Back from the brink of extinction: A conversation with Ken Burns on 'The American Buffalo'

By **Gabriel Pietrorazio**
Published: Monday, October 16, 2023 - 4:25am
Updated: Monday, October 16, 2023 - 1:50pm

Coverage of tribal natural resources is supported in part by **Catena Foundation**

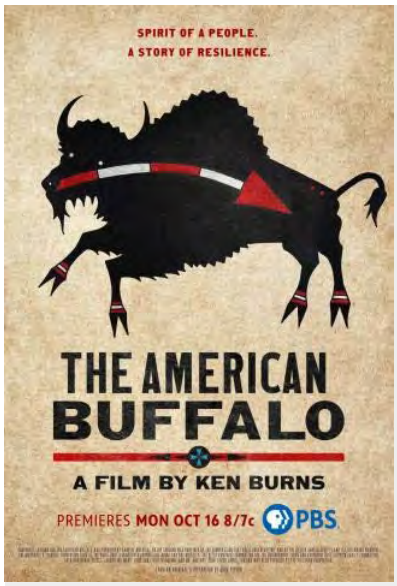
Documentary filmmaker Ken Burns discusses his latest PBS project, "The American Buffalo," with KJZZ News in an in-depth conversation about this iconic species and the Indigenous communities that share a traumatically intertwined history spanning hundreds of generations. This two-part, four-hour documentary series premieres tonight on PBS.

GABRIEL PIETRORAZIO: Ken, you know, I think the first thing I was really interested in asking you about is where did your fascination for the American West begin? And how did that ultimately shift you focusing on the American buffalo for this documentary, your latest project?

KEN BURNS: Well, I grew up a lot of my childhood on the East Coast, and then the Midwest. And I had over my bed as a young boy, a map of the United States, as many people did. They had political divisions of the states, but they weren't listed — what was listed — as a son of an anthropologist — were all the Native tribes.

And so, I had already a kind of great sense of the overlap and the overlay the strata of cultural life in the United States. And add to that, I don't know anyone on earth — certainly not — that's American — that doesn't like the buffalo. I mean, it's the largest land mammal, it is now officially, the national mammal, and it's just a beautiful and magnificent beast.

So built into my DNA, in a way is a kind of draw an attraction drawn to this amazing animal. And then in the course of several films that we've worked on, on the West, on Lewis and Clark, on the national parks, most notably, we kept saying we should do something standalone. We're doing all these biographies on other subjects, you know, like Mark Twain, and Frank Lloyd Wright, and Thomas Jefferson, Jack Johnson, you know, Jackie Robinson, we should do a biography of that.



Courtesy of PBS

A poster for 'The American Buffalo' depicting an original Illustration by John Pepion.

And I'm really glad that we waited because I think, in the decades that intervene, new scholarship arrived, very important, but also our strength, I think, I hope, as filmmakers [is] to get better, and to also not just pay lip service to other people's points of view, but actually yield and permit other points of view. There are people who have had 600 generations of experience with this animal, and the rest of us have had four or five, six, maybe maximum; I would yield to that 600 generations of experience, first and foremost, which is what we tried to do in the film.

So in a way, I'm glad we sort of didn't find the right place to jump in. You know, we first thought it would just be this biography of an animal. Of course, it is, but it cannot help but be also a biography of the people who were intertwined. For those 600 generations, we thought it would be a parable of de-extinction, and it is, particularly in climate change. But it's also a cautionary tale and an unspeakably sad tragedy in which there are those Native people have now been separated for 150 — 200 — 250 years, in some cases, longer if you're East Coast tribes, from the animal that was hugely part of their lives and their livelihoods, their folkways, their spirituality.

So this project gave us a chance to sort of fulfill that lifelong boy's excitement, I was just with a group of Buffalo, in New Hampshire, of all places where I live less than a couple of weeks ago. And looking in their eyes, you feel like you're looking into time, and these beasts have witnessed so much, and there's something about that, that we wanted to tell as well.

PIETRORAZIO: For sure, and you immediately touch upon that point in the documentary where you talk about the story of the American buffalo and Indigenous peoples as intrinsically inseparable, you kind of come out of the gate with the film talking about this and that aspect.

And so one of the things that I took away was redeeming the wilderness as an attempt to kind of rationalize this wanton killing of buffalo, essentially, and other species like elk and bear, antelope bighorn sheep, in the Great Plains. And as your documentary shows, there's a lot of history around the almost extinction of this species. Do you believe that viewers of the documentary are well aware of that history, and how close we came to a nation as essentially losing the largest land mammal in North America?

