Carolyn Duckworth, Chair

Bear Creek Council

2009

 “Caroline Duckworth is the chair of the Bear Creek Council. She is now working on her second year with the grass roots organization based here in Montana. These are high school and middle school based teachers from Indiana. They’ve been here for about a week now.”

 Thank you all for sending questions ahead of time. It helped me focus on what you wanted to know about Bear Creek Council and the bison issue because there is so much to talk about. What I did do is, I wrote out some thoughts that I can refer to. I also rearranged the order of the questions just a little bit to make it flow a little better for me. I’m also an editor too, so it’s a habit.

 One of the questions someone had also serves as an introduction to Bear Creek Council’s work. You wanted to know what we think has been gained by each group’s activities on the bison management issue and what has been gained or lost. So just quickly, I’ll name a couple of groups. Buffalo Field Campaign, we believing very strongly that they provide awareness to the mainstream public about the buffalo issue. They use media very effectively and creatively. They keep bison management at the national level and with media attention in a way that no other groups can do. I think that is also the benefit of the way they work. They work with emotions and passion. I personally believe that is essential to an issue of this size and complexity. Those passionate people on the ground are out there every single day. Every single day they play a vital role in this issue, but they’re not the only ones, of course. We keep in perspective what their benefits are and what some of their drawbacks can be, which some of the same things are, lots of instant media attention, their point of view, emotion, drama, all of that.

The Stock Growers Association, I think that their biggest benefit is that they remind us of the passion that livestock producers have for their work and for the creatures that they work with. The Stock Growers Association also does a very good job of, whether they know it or now, about educating us about what their two concerns are. We learn a lot from paying attention to the Stock Growers Association. Those are the two that you mentioned as being at extremes of this issue it seems like.

The Greater Yellowstone Coalition we work with a lot. They’re based in Bozeman, Montana. In this issue and a lot of other issues, they are a well respected voice of reason. They also know the law very, very well. They use it when they need to, but they use it selectively.

The National Parks and Conservation Association has a national voice, but they have local credibility with this issue now. They have opened offices in Bozeman, Livingston, Helena, and some other local areas. They’re run by people who are established in this area. They can dodge that frequent criticism of “Oh, it’s a D.C. group, blahh.” NPCA brings a good national voice with some credibility.

The National Wildlife Federation, which I use to work for both professionally and then as a freelancer on this particular issue, they bring excellent science. Their lead scientist is dedicated to the bison management issue. He’s always the person I call if I have a question, or what is the latest on this or any other thing. Also, they bring to the table their long standing excellent relationship with more than 50 tribes that are involved with bison.

The tribes are a critical link in this process too that are often forgotten not only by the agencies, but by the nonprofits as well. The tribes bring their unique perspective, their experience with bison raising, and also their power, their legal power. They’re a sovereign nation. That means that they are entitled to government to government meetings between federal agencies and their government.

That is something that Bear Creek Council brings out as much as we can to the agencies and other nonprofits. It’s reminding them where the tribes are. Are they going to be involved in this next level of discussion and at what level? We can’t make some of this happen, but we can remind people. That ability to be a voice to remind people of what needs to be included in this discussion, I think is one of Bear Creek Council’s primary contributions. It comes because we have a lot of trust and respect now from the local, federal, and state agencies and other nonprofit groups. Even if we don’t agree with them, they know that we have a voice. We have a very local point of view. Our work is here in Gardner and in the Gardner basin that goes up to Yankee Jim Canyon. We have members beyond there and occasionally we’ll step out on a campaign that’s broader, but our perspective is right here. That works really well in the bison issue because the bison issue is kind of divided geographically, the north side of Yellowstone and the west side. They’re very different issues. We have, in the twelve years we’ve been working on this issue, continually brought to the table the differences in those issues on this north side. It complicates the discussion, but it makes sure that the people that we represent are included. We also insist on forming our own action plan and our own goals based on the science involved in this issue because there is such emotion involved. We have always said that this science is the premier point that we’re following and of being rational. We are very emotional about the issue, but when we act as a group we are being rational and we were following the science or the legalities.

