Mike Mease

Buffalo Field Campaign Co-Founder

June 2009

“The thing about Montana politics and even Schweitzer our governor, who we helped elect, and the environmental community still has sided with the livestock industry on every turn so far. So, we helped get this guy elected and the livestock industry is in such control that he cannot do anything. I’m sure that he’s been talked to.... “

“On a more national level, we have worked to do one bill in our history, which started to drum up a lot of support but our current way to get into the administration is that we have a project going on right now with outdoor retailers in the first nations of the continent. We’ve been working a lot with the Intertribal Bison Cooperative which is now native run. The Intertribal Bison Cooperative is a Native American organization that represents, at last count, 55 tribes. We signed a memorandum of understanding at the last board meeting which states that we are going to work together to protect Yellowstone bison. That is a very huge move. The woman that cofounded this organization with me is Rosalie Littethunder, a traditional Lakota elder. She has been doing a lot of work in bringing Orville Lookinghorse back here who is equated to perhaps the pope on the Lakota level. He’s a 19th carrier of the sacred white buffalo calf pipe and he’s a very big holy man in their world. Just on the 31st of this month he held a prayer and you guys might’ve even gone out and seen the site at the old capture facilities site on horse pew which is yet another ironic twist. “

“So much of this is occurring on our natural forest public land, originally earmarked and designated as wildlife habitat outside the park. I think everyone knows that visits Yellowstone it’s beautiful country, but it’s not prime ungulate habitat year round. It’s a high elevation plateau that traditionally gets some of the biggest snow fall all around in the lower 48. All the animals migrate out and that brings us to the biggest hypocrisy of it all is that in the last 3 years three states have lost their brucellosis free status on their cattle: Wyoming, Idaho, and Montana. In all three cases, they’ve been attributed to elk and yet the elk wander freely wherever they want in this ecosystem. It really just shows; is this about brucellosis? Or is this about an unfortunately lingering prejudice that exists since time immortal? We came and we cleared this land of these buffalo.”

“I don’t want to insult the buffalo, but the buffalo were really the cattle of this continent. We came here bringing our European cattle in with the destructive ways. People don’t look at it a lot, but cattle are an invasive species. They’re like a weed to this continent. They’re not native here. They absorb, kill, and control the land. I agree that everyone has their right to coexist. If they buy their private property they should deserve and warrant their ability to live, but I think the buffalo have that right as well and that they deserve to be treated as all other wildlife to be able to wander our national forests, our public land. People think that they’re “So dangerous”, well so are grizzly bears and so are wolves. We have damage control and ways of managing that. I’m sure we could get people to pay $1,000 to euthanize trouble bison through a hunt process. People are already paying for these kinds of things. It’s just the lack of ability to want these animals back. In our mission statement is to strengthen the voice of the native community and now that that’s really taking a turn, we have a plan implemented to approach Obama with the first nation’s people of a lot of the Plains, as the buffalo’s so sacred to the vast majority of the Plains’ animals, all these different groups and demand that they are involved in this process. It’s an insult.”

“I’m not originally from Montana. I came to college here at age 18. I was an army brat. I grew up all over the world. Ever since I’ve had a choice to live where I want to live, I’ve lived in Montana. I went to the University of Montana and I love it here. No matter what, I will be to every local here an out of stater. We pay so much heed here to the “I’m a 4th generation Montanan….I’m a 5th generation Montanan”, but we have no respect or reverence to the thousands of residents and the people of the first nation. People who have always lived here, who have coexisted since time immortal with these buffalo, but are never asked to be involved with any of the management or anything. I think that’s probably the biggest insult to this issue.

“Just recently the three (?) livestock agencies in the federal government decided to dismiss the brucellosis plan, the Aphis plan,…..”To split state status”….change up of zone area with specific counties. Is it letting live stock agencies determine where areas need to be controlled? They really haven’t proposed a plan, but they’re just throwing out all the existing rules. Does that help you then focus your efforts on the real purpose of bison baiting?? then brucellosis?”