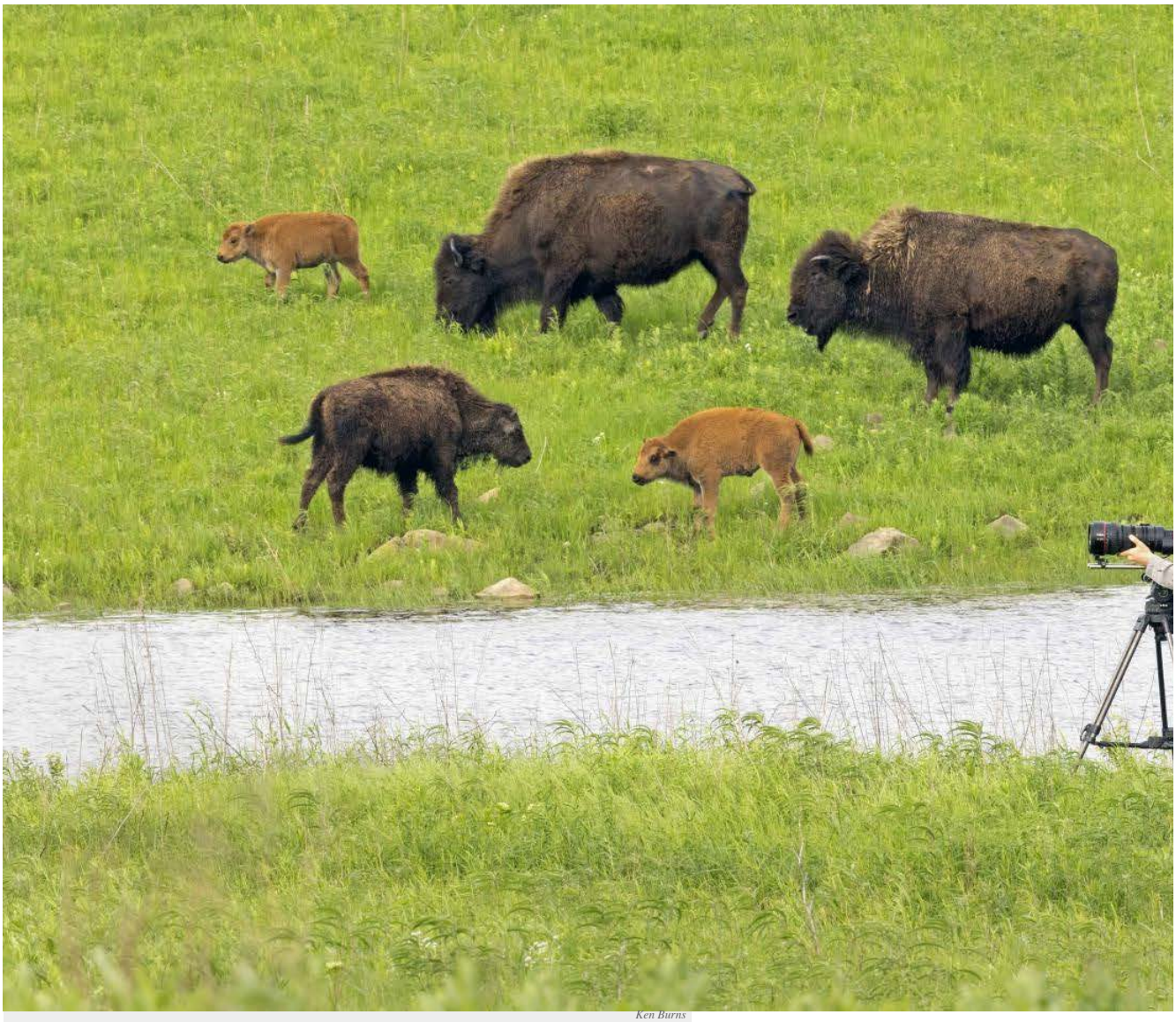
BURNS: Well, you know, it's interesting, and that's a really great question, because in all of our films, we presume ignorance not — not in a pejorative sense, but just in we can't presume that people know this. I think people know that buffalo were slaughtered. I imagine most people will be stunned at the cascade of details about that story that, you know, leaving the hides there to go from 35 million at the beginning of the 1800s to 12.5 million by the middle of the century to almost none by the end of the 1880s.

