quarry.

Change, both human induced and natural seems to have been the norm across my life time. I am often mildly annoyed when I hear on TV that the songbirds are in peril or the pollinators have disappeared. Maybe! Maybe somewhere and maybe for a period of time! But if a habitat exists, some kind of life will

emerge to exploit it. Who says that the natural world is fixed in just one specific way that must be preserved? Patience is what you need if you want to experience the intricacies of nature.

But social change is also inevitable. This is certainly a factor in our antipathy towards the APR. They represent a force of change in our small town/ranching culture. But the APR are not the only ones. Of more immediate concern to me are the Wilks brothers who have purchased the N Bar and Pronghorn Ranches along with every adjacent place they could. The Wilks brother's main priority is to have an elk hunting preserve. They don't seem to care that the elk eat half of their hay before it is even harvested. The problem from mine and my neighbor's point of view, is that the Wilk's elk are invading our pastures and hay fields.

The word that describes this is colonialism. Western Montana has already been colonized. Bozeman is not the same sleepy college town that it was when I studied there. People without professional level jobs can no longer afford to live in Bozeman. Eastern Montana's climate is less hospitable to the forces of colonialism but obviously not immune.

We feel we have a unique culture, one based on the landscape which we inhabit and the work we do raising livestock. But there is no doubt that our culture is in peril. The school in Grass Range has less than half the number of children as it did when I was a student. Neighbors who had nice farms and ranches have passed on and their land has been absorbed into larger units. But those bigger ranches are not necessarily that profitable, particularly for the younger generation struggling to buy the land from their siblings. The main street businesses that were the norm fifty years ago can't compete with the discount stores. It is obvious that our rural way of life is collapsing even without the changes brought on by the new land owners and different ideas from the outside.

Who is to blame? Certainly, we are the victims of an economic system rigged against us. However, we are also guilty of not robustly resisting the policies and forces making production agriculture chronically unprofitable. We tend to believe the notion that everyone has the right to buy what land they can and sell to whomever they wish. Zoning such as is common in Europe that requires that only farmers can own farm land, is a total nonstarter around here. The result is that billionaires and out of state foundations like the APR are free to invade our communities and imperil our culture.

I can't recommend any particular remedy. If we were to insist that livestock markets be reformed such as to be actually competitive, that would help to preserve what is left of our communities. I am not all that concerned about the future of the APR. The negative news they have been getting can't help their fund raising. I also can't see that there will be all that many tourists willing to tramp across the hard pan and gumbo of eastern Montana just to look at a buffalo and a Baird's sparrow. If you want to see buffalo, go to Yellowstone Park or the Black Hills. As for the sparrow, one little brown bird looks a lot like another. Can't be certain about the future of course, but the whole APR concept is not really scientifically or economically sound. However, there is not much we can do about the billionaires who desire their own hunting preserves.