“Well as far as I know, it’s just a thought. It’s not a new rule. It hasn’t been passed by any legislation or federal anything. It was just in the newspaper. We had a similar case with Governor Schweitzer where we introduced the idea when he first got elected. We had three meetings that year. Our big suggestion was what we referred to at the time as “Split State Status.” It would basically just draw this line around the greater Yellow Stone eco system and have a different brucellosis rule in there. Well the Montana state livestock people shut it down. So, I’m just curious to where it’s going to go. I mean, yeah it would be a step in the right direction, but I don’t know that it’s so carved in stone right now and that it’s actually legitimate. I think it’s an idea that they’re passing around and yes, we would advocate for something like that. And we’re not trying to say that brucellosis is this myth or it’s obviously something.”

“I mean, I’m not a scientist and that’s not my background, but basically if I was going to go after a disease, I would go after all the carriers of that disease if I was going to manage it and have a solution. The elk which overpopulate everywhere and there could never be too many elk anywhere in the greater Yellow Stone ecosystem. They’re still not managed that way. So, what we say is give them some habitat, give them some year round space. Any buffalo you kill, let’s do research. Let’s employ Montana State University, Idaho State, all of these surrounding universities as well as Native American colleges and let’s come up with a vaccine for the cows. Let’s come up with a solution. It’s obviously not a solution based plan at the moment and that’s what our discrepancy is. These buffalo are so important to their genetic viability of their existence. Why aren’t we managing for their safety, instead of these cows which overpopulate everywhere? It’s a ridiculously guided, you know…. In the last year, the GAO (Government Accounting Office) came out and said this plan was an utter failure, an utter waste of money, but yet we perpetuate it in this depressed economy. You tell me where the logic is.”

“Can you clarify private land and public land? Do you want to buy some to be able to roam on private lands too, or do you want them not to?” I mean, I think this is the big dilemma here. This disease issue does warrant some concern, but why isn’t it there for the elk? Part of our plan, and we’re trying hopefully to talk the president into something like this, is currently we have what we call Conservation easements, but they all involve cattle. The vast majority of those come with cattle. So, we’re going to propose that we come up with this plan where we give large track land owners the option to get the same tax break to have these cattle on their lands as they would to rip down their fences and open their land up to wildlife. Obviously we’re going to run into ranchers who want to keep their way of life, but until we come up with a cure or a solution, we obviously need to know how to make buffalo proof fences. It’s not just the buffalo, you better be worried about the elk coming on your land. So, we can just fortify their land with these wildlife proof fences and let them have the rest of the land around them. You could actually, through this process, hopefully implement a recycle process. Where you take down fences from here and use that to fortify the private land ones. You take away the cost to the individual and you know a lot of people, for instance the Sun Ranch, one of the biggest ranches down in the valley here is more of a hobby ranch than it is, but they get a break for bringing in 200+ cows a year and they get a tax write-off. If they all of the sudden had an incentive to rip down their fences and open up their land, they would all of the sudden perhaps be more interested. Think of all the costs you save: fence maintenance, animals that you have to maintain and keep, the wolves that are out there as well as the grizzly bears, the impact on the ecosystem from this invasive species. So, just give people an incentive to do both things.”

“I mean, this is Montana. We can grow cows everywhere. We’ve been protecting for the last two decades for these cows that aren’t even here. That’s the saddest part of it all. Over in west Yellowstone, the cows aren’t even here except for three to four months out of the year when the buffalo are traditionally back in the park. Granted when we start letting them out, that won’t be the solution, but basically there are ways to work around it and until we start managing to let buffalo be buffalo….. Right now when they step across this imaginary line then we haze them back. Their instincts, of course, tell them to go back where the food is. I have got to go, this is why I’m leaving in the first place. We manage everything in these square boxes, not looking at ecosystems because they don’t care what the scientists say. Rick Wallen isn’t a big sayer in this play. Rick Wallen is a guy that they need this perspective and not be locked into these brucellosis things. We’ve got to manage to keep the buffalo a healthy heard and to keep them around. There’s no epidemic of cows going extinct.”