That's really a startling and staggering and sad thing that people, who had used everything from the tail to the snout and then even this, the snorts the sounds went into the rituals. The waste was used as fires on nearly treeless plains — would watch somebody just take a hide and leave 700 — 800 pounds of meat to just rot there and then later on, somebody decided the bones were valuable and people made even more money collecting the bones.

To go back to your original thing, this idea of Manifest Destiny is very much part of the American bloodstream — that we were destined to take it over, but what we saw was an Eden, this beautiful continent, and that we somehow convinced ourselves it was unpopulated, or we would dismiss the people who populated it as savages.

And unlike the Native populations, who saw themselves as related to nature, we saw ourselves correctly as the dominant species on the planet, but incorrectly in my evolving view, as therefore without responsibility to everyone else. And so if you see a river, you put a dam. If you see a stand of trees, you cut it down and you think board feet. You see a canyon, you mine it for what minerals can be extracted. You see a group of people whose land they've been occupying for 600 generations, sorry, it's our land now.

This story touches on so many aspects of who we are, not just who the buffalo is, and who the Native populations were, but who we are. There's points when, for example, George Horse Capture Jr., who appears in our film, a member of a northern Montana tribe, called the Aaniiih, he says, you know, what do you mean my cattle, my land. He just all of a sudden goes to the heart of the question, even if something we all take for granted of basic land ownership.



Ken Burns

Ken Burns shooting "The American Buffalo."

And there was a sense of the buffalo being the brothers. Gerard Baker, a Mandan Hidatsa, from what is now North Dakota, talks about the kinship with animals, not a sense of separation. The opening of our second episode has in it a quote by Wallace Stegner, the writer who says, you know, man is the most dangerous species on the planet, and every other species, including the earth itself has right to fear. But this is really important, but, but we're also the only species when we want to, we can save another species. And we've done that with the buffalo. And that raises itself a whole set of questions now, so it's not going extinct, but is it wild and free?

No, it's not. Can we recreate ecosystems large enough to sustain them and other megafauna? Yes, we can. Do we have the will? We'll see. So in many ways, Dayton Duncan, who wrote the script here, longtime collaborator, and Julie Dunphy, longtime collaborator, co-producer, and I sort of feel like our two episodes are the first two acts of a three act play. And now it's really for the rest of us, who, whether we knew or not the details of this, whether we were conscious of all of the intricacies of this complicated story.

We're storytellers. We're not trying to get people to do something, but I think at the end, there's a real question like, how will you help? What will we do to make sure this doesn't happen? And this has global implications, because we're seeing in climate change the loss, you know, a major species going extinct or down to under a 1,000 head. And that's troubling, and yet we know we have before us the resources to do something about it.

PIETRORAZIO: You know, I think what's interesting too, is the story of the American buffalo is one specifically about the Great Plains, but there's also a narrative here in Arizona that carries resonance for our listeners, particularly surrounding Charles Jesse "Buffalo" Jones, who plays an important role in conservation efforts here in the Southwest, since it was actually his herd that brought buffalo to the Grand Canyon in 1906.

And a portion of your documentary actually touches on his life, but I was wondering if you could talk a bit about his checkered history of Buffalo Jones and how we should essentially remember his legacy today? And how do we understand his contributions to those efforts?

Courtesy of Special Collections at the University of Arizona Libraries

Charles Jesse Jones was once a buffalo hide hunter turned cattalo caretaker and breeder.

BURNS: Yeah, I think we live in a kind of a binary universe where everything is either one thing or the other. What's so great. If we're honest about ourselves, the people that are closest to us, is how much things are in flux in movement, that there's nothing binary about anything in that regard. You know, good — bad — up — down, all of these things.

Charles Jesse Jones is an interesting character who migrates. He's a buffalo hide hunter, right? He's a killer of Buffalo. He's also somebody who wants to make some money off buffalo, tries to breed them and mix them with cattle and doesn't really work out, kind of gives up that, you know. But he then goes back to Texas and he finds some calves and he starts raising them and he turns as so many people like Buffalo Bill and even more famous nickname that or Charles Goodnight in the panhandle of Texas, who was an Indian fighter, Indian hater, cattle rancher who drove the buffalo out of the Palo Duro Canyon. He had the first ranch there, but his wife was lonely. Her nearest neighbor was 70 miles and turn of the 19th to 20th century and they started raising some buffalo and suddenly realized that the buffalo were going extinct, kind of repaired his relationship with Native peoples and, and really, I think all of these people speak to the possibility of evolution of getting better of understanding, which means you don't have to be stuck yourself, in the place where you are.

