

A stylized, colorful illustration of a landscape. The sky is divided into yellow, orange, and red sections, with a large yellow sun. Two birds are flying in the sky. Below the sky are blue mountains. In the foreground, there is a green field with a herd of bison and a person on horseback. The bottom of the image shows green grass and foliage.

# 2021 NATIVE NATIONS PARTNERSHIP REPORT







# GREETINGS

From high atop the hump of the Turtle's back I can look out and see all the relatives moving across the landscape. The life sustaining foods—grasses and plants—blow and sway in the wind. I smell the freshness that the root nation brings to the air that we breathe. I feel Grandmother Earth—Unci Maka—beneath my feet. From the tiniest buzzing insect to the thunder of hooves touching the land, the world is alive with sound. I am enlightened and humbled when I recognize that I am only a small part of this wonder, a fragment of the ecosystem and the many relationships that have evolved and survived throughout the ages.

WWF's Northern Great Plains (NGP) Program acknowledges these connections as we work on a variety of projects spread out across the NGP. We acknowledge the rarest mammal in this part of Turtle Island, a masked ferret, as we offer hope for its continued presence on the landscape. As it goes with so much of our work, survival will only be possible if connections between the wildlife and human communities are sustained.

We acknowledge the bison—once almost erased from the land—for the irreplaceable role it plays in sustaining the grasslands. Today our relative is returning home from the National Parks, which were once its last refuge after so many were lost. Prayers, prophecy, strengthening, reconnecting, and perseverance called them to thunder across the grasslands of a place called Wolakota. Its name acknowledges the sacred Lakota way of life that has connected its people to the bison since time immemorial.

And we acknowledge the 15 Native nations who have come together to form the Buffalo Nations Grasslands Alliance (The Alliance), whose connection and partnership will ensure that there will be grasslands for the generations to come. Unci Maka smiles upon the relationships that are being restored, while recognizing the incredible challenges that lie ahead.

Thank you for taking the time to read WWF's inaugural Native Nations Partnership Report. This year's report summarizes our work over the past several years. As we look to the future, WWF's NGP Program has been encouraged by the momentum that we've been able to build with our partners in recent years. Community collaboration and support allow our work to have a meaningful impact. Whether it is restoring bison to Native lands or developing strategies for sustainable financing, it is the personal connections that bring our efforts to life. In the coming year, we'll continue to build off of the successes and lessons learned thus far. Exciting initiatives are underway that include expanding bison habitat at the Wolakota Buffalo Range, returning black-footed ferrets to new partner lands, and developing the future of The Alliance. With your continued support, we can accomplish great things for Native nations here in the NGP.

Wopila Tanka for taking this journey with us.

**-Monica Terkildsen,**  
*NGP Program Native Nations Liaison*

# OUR TEAM



**KRISTY BLY, Manager,  
Black-footed Ferret Program:**  
kristy.bly@wwfus.org

Kristy leads WWF's recovery efforts for the endangered black-footed ferret and their prairie dog prey through partnerships with Native nations, ranching communities, and federal, state, and private entities.



**NOELLE GUERNSEY,  
Specialist, Bison and Black-footed Ferret Programs:**  
noelle.guernsey@wwfus.org

Noelle supports WWF's bison and black-footed ferret restoration efforts across the NGP in ways that benefit communities and ecosystems.



**DENNIS JORGENSEN, Manager,  
Bison Program:**  
dennis.jorgensen@wwfus.org

Dennis leads WWF's efforts to restore bison conservation herds and expand their habitat through partnerships with Native nations and National Parks.



**LIBBY KHUMALO, PhD, Sustainable  
Financing Coordinator:**  
libby.khumalo@wwfus.org

Libby coordinates the Buffalo Nations Grasslands Alliance by fostering conversations, conducting outreach with Native nations, connecting with Native knowledge-holders, facilitating gatherings, assisting with fundraising, and offering strategic guidance to Alliance members.