Then the question that follows that is “Where do you feel Bear Creek Council and the general public fall on the issue of wild bison management practices?” I’m going to skip the general public part of this question at this point. We might be able to talk about it later. Bear Creek Council believes in exploring issues in depth. We keep an open mind as we review the facts. We want to understand the science. We want to understand the community’s involvement in an issue and the community’s impact. We also want to understand the wildlife issue and of course the political and legal issues. We are an affiliate of the Northern Plains Research Council. It’s a group that formed in the 70s in eastern Montana when a lot of agricultural land in that part of the state was feeling pressure from oil, gas, and coal development. Doesn’t that sound familiar? Some things are coming around 360 degrees here. Northern Plains is based on the philosophy that you organize the people in the community because they are the direct stakeholders in whatever the issue is and that is how the work gets done. It’s one of the most grass roots organizations you can find. You find them in Kentucky, the Kentuckians for the Common Wealth, and are based on the same philosophy. We have a president in office now in the United States who was trained to be a community organizer. We have a lot in common with him. It’s kind of nice. That’s how we’re trained, to involve our community, to involve our members and reach out to the community to find solutions. This philosophy helps balance the emotions and has built the trust as I mentioned before.

Then there was a question about “Where do we believe buffalo belong?” We don’t address that issue specifically because it becomes, for one thing in order to become a small volunteer local group to work effectively on an issue we have to evaluate it carefully and we evaluate it every single year and determine what we can really do. If we try to do too much, we won’t get anything done. So, we’re very careful about defining our goals and our objectives and the actions that we are going to take to reach those goals. So, a question like this, we’re not going to address. We have lively discussions about it, but we really don’t address it unless it pertains specifically to something that we’re dealing with that year. We can say generally that we believe that bison have a very important social, spiritual, and ecological role beyond the boundaries of Yellowstone National Park. Because of that, we believe that they need to be treated as wildlife and not as livestock or pseudo livestock. We believe their management needs to be handled by wildlife professionals, not livestock professionals. We believe they should be allowed beyond the boundaries of Yellowstone National Park. So, that’s how that answer to the question fits into what we are doing.

If there were no bison, I can tell you that there would be significant ecological impacts to Yellowstone and to any other place where they are allowed. I just did a tremendous hike yesterday. I took the day off and I hiked with friends from Livingston. We hiked from Canyon Village through the Hayden Valley to Fishing Bridge. We were walking right through major bison habitat. We had to evaluate each bull that we found for their mood, but that’s a whole different topic. What really struck me was “Are we following the bison trail or are we following a human trail and which came first?” Because, the trail went through dozens of wallows, which at this time of year, a lot of them are extremely muddy but some of them are very sandy too. Wallows are one of the most important features that buffalo bring to a landscape. By disturbing that ground, they loosen it up so that water can permeate and flow through much better and refill the water table at a much better rate than elsewhere in the grasslands. There’s a whole different vegetation set around a wallow because of that. There are different animals associated with buffalo wallows, like snakes, prairie dogs, ground squirrels, and different birds. A buffalo wallow is its own mini ecosystem. The loss of bison across our high plains and our prairies, over that last 130 years or so, has demonstrably changed the ecosystem of those lands. So, we already have the information of what would happen if there were no more bison because we know what has happened.

Back to the groups working on the bison issue, “describe what you think the diverse parties are more concerned with in terms of buffalo threat or the threat to the buffalo and what are some ways to address those fears appropriately and who should be responsible for the actions?” The first part of that question, we believe very strongly in letting other groups speak for themselves and giving themselves the room to move and operate according to their philosophies. We will raise objections if we hear falsehoods being raised. We will not raise objections if somebody’s got a different working style than we do. The few times that we have openly criticized is the buffalo field campaign, for example, and I am not picking on them because they are our allies, but it is when we feel like they have published something that is not quite the truth or they might’ve gotten a statistic incorrect because they weren’t aware of something that was happening on the northern side. We try to cordially exchange the correct information and hope that that works and usually it does.

So, we have joined with other groups both formally and informally to try and come to a consensus on what local nonprofit and national nonprofit groups can do to influence the situation. We’ve had some sustained success. The one that I’ll refer to again is reminding people that the northern issues are very different from the western issues. So, people are more inclined now to come and check with us before they make blanket statements about bison management. “Hey, what’s happening on your end?” “How is it this winter?” We had a very different winter situation this year than the west side did. It makes a difference in what we’re going to get involved in and what we’re going to do.