It's all possible to grow and learn and do new things. It's why I've spent my entire professional life with public broadcasting. It's about learning things; we don't go in telling you what we already know. We're sharing with you a process of discovery. And one of those is this very interesting, complicated figure of Buffalo Jones. And I think it's interesting that so many of these people for a variety of reasons, some of the people devolve, you know. They're people who believe in eugenics that they're interested in saving the buffalo is part of white man's burden, they're white supremacists. They believe in the idea that native peoples are savages. And that's as troubling as anything, but they're also saving buffalo.

So you just look at this motley crew, and have to say, Yeah, that's the way it is, and, and Buffalo Jones sort of finds himself kind of in the middle, you know, he doesn't go as far as you wanted to do; he's not William T. Hornaday, who is sort of racist to the very end about the Native people. You know, everybody's contributing to this story, and that's kind of like us today. It's always complicated. There's not one thing or the other. That's the story we need to tell. You know, I have in my editing room, a neon sign in lowercase cursive, and it says: It's complicated.

Gabriel Pietrorazio/KJZZ

Signs for buffalo crossings scatter along the edge of State Route 67 heading toward the North Rim.

I've made films for almost 50 years about the U.S., but I've also made films about us, that is to say, the lowercase two-letter plural pronoun — all of the intimacy of us, and we and our — and all of the majesty, the complexity, the contradiction, and even the controversy of the United States. It's a privilege to act in that space, and to realize that there's always tension in the world, there's always tension between one thing and the other. And it's our job to figure out how to reconcile that tension. I think [The American Buffalo] is one of the most important films we've ever made, because it touches on seemingly this animal of the West, with the people that we identify most with the West, but

we're here from sea to shining sea, more than 300 nations, and also who we are, how we behave, what we did, what we didn't do, the kind of assumptions that we have, right now.

You hear a lot of people saying, 'Oh, no, they're trying to take away my heritage.' And your heritage is, you know, three, four generations on this land, and somebody else's heritage is 600 generations on the land, but we don't care about that. We're gonna press restart, whenever we took over, and everything else be damned, and I don't think an accurate accounting of where we've been, and where we are, and where we're going, can ignore these hugely important parts of our past.

PIETRORAZIO: Sometimes people don't like the complicated.

BURNS: You know, I mean, the demands of storytelling are in one corner, and the truth is in another, and then you have to figure out how to reconcile that. So what we're trying to do is figure out how to honorably, and that's where PBS comes in, for me. It's the place that permits me the time to do the deep dives, to be able to contain the contradictions and say, it's not bad — the simplification of history; the superficiality of those who wish to teach only part of it is the great danger. The complexity is what we know from our lives, what we see in ourselves and listen to, you know, in our own inner chatter, I'm excited by these challenges.

PIETRORAZIO: Some people steer away from them very quickly, so I do appreciate you challenging it, and you actually preface something that I wanted to talk to you about William T. Hornaday, George Bird Grinnell, Theodore Roosevelt, and obviously, "Buffalo" Jones, all these people behind essentially the early conservation efforts to bring buffalo back from the brink of extinction. But your film indicates all these issues about what their motivations were, how pure were they, some were advancing nationalism. Others were propagating eugenics.

But I'm curious, from your research, was there any indication that these early conservation efforts were informed or influenced by Indigenous peoples at all, or any sort of value systems that they may have their perspectives through these powerful white men in that early stage of bringing buffalo back to North America?

BURNS: Wow, what a wonderful, smart question. Two of those men, no: William T. Hornaday and Theodore Roosevelt. Theodore Roosevelt evolved a little bit, certainly evolved on conservation. You know, he was interested in just bagging one of every mammal and there are many people believe that's what he did on San Juan Hill, in Cuba, you know, shot a human being was very excited by that. And so there's something kind of, you know, crazy. William T. Hornaday is just your dyed in the wool.