**MONICA TERKILDSEN, NGP Program  
Native Nations Liaison:**  
monica.terkildsen@wwfus.org

Monica, a citizen of the Oglala Lakota Nation, joined WWF's NGP Program in 2017 to lead outreach efforts across the Pine Ridge Reservation's South Unit (the Strong Hold). In her role as the NGP Native Nations Liaison, Monica makes connections with many tribes within the Great Plains and beyond, building partnerships through Indigenous knowledge and voice.

# WHERE WE WORK

World Wildlife Fund proudly partners with Native nations throughout the NGP in support of their efforts to conserve and restore grasslands ecosystems within their communities. WWF works as a guest on these Native-owned lands, supporting local visions and strategies that aim to bolster ecological, economic, and community benefits. WWF's staff contributes to restoration planning, capacity building activities, community engagement and outreach efforts, supporting financing through grants and fundraising, wildlife management efforts, and implementation of on-the-ground wildlife conservation activities. Our current collaborative work with Native communities focuses on black-footed ferret and plains bison restoration, a communal lands project at Pine Ridge Reservation, and supporting the goals of the Buffalo Nations Grasslands Alliance across the NGP region.

**Please note:** WWF's NGP Program uses the preferred term "Native nations" to refer to the governance structures established by the Indian Reorganization Act, and also uses the corresponding terms "Tribe/Tribal" and "Tribal member." We acknowledge that terminology is often contested, and continue to seek input from our partners to learn and adapt the terms that are used.





**Blackfeet**

*Amskapi  
Pikuni*

**Rocky Boys**

*Chippewa  
and Cree*

**Fort Belknap**  
*A'aninin and  
Nakoda*

**Fort Peck**

*Nakota, Lakota,  
and Dakota*

**Turtle Mountain**  
*Chippewa*

**Fort Berthold**

*Mandan, Hidatsa,  
and Arikara*

MONTANA

90

94

**Standing Rock**

*Hunkpapa Lakota, Sicasapa  
Lakota and Yanktonai Dakota*

Bismarck

SOUTH  
DAKOTA

**Crow**

*Apsáalooke*

**Northern Cheyenne**

*Tsétsêhéstâhese  
and So'taahe*

**Cheyenne River**

*Minnicoujou, Oohenunpa,  
Itazipco, and Sicasapa*

IDAHO

90

WYOMING

**Lower Brule**

*Kul Wicasa Oyate*

**Crow Creek**

*Mdewakanton  
Dakota*

Rapid City

**Pine Ridge**

*Oglala*

**Rosebud**

*Sicangu Yankton*

*Yanktonai*

NEBRASKA

Buffalo Nations Grasslands Alliance (BNGA) Invited Nations

Communal Lands Project



Bison & Black-footed Ferret  
Reintroductions on Native Nations  
Partner Lands

# PLAINS BISON

The plains bison is an ecological and cultural keystone species that was once central to the lifeways and lands of Native nations throughout the Great Plains. WWF partners with Native communities seeking to restore bison to their lands. Our goal is to ensure that bison restoration fosters community benefits and ecological and economic sustainability. Currently, WWF works closely with partners at the following Native nations: Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes, Fort Belknap Indian Community, and the Sicangu Lakota Nation in

support of the expressed values, needs, and aspirations of these communities. Additionally, WWF works with the US National Park Service and Parks Canada on bison restoration efforts.

## PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

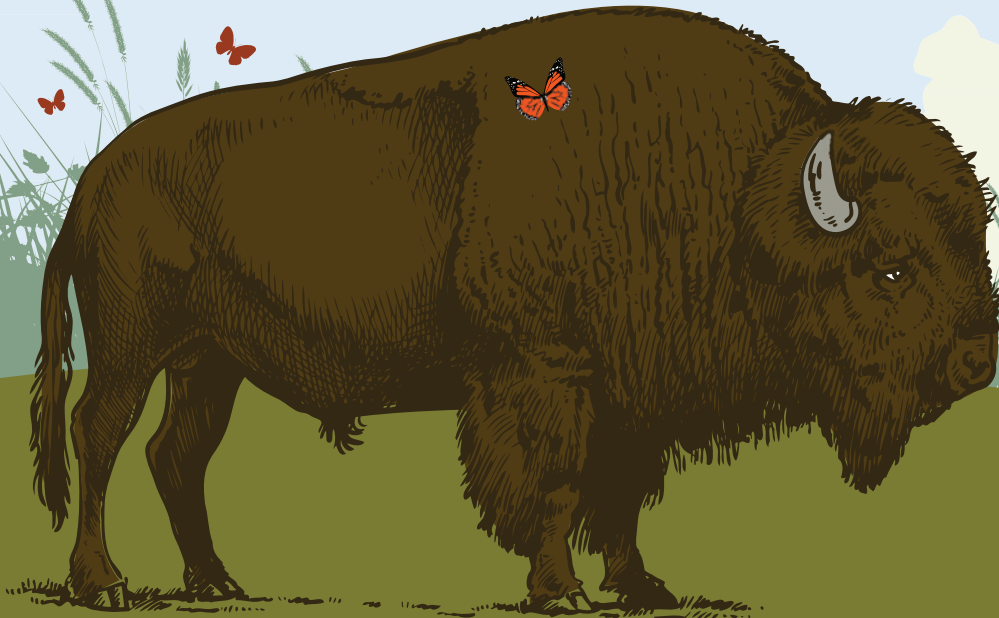
### 2014-PRESENT:

#### Fort Peck:

- WWF was invited by members of the Fort Peck community to work collaboratively to ensure that their Tribal bison herd contributes to the health and wellbeing of the community. Through this collaboration, WWF has supported the Pté Group, a community

stakeholder group, and the Fort Peck Buffalo Program by funding an additional position. WWF has also supported the development of new programs and activities including affordable meat sales, improvements to Fort Peck's Yellowstone bison quarantine facility, and an online fish and game license sales system.

- Since 2016 WWF has supported Fort Peck's efforts to develop a "Buffalo Trail" for visitors and community members. This is an exciting project that will increase community access to the bison herd. The trail will feature art installations and interpretive signs that will encourage outdoor recreation, strengthen cultural connection, and deepen appreciation for Fort Peck's lands and wildlife.



### Badlands National Park:

- WWF supported a land swap in Badlands National Park that made it possible to expand bison habitat in Badlands National Park by almost 40% to over 80,000 acres. Almost 1,200 of these extraordinary animals now live on these grasslands. In a demonstration of the interrelatedness of bison restoration efforts, 50 bison from Badlands National Park were transferred to the Wolakota Buffalo Range on the Rosebud Reservation in October 2020.

### Fort Belknap:

- WWF has worked with Fort Belknap's Buffalo Program to assess range carrying capacity, to advise on proposed bison range management scenarios, to support bison range expansion, and to facilitate the construction of wildlife-friendly bison fencing. WWF also funds a part-time position through a grant administered by Aaniiih Nakoda College to support the buffalo program's community outreach and engagement.

### STATUS OF PARTNER HERDS IN 2020

Partner Conservation Herd	Total number of bison including calves (2020)	Total number of acres (2020)
Fort Peck Reservation (Yellowstone bison)*	370	15,000
Fort Belknap Indian Community (Yellowstone bison)	100	1,000
Wolakota Buffalo Range	100	8,300
Badlands National Park's North Unit	1,115	80,193
Grasslands National Park	446	44,500
American Prairie Reserve	810	42,200

\* Adult Bison Only

*“The sacred relationship between Native nation communities and the buffalo is part of a shared story of strength, resilience, and economic revitalization. To do anything good requires healthy relationships and partnerships, so we are incredibly thankful for all of our partners.”*