“If you could sum up, since 1997 when you started what’s one of the more memorable moments of your experience working with the buffalo?” That would be a hard one to pick. I think just being in their presence is probably one of my favorite things of all. Just watching how as an animal they have lead cows and lead males, but their whole job is to take care of everyone in the herd. I’ve never seen an animal that respects itself and each other so much. Their whole existence is that…. You know I’ve watched them be hunted and they’ll shoot one in a herd out of three bulls and those other two bulls will have a mourning session for their brother. At first, they’ll go down and physically lift him up, get him back on his feet. They realize that he’s dying and they do these circular rituals. The hunters are learning about his passion and they’re teaching. When you watch them walk through snow in the winter you’ve got four to five feet of snow and you have a heard of buffalo, they walk single file. When the lead buffalo, he or she, gets tired they step to the side and the whole procession goes by and then they jump at the very end where it’s the easiest to walk. Just how they work together, I really think humanity could learn a lot. We let our leaders who preach Christianity and prolife and everything to us, openly let people destroy the air that all need to breathe to live in this continent. We let them destroy the water that we all need to drink. We let them feed us food that is contaminated and toxic and there are homeless everywhere in the world. These people, how can you get them to care so much about wild buffalo in Montana, when they don’t even care about people in their own back yards? We’re to that mentality where we all don’t count and we all don’t matter, where in the buffalo world everyone counts. Their whole ability to survive these mass slaughters makes it beyond. It’s just like the Native Americans, they’ve made it past. They were killed down to 23 animals, from 30-60 million. These are strong survivors. Why is that? Because everyone in their herd matters. The whole existence of the herd is to make every buffalo live and survive and have a full life. To watch that in action and get to learn what they do and how they talk to each other. We get caught up in these days and in this depressed, harassment, slaughter that’s been going on since before we even started this. We don’t celebrate the beauty of these animals enough and what they mean and why it’s important that they exist. Why we have to have them around? Why they deserve a place on this planet? Until that recognition, respect, and restoration occurs we will be here every day out in the field standing with those buffalo and hopefully telling the world, in a respectful way, why and how they need help and why we need them around.”

“As an organization, what kind of processes do you use to decide what your strategy is going to be for the next term and how you run as an organization?” I wouldn’t say I run it. There are way too many strong people. Well I mean, we work on so many levels, it’s like our first and most precious obligation and why we are different from other groups and why I feel that we have a bit of a right to speak for the buffalo is we stand with the buffalo from November, when hunting season starts, all the way until June, this year late June because they just killed four bulls last week. We typically like to, we’re armed with one chip digital video cameras, still cameras, and our first obligation is to show the world what’s going on and to educate and outreach. Then we work with lawyers on litigation on several levels. We also work with Darrell, who’s our habitat coordinator, and we work with different levels of legislation, both on state and national level. Our network in an outreach with basically groups that see the buffalo in the same eyes that we do. They can hand out some of our newsletters from maybe last year. We had this beautiful newsletter that we did with Intertribal Bison Cooperative, Titonka Kiluate (?): Rosalie’s native group, Buffalo Field Campaign, Horse Pew (?), Neighbors Of Buffalo, who’s this local group out in that peninsula that formed a group in protest of the slaughter, and then our national group National Resource and Defense Council. We published this thing with a map in it, just a whole good vision. We’re currently in the process of talking the message to Obama, networking the non-profit world with the outdoor retailers. Patagonia is one of our biggest sponsors that we have, Osprey Backpacks, and this group Clean Canteen. We’re coming up with a sign on letter, which the goal is and it accrues to natives taking over and being a bigger part in the management. It’s a whole strategy to take to Obama. We’re targeting 50 environmental groups, 50 tribes, and 50 outdoor retailers and then we’re going to set up a meeting with Obama to deliver this message to him and hopefully a solution to this problem. Those are the ones that I remember off hand. We create documentaries. We do all kinds of stuff. But, what we’re lacking and what excites me about you guys and I’d love to help point you in the direction of a woman, Flow Gardapie (?), who has worked with us since we began. She’s a Native American biologist, but also the curriculum for kids. That’s why I really wanted to say that end part. I get stuck in this depressing realm of having to talk about “Oh my gosh, today we had to watch ten die, we watched the helicopter do this, we watched 14 buffalo fall through the ice because they were hazing them in the middle of winter.” It’s always sadness and depression. Well what’s lacking in this picture I feel is the respect and reverence and what makes this animal so unique, different, and special and getting that out there. That’s when change is going to come, when people start to revere these animals again and understand why they’re important to this continent. That’s when we’re going to start to create some change and get things rolling. I honor you guys that you’re taking this time and I look forward to being apart of with any of this that I can help with. Anyway that we can educate people more about the importance of these animals, I think is a step in the right direction.