But George Bird Grinnell, he's really interesting. You know, where Theodore Roosevelt has, as we point out in the film, heads mounted on the wall, he's got skeleton[s], he's got skulls in his office of buffalo. He knows what's lost. He spends a great deal of time with various Native tribes, living with them knowing their folkways, so, I'm not sure that in the process of what we would call the modern conservation movement, or even specifically with regard to saving the buffalo as it develops and gathers steam in the early decades of the 20th century, that you can say that Native people and Indigenous ways were consulted. But I know they're baked into who George Bird Grinnell is, one of the most important people in the history of conservation. And so I think they're in his — I can't even call them sympathies — in his willing to yield to other perspectives into other viewpoints, there's something really positive there.

Gabriel Pietrorazio/KTCC

The 1.6 million-acre Kaibab National Forest stretches across the north and south rims of the Grand Canyon, encompassing part of the nation's largest contiguous ponderosa pine forest.

So there are enough people with sensible heads if they realize that even though it's not written policy, everybody knows. And they articulate it out loud, but they don't write it down. You kill the buffalo, kill the Indian, right? And that's at the heart of this murder mystery. It's not a mystery. It's at the heart of this slaughter of an animal and other people, and the isolation of that people and the separation of them from their life ways, but they have still influenced things.

And one of the most difficult for me to understand is this moment when we have an Indian head nickel with a buffalo in the back. The buffalo is the model for that goes to slaughter in the meatpacking district in New York, but here we are fetishizing, romanticizing two entities, the Native American and a buffalo that we spent the last century trying to eradicate. And so somewhere along the line, there's guilt. There's an awareness that there's something that we've missed, they become the symbols of who we are. The West is the symbol of the whole United States, that sort of progress, and at the heart of that are the symbols of the buffalo in the Native American.

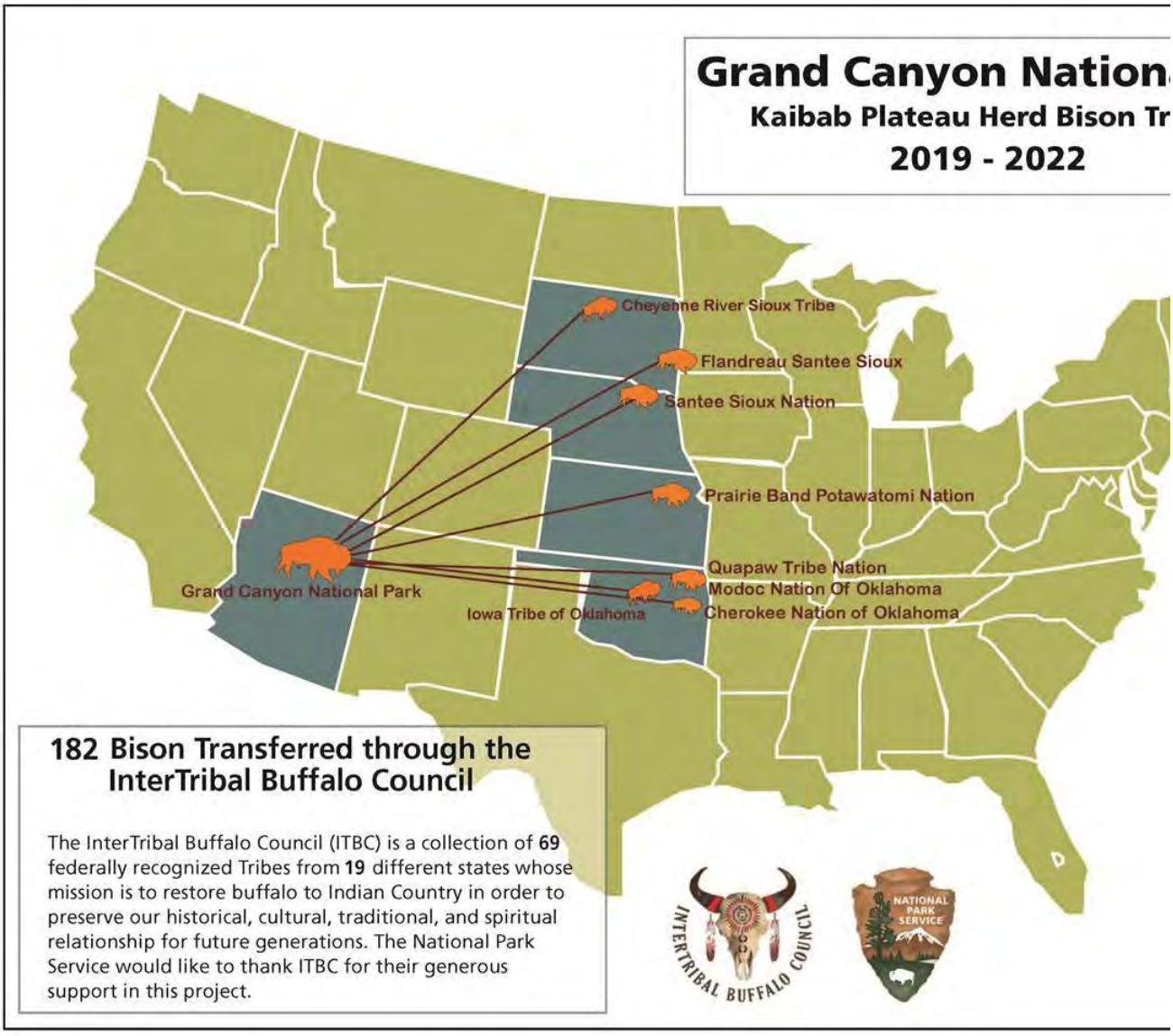
And they run counter to our behavior, but our own mythology develops around it. Maybe it's reflecting a little bit of our conscience, and so people like George Bird Grinnell, and the Native Americans who are there and alive today, remind us of that part that was also us. Remember, when we say Americans, they're all Americans, right? Everybody's American.