I’ll give you a couple of examples. Here’s one where we actually try a formal collaboration. It was called the Greater Yellowstone Wildlife Alliance. This was started in 2003 and we worked together for a couple of years. A bunch of non-profits, both national and local, got together, recognizing that we get a lot more done if we could agree on a couple of goals that we were all going to work towards. We made a lot of progress in understanding each other’s working philosophy and how that applies to the goals and what we can and can’t do. One of the first things that Bear Creek Council found out was that we were the only members of this group who were not empowered by our members to make decisions immediately or within even two days. Bear Creek Council built on a classically democratic model where every member has a vote and we vote with very specific guidelines. If something is going to cost us a certain amount of money beyond our budget or if it’s a deviation from an already approved action plan, we need a membership vote. You can’t do that in a day or two, not even with e-mail. It would take a week or so, so we kept saying “Sorry, we can’t participate in this.”

“What kind of people are members of your council? Are they people that work in the national park or are they people who just live in the community and share the concerns? Is it a mixture of all of that?” It’s a mixture. We have more than 70 members in a community that has about 900 people. We have people who live out in rural areas also. We are a good mix of people. I do work for the federal government and I have taken time off today to come here and talk to you all. A lot of us do work for the federal government, for the Yellowstone Association. Some of us have businesses here in Gardner. We have outfitters who are members, small family sized livestock producers who are members, teachers, and some students. We work very closely with our local school.

So that collaborative group that I mentioned, Greater Yellowstone Wildlife Alliance, we agreed to disband after a couple of years. We were able to get some consensus and movement on some pieces of national legislation and state legislation, but essentially we found that it was very difficult for us to collaborate on a few issues while we were working independently on other issues. There were just some conflicts that came up. We did try to work them through and it just didn’t happen, but we tried.

“What would you suggest is the next steps for each group and why?” One thing that Bear Creek does do, we do often discuss our actions or planned actions with other groups like the Greater Yellowstone Collation, the National Parks National Wildlife Foundation, sometimes with Buffalo Field Campaign and Gallatin Wildlife Alliance and vice versa. In fact, we’re planning on having an informal meeting in a couple of weeks where some of us get together to talk about what’s going to happen in the next year or two. It is informal and we do kind of check in with each other. So, what are the next steps for each group?

“So, what is the outward evidence or strategies that you use for advocacy? How would I see something and know they’re part of this?” A lot of it’s not visible to the public, but we have public events though, in support of our bison campaign. We are known in this area for hosting pot lucks when the associated tribes of Yellowstone come here for consultation meetings. They come every 1-3 years. We were invited by the National Park Service to co-sponsor those. We invite the entire community to those and a part of that program is giving tribes the chance to talk to the community and Bear Creek Council having the chance to talk to the community and to the tribes. That has built a significant amount of cooperation between Bear Creek Council, the tribes, and the community. Because, we invite the Saw Tooth Delis sometimes to provide the bison stew that is served at that meal and other businesses to contribute, that sort of thing.

So where you tend to see us most visibly is in public events, like that, or educational forums that we organize when we recognize that there is a lot of misunderstanding going on in the community or a lot of questions about what’s happening with the bison. We will organize a forum and invite agency members to come here and talk with the community about it. Sometimes we’ll put adds in the Gardner newsletter if we think there is some information that needs to be provided accurately. We’ll write letters to the editor. We testify before the state legislature. I went up three times this last session, some other members did also. So, those are the kinds of things. We do get some press because of that. We just feel that that is part of the awareness and driving to action. We work with those other groups on those kinds of efforts, especially the state legislative effort. We organized our lobbying. We organized our comments. We organized our members to contribute letter, phone calls, that kind of thing.