**-Wizipan Little Elk**, CEO, Rosebud Economic Development Corporation

## 2020 HIGHLIGHTS

- REDCO, the economic arm of the Sicangu Lakota Nation, partnered with WWF and Rosebud Tribal Land Enterprise to dedicate nearly 28,000 acres (8,300 fenced in 2020) of Tribally owned grasslands to developing what will become North America's largest Native-owned and managed bison herd. The new Wolakota Buffalo Range, which welcomed the first 100 bison from Badlands and Theodore Roosevelt National Parks on October 30th, 2020, will eventually support 1,500 bison.
- The challenges presented by the pandemic reminded us of the bison's unique value to Native communities. The Fort Peck and Fort Belknap Buffalo Programs provided their community members with bison meat by sustainably harvesting 36 and 37 bison respectively to provide food to community members in need during these difficult times.



# BLACK-FOOTED FERRET

The black-footed ferret is a culturally significant species for many Native American people across the Great Plains. WWF is partnering with Native communities, non-governmental organizations, private landowners, and governmental agencies to fully recover the black-footed ferret and remove it from the Federal List of Endangered Species. There are approximately 400 black-footed ferrets left in the wild today, which is well below the 3,000 individuals that are needed for the species to fully recover.

Native nations within the NGP play a significant role in advancing black-footed ferret recovery by hosting populations or striving to establish them on Tribally owned and managed lands. WWF supports partners who are actively doing this in Montana in the following communities: Fort Belknap Indian Community, the Crow Nation, and the Northern Cheyenne Nation. We are also working with Native partners in South Dakota who are considering black-footed ferret reintroductions. WWF provides training on reintroduction techniques, population and habitat monitoring, and sylvatic plague mitigation. Additionally, WWF supports wildlife managers with grant writing and reporting, and co-developing wildlife conservation plans with Native partners.

## PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

**2012-PRESENT:** WWF mentored and supported Native biologists and interns in Montana from the Fort Belknap Indian Community, Crow Nation, and Northern Cheyenne Nation.

**2013-PRESENT:** In partnership with the Fort Belknap Indian Community, WWF re-established a black-footed ferret population on community lands after a 14-year absence.

**2015:** In partnership with the Crow Tribe, WWF helped to re-established a black-footed ferret population on the Crow Nation after a 92-year absence.

**2015:** Together with the Fort Belknap Fish and Game Department (and others) WWF tested the application of drones and high-resolution 3D imagery to monitor black-footed ferret habitat.

**2019-PRESENT:** WWF partnered with the Fort Belknap Fish and Game Department (and others), to evaluate the efficacy of forward-looking infrared cameras to detect black-footed ferrets on community lands of the Fort Belknap Indian Community.



## 2020 HIGHLIGHTS

- Together with the Fort Belknap Fish and Game Department (and others), WWF evaluated the efficacy of scent-detection dogs to detect black-footed ferrets on the Fort Belknap Reservation.
- WWF initiated a co-designed black-footed ferret conservation planning process with the Northern Cheyenne Natural Resources Department, Little Dog Wildlife, and the Northern Cheyenne community.

### PROGRESS AGAINST GOAL OF 3,000 BLACK-FOOTED FERRETS IN THE WILD

Metric	National Delisting Goals	Range wide Status (2020)	NGP Ecoregion Status (2020)	Tribal Lands Status (2020)
<b>Total number of black-footed ferrets</b>	3,000	400 (13% toward delisting goal)	267 (67% of the range wide status)	43 (11% of the range wide status)

*“We as the Northern Cheyenne Tribe need a strong plan to manage, protect, and preserve the prairie dog and black-footed ferret that will allow for co-existence with these species of the grassland ecosystem. Prairie dogs have an important traditional value to the Northern Cheyenne Tribe.”*

**-Jason Whiteman**, Water and Natural Resources Administrator,  
Northern Cheyenne Natural Resources Department



# COMMUNITY CONSERVATION

## BUFFALO NATIONS GRASSLANDS ALLIANCE

The Buffalo Nations Grasslands Alliance (the Alliance) is a Native-led, sustainable financing initiative supporting conservation and sustainable livelihoods across Native nations within the NGP. WWF provides critical programmatic and fiscal support for the Alliance as it grows into an independent organization.