“You say she’s written curriculum?” She’s worked a little bit with it and she’s Native American, so she has that perspective. I think obviously that has to be included. Yes, I have her card and I will get that right after I’m done here.

“Could you mention again the companies you say support you?” The outdoor companies you mean? “Or is it on your newsletter? That’s one way we can help, if we know that their helping out organizations like this.” They’re all on that postcard. There’s a list of groups that support us on our website. “Buy a Jackson Brown CD. He donated that blue suburban to us.” “We call it “Runnin’ on empty.” “The Indigo Girls donated a laptop, Crosby, Stills, Nash, Pearl Jam, just all different types.” “We had a guy call from Indiana yesterday who went and bought an album and there was a little note for flier on the inside of the CD case and he called up and said “Hey, I just bought this CD” I had never heard of the band, but he called up to tell us how awesome we were. I called him back up, he wasn’t expecting a call and I just said “Hey, thank you because we have some days around here where it’s just nice to know that someone far away did something as innoxious as buying a CD and discover us in the process and thought of us enough to call us and tell us you like what we do.”

I’m going to cut out here, after your question unless anyone else, but I just wanted to…Chip put this together the last couple of days and I’m just so proud of it. If you care to sponsor us, or help us out, these things are all for sale. Even now in the state of Montana, if you look at all of our cars, they all have these license plates are legal. They’re a fundraiser for us, but these are sample plates we sell to people out of state. In the state of Montana we already have over 400 people with those license plates on their cars. And it’s only it’s first year. It was another Patagonia project. If you go north on Highway 191 you’ll see a little tiny billboard, they’ve sponsored two billboards, and it basically says “Yellowstone national park kills thousands of bison. Ask them why.” It caused so much ruckus, we got calls from their DC office. They were begging us to take it down and that was a six month project. They left the big billboard up in Billings for a year and this one has been up for three and a half years. They haven’t taken it down or charged us for six months. You have support in all these weird circles and it just keeps growing because the bison are worth it. They’re that important.

“If everything panned out and you were able to get the Tribal Council in control and the bison were able to have a winter range, what would be your next step?” As far as calling this a success? Well the one nice thing is, as a non-profit agency we were able to buy this whole place, the nine cabins and seven acres. We have a project in the works and I probably shouldn’t say this because it may not happen next summer, but we’re going to build a big straw bail classroom, bathhouse, and garage for working on these cars in the winter. I would like to turn this into some kind of education center about this corridor of the Yellowstone ecosystem. It’s not just the bison, its development, and its so many things and why such great people have gotten that word out and educated people about this ecosystem and its importance. Be something along the lines that at least this property and this area would be left for something like that. Our back yard is the Lee med cap wilderness. I can walk up there twenty miles without seeing a road. There’s a 100,000 acres of wilderness and where else can you go and see that. It would always be an education center to protect this corridor and to protect this area. Me, I would probably go on to making more documentaries, but I would probably always live here and be a part of the buffalo’s life. Once you get touched by the buffalo, you get as weird as me.

I’d encourage maybe talking to Yellowstone national park about when they find dead buffalo, getting horns and skulls and having a visual packet and getting some fur so people can actually see and touch. Things that I always do, I always get a hump bone which holds up that big muscle. It’s right off the vertebrae.

buffalo@wildrockies