In fact, we need to be preparing right now for the next legislative session. In our state, we meet only every two years. But, the big work that gets done is in the year right after the legislation session has occurred, before the election cycle starts. That’s a place where Northern Plains Resource Council helps to step in and guide us on who are the best politicians to talk to, the most receptive. They can dig up the voting records for us. They have paid staff that is there to help because we are volunteers who can work one or two hours a week, maybe forty five minutes on a given evening. Like wise with some of these other groups, we count on them because they have the paid staff that can answer our questions for us. We would also love to try another formal collaboration like the Greater Yellowstone Wildlife Alliance. We felt like that had a huge amount of potential, but it is something that would need to be…. I have no idea how it could be organized, but one of the key factors would be finding funding that is provided independently of any of the groups associated with it. That was an issue that came up from time to time about who had veto power and who didn’t on some of our decisions. I think continuing our informal collaboration with the other groups has been working very well and it allows Bear Creek Council room to descend.

We had a very controversial thing happen in this last year and it’s still going on. Did Rick Wallen talk about the buying out some grazing rights from the Royal Teton Ranch? It’s not directly involving Yellowstone National Park, it’s more of a state and national forest issue. With much discussion and angst, we decided to support this. There’s a non-profit organization that owns some land just outside the north entrance of the park where bison want to migrate through to get to national forest lands. It’s a conflict zone because this group used to graze cattle. It’s very complicated, but in a nut shell, in order to get the cattle off the land it cost a whole lot of money. It was horrifying to us how much money it would be, but then you put into perspective just how do you put a price on a buffalo and how do you judge or put a price on their ecological value and how do you put a price on their ability to migrate? What we did know, that a lot of groups didn’t know and didn’t trust but we do, is that this was going to start out with twenty animals (bison) being allowed on this property in the winter, but it would grow from there. The agencies in the Stock Growers Association and Live Stock Producers are fearful enough of brucellosis that at some point we have to compromise and say “Okay, if you will feel better if we take these itsy bitsy teeny weenie steps, regardless of how much it costs. Okay, fine.” If you will agree that if all goes well, the numbers can increase and increase and increase and that is what is going to happen. We believe that that will happen because we have built up trust with the State Fish and Wildlife Parks Department. APHIS knows we’ll come after them with guns slinging (sorry, but we will). APHIS is the Animal Plant Health Inspection Service who enforces wildlife disease laws and livestock disease laws. So, there’s a lot of trust involved in this, but there are things on paper. The buyout is good for only thirty years. That’s also where I think Bear Creek Council’s inherent optimism and rationality comes to play here. A lot can change in thirty years. We have seen a lot change very positively in the twelve years we’ve been working on this issue. Sure, we’ve got reason to believe that it might go into the toilet and we’ve made a huge mistake, but we’ve also have a lot of reason to believe it will continue in a very positive way. We’re taking a chance, we’re backing the risk takers on this one, but we’ve firmly supported it and that put us at odds with a lot of groups. It also put us in agreement with some groups too.

Another example is a very simple on-the-face-of-it solution for the conflicts in this Gardner area that on the north side to simple remove all of the cattle here and make this a cattle free zone. But, Bear Creek Council believes that, for one thing we believe pretty much that the fear of brucellosis transmission to bison and then from bison to livestock is not scientifically proven yet. It’s based on, still, a lot of fear and not many facts. More research needs to be done and there needs to be more tolerance for bison. That includes allowing small family livestock operators who have been here since the early 20th century to continue to have their livestock. There’s got to be a way to allow them to have it. Some of them aren’t our members, but a very important person in this community is and he raises livestock with his grandchildren now. So, we’re working to find a way.

“About the grazing rights on animals, how many ranchers actually have access to that land and how far away are they?” Are you talking about the Royal Teton Ranch land? The public land around here. I don’t know the answer to that question. It’s not very many, for example Hank Rate our member who is raising cattle now with three generations of his family has a public grazing lease, but it involves like twenty cows. It’s one permit area. Another person who has cattle, I think it’s about the same number, maybe twice that. “So, it’s not like they have to bring 200 to 300 cattle over here to graze, it’s just 20 cattle?” Yeah, it’s a small number and they’re very fence-able. The conflict time is in the wintertime when bison are migrating out and staying out here. These livestock operators are amenable to fencing their cattle in the wintertime.