The Alliance envisions Native nations uniting in support of conserving the diversity of life (people, ecosystems, wildlife, and plants) in the NGP so that



it will flourish for current and future generations. Its mission is to ensure that the 15 Native nations in the NGP have the technical and financial resources to plan and act on their vision for their traditional lands and waters, which includes ensuring that:

- Tribal fish and game departments have the capacity to deliver conservation at scale;
- Tribal members thrive by sustainably stewarding and connecting with natural resources;
- Grasslands and native wildlife on Tribal lands are restored or enhanced.

### PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

**2017:** The steering committee visited the Great Bear Rainforest and Haida Gwaii and gained inspiration and guidance from Coast Funds representatives and First Nations.

**2019:** The steering committee oversaw the completion of an assessment for increasing sustainable tourism opportunities in Native nations in the NGP.

**2019:** With support from the steering committee and WWF, the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe's Department of Wildlife, Fish, and Recreation completed conservation and financial plans.

**2019:** The Rosebud Sioux Tribe's Game, Fish, and Parks Department began their conservation plan, with support from the steering committee.

## 2020 HIGHLIGHTS

- The Alliance completed a draft regional conservation plan in May.
- With support from WWF, a conservation trust fund feasibility assessment was completed in July.
- In September, the steering committee created a terms of reference for its work.
- Jonny BearCub Stiffarm joined the steering committee in October.
- In December, WWF completed a draft working report entitled, "A Pathway to Food Sovereignty: Tribal Wildlife Conservation Among Native Nations in the NGP."



## PINE RIDGE RESERVATION

Pine Ridge Reservation is a land base of 2.7 million acres consisting of 32 communities and 9 political districts, which are shaped by individual allotments, Pine Ridge Indian Reservation Fee Patents, homesteading, the Federal Declaration of Taking Act, the Pine Ridge Aerial Range, the US Bureau of Indian Affairs, US National Park Service policies, and congressional acts. This patchwork of policies, actions, and agencies represents a continued removal and separation of Oglala Lakota people from the land—both physically and spiritually.

## PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

**2017-2018:** WWF conducted a survey across across the Oglala Lakota Nation (Pine Ridge) to gain a better understanding of how community members would like their lands to be managed. In total, over 2,500 surveys were distributed across the Nation.

**2018:** Once the survey was completed, a group of community members—one to two representatives from each of the nine districts—came together as a working group to:

- Create a vision to establish a declaration of priorities from the survey data and community discussions;
- Build their own capacity to use Native land information systems and to understand what it takes to create and sustain conservation areas;
- Develop a story map, which will be used to educate community members and the Oglala Lakota Nation's leaders about the history of their lands on Pine Ridge Reservation, share community perspectives, and propose opportunities for the future.

## 2020 HIGHLIGHTS

- The Pine Ridge South Unit Working Group toured the South Unit and began discussions regarding the future of the land.
- With WWF's support, the South Unit Working Group purchased Wi-Fi hotspots to allow the group to continue to safely meet during the pandemic.

*“The past is here with us. I share the stories of my father and walk in his footprints. The future is with us as our young relatives share their thoughts and walk amongst us. We are generationally linked.”*

**-Gilbert Mesteth,**  
South Unit Working Group

*“We are all unique tribes, but we can network to learn what works for others and what might also work for us.”*

**-Emily Boyd-Valandra,** Biologist,  
Citizen of the Sicangu Lakota Nation  
(Rosebud Sioux Tribe)





# THANK YOU

We truly appreciate all that you do to advance WWF's conservation initiatives in the Northern Great Plains. We are grateful for your passion and dedication to protecting the future of these grassland ecosystems and the people and wildlife that depend on them.