“So this is about bison, when we’ve been talking about brucellosis. So, what do they do with their elk as far as having feeding grounds for elk? Where, we do see the transmission from. If you want to have the cattle here, as the tradition, but you still have the problem of the brucellosis transmission do you incorporate the elk as well when you discuss this?” Again, as part of our trying to focus so that we are our most effective on a few key things, we don’t specifically don’t deal with elk in this equation, but we are aware it is there. That’s one reason we feel like fencing these small groups in the Gardner Basin would be very effective because bison fences are going to keep out the elk and it won’t disrupt their, or anybody’s, migration at all.

“Can you explain the fencing? Is if fencing cattle in?” Yes, it’s fencing cattle in. “So it’s not keeping bison out?” No, it’s not constricting the movement of bison. Now I have to be careful here because there are two different types of fencing strategies that are going to be used here in the Gardner Basin. We don’t know for sure, but we’re working towards getting the individual groups of cattle, the small groups of family owned cattle, fenced during the wintertime with what they call take-down fences. I can’t tell you exactly what they look like. I really don’t know, but they can be put up and taken down seasonally. That’s to keep the cattle in to keep them confined. That’s just for like 2 or 3 families in the Gardner Basin, very small scale. The other kind of fencing that is going to be going up is associated with the lease buyout with the Church Universal Triumphant. Private property owners there along that corridor, some of them are very concerned about public and personal safety from the bison and the Church Universal Triumphant’s headquarters is right there in the middle of this corridor where the bison are going to be allowed to move from the national park to the national forest lands. There are enough private land owners that are concerned about their safety that part of this deal is fencing that corridor to keep the bison in the corridor and not roaming off onto private property or into the Church headquarters property. That is very controversial, it’s very malleable and we’re going to see how it works.

“If they can only bring 20 cattle onto public lands why did some of them stress that if they we’re able to use that then it was going to be a hardship for them? If it’s only 20 cattle, I don’t see how that is such a detriment to their industry.” It’s actually not. Let me make sure we’re clear. When the cattle are confined and fenced, we’re envisioning that on a person’s private land. They have grazing leases that they use in the summertime that are public land and those aren’t confined, unless they do it on their own as part as their agreement with the forest service. So, there’s not restriction on the summertime grazing of cattle. If and when such leases would come up for renewal, we would certainly talk to the forest service about what’s called retiring those leases. It’s not just for the bison. It’s for the elk, the deer, and all the other wildlife that need those lands. There is a major land owner near Yankee Jim Canyon who has voluntarily retired some of his public leases and he’s voluntarily taking cattle off his land mainly because he’s getting older and he doesn’t feel like dealing with them anymore. But, he’s also trying to secure his private land with a conservation buyer, someone who’s going to come in buy that land and protect it. It’s not a done deal yet, but we’re really excited about it. “So, there really isn’t that much of a chance for the bison and the cattle to actually roam together at the same time?” No, and that’s been a key part of the Bison Management Plan all along, what they call temporal and spatial separation. That’s why there’s been some hazing on the west side recently, a lot of intensive grazing because the temporal, spatial separation deadline came and went and there were still bison out. According to the written agreement the bison have to be back in the park, but what makes people so upset, which we also agree with, is there’s no cattle there anymore and the ones that are coming on aren’t coming on until July. So, what’s all this ruckus for the last two months? “And that’s public land that you just described?” It’s public and private land. A lot of the hazing has been going on private land.

“I’ve read where they’ve sent in bison to slaughter…” Yes, that’s in the plan. It is part of the bison management plan. It is a very complicated plan. One of the first things I tell people and I shouldn’t have told you all first thing, this is not built on rationality. A lot of the agency players will tell you the same thing. One of the triggers for sending bison to slaughter is if the population of bison in Yellowstone National Park, going into the winter, is more than 3,000 animals. Whenever that happens, the Montana Department of Livestock has a right to just shoot the animals without testing. It is so politically unpopular now that they make every effort to capture the animals and test them. In the field, they use a field test which is a blood test. It’s not extremely accurate, but it’s what they use and if the animal tests positive, it goes to slaughter. It’s pretty much that simple. There are lots of other variations of that plan and I encourage you to read it. It’s on the web. If you go to the Yellowstone National Park website, you’ll find it. It’ll give you a lot of appreciation for the complexity of this issue and you’ll be able to see where things are rational and if you think that that probably doesn’t make any sense, you’re probably right.

“You mentioned earlier that there are very different issues going on with the west side and the north side. Could you explain a couple of the reasons you say it’s so different, because you’re both looking at bison management, but what makes it so different in each region?” It’s one thing that complicates the bison management plan because they do recognize the differences, so there are different rules. Our climate is different, very different. We don’t get the snow. We are on the northern range. We’re low down; we’re the lowest part of Yellowstone National Park. It’s very dry, its grasslands, and its wide open. A lot of times the bison don’t even come close to our border. They have no interest, no desire, no need to come out of Yellowstone. So, there are many winters when we don’t have an animal come out at all. This is one of those winters. West Yellowstone gets a lot of snow and they get a lot of snow every winter. Sometimes they get it very late in the winter. So, it’s a very different scenario there and that’s the main reason. “So, it’s more about the weather and the geography?” Right, the other thing that is different, but it’s changing, up until recently another big difference was the bison down in that part of Yellowstone dealt with much more severe winter than the bison up here, so they want to go out and have their calves. There’s a beautiful calving place out there. Until the last two years, the bison weren’t coming out here to calve; now they are. They’re starting to come out here. So, we don’t know what’s going to happen with that. Those are the two main things; behavior and the climate are very different.

Let me cover the last two questions that I thought were kind of interesting. How do I feel about motorized vehicles during the wintertime? We’ve always remained neutral on that, while we wait for better science to be pleaded and to get better answers. A key research project is underway right now that’s evaluating bison use of the winter over snow road between Norris Junction and Madison Junction. The scientists think that that may be a key reason why we are seeing so many animals, bison, from the southern part of the park coming up here in the wintertime. It’s not the only reason, but it might be the major transport route. If that winds up the case, the park is going to try and close that and we would support it. We generally feel that right now winter use is, until proven otherwise, a fairly neutral activity when it comes to bison, since it has been put under some controls. The animals are not harassed like they use to be. The people coming into the park have to have guides and that helps build awareness of bison which we think is really important too.

Then the other question was what else do we work on? Bear Creek Council, ever January, starts out our calendar year by reviewing what our major campaigns have been and what might be new ones for the coming year. The bison campaign is put on the table with everything else every January. We discuss it, sometimes to death, but we discuss all of these things and whoever is at that meeting has a vote in what are going to be our top three issues for the year. For the last couple of years bison have been there, but they’ve been maybe third which I think is really interesting. They have consistently been voted one of the top three issues for us to work on. Greening and sustainability, for the last couple of years, has been our second major project. I love that one because its community driven, its community benefits, it’s very direct. We have solar panels on our school now that we helped put up there on Earth Day this year. We’ve been working with the industrial arts classes to build recycling bins. They asked us about recycling textbooks. One of our crew members found out how to do that and we were able to recycle textbooks this year, for the whole community not just the students. That’s been a hugely successful and popular project. The third one that we are focusing on this year is called Bear Awareness Gardner. For the last two autumns, we have had grizzly bears come down to Gardner because we have a lot of unsecured trash, we’ve got apple trees with apples on the ground, and we’ve got people with gardens who don’t have them fenced and don’t harvest the gardens right away. We’ve been complacent. We haven’t had bears in town for a long time and all the sudden it’s not black bears it’s grizzly bears coming here. We don’t want the bears to get in trouble and we don’t want people or pets to get hurt. Unfortunately I’ve heard that you all won’t be here Sunday night, but we’re having a big public event Sunday night, a bluegrass concert. All the net profits are going towards this campaign, which is a collaborative project with two other groups in Gardner. One of them is the Chamber of Commerce, which we think is really cool.

“Do you put a publication out yearly or quarterly?” We have a member newsletter that comes out monthly and when we get around to it, it’s posted on the web. Anything we do like that, letters to the editor, our comments on things that are going through the EIS process we try to get onto our website as soon as possible so that they are public. “So you’re the ones that actually had experts talking about specific issues?” We might’ve, but I think Buffalo Field Campaign does too and some of the other groups do also. We have a fabulous member who is a webmaster, but he does a great job with that. He’s been a little overwhelmed recently.