PIETRORAZIO: And to your point about the fetishization — two sides of the same coin — and you can't write that. And it actually leads to my other question, which is, how do we navigate in those worlds? You know, we're talking from stuffing Sandy the calf at the Smithsonian to creating this petting zoo and even the coining of the buffalo nickel. These are the interpretations of conservation efforts from the leading conservationists at that time. This is how they thought, well, we could save the species.

And I guess from your perspective, how do those values deviate from Indigenous interpretations of what conservation of buffalo look like, for example, like those of InterTribal Buffalo Council from their non-Native predecessors, because they're talking about putting these animals on display — taxidermies — and zoos that are confined and entrapped to save them.

BURNS: You know, there's a moment when Gerard Baker, again, a Mandan Hidatsa Indian from what is now North Dakota, talks about, you know, the elders going to the zoo. And looking at their brethren, as you put it, you know, in caged and where are they going back to a reservation, which is just another fenced in border for them for two species human being Homo sapien and this Bison bison, as scientists call — what we call the American buffalo, who are used to huge wide prairies to range on and before that every part of the United States.

And so I think that there's a huge disconnect. You know, there's hundreds of thousands of buffalo, many of them are standing in feedlots sustainably being raised for slaughter. The Native peoples control 20,000 or more — 80 tribes now in the InterTribal Buffalo Council are connected to it. The U.S. government and its national parks, in its refuges, have another 20,000. There are lots of NGOs that are trying to work to create habitat, where the buffalo can roam wild and free.



Courtesy of National Park Service

This map indicates where the InterTribal Buffalo Council relocates buffalo from the North Rim to tribes on the Great Plains.

We hope that we can see it in our lifetime or our children's lifetime. It's a goal to set for ourselves and our posterity. It was Theodore Roosevelt who said we're saving these things for our children's children. And that kind of long term view fits in quite nicely though I think that Theodore Roosevelt might be a little bit embarrassed to have to admit it, that the Native peoples often say you have to plan six or seven generations out. And we don't do that, we plan for our instant gratification. And that's why trees are cut and dams are built and buffalo are slaughtered. And all of these things happen and they're part of progress.

But we've also been able to, at times, arrest that and save the lands. We invented the national park system, and that, to me, comes from Native American values that the land ought to be there. My great great grandchildren ought to be able to see Old Faithful or to see Yosemite and its falls and Half Dome and El Capitan.

PIETRORAZIO: And you touch on this final message to talk about these climate-related challenges that buffalo face. You know, here at the Grand Canyon, they've implemented a plan to reduce the herd by 200 buffalo by 2025, citing reasons to essentially protect park resources, including vegetation and water, due to overpopulation.

And I guess, from your perspective, through the film, can you elaborate on your climate-related concerns for the species, and what in particular troubles you for their viability moving forward for future generations?

BURNS: Well, clearly, the greatest pressure is climate change and what that's doing to every system everywhere. You know, it's, it's catastrophic, in many cases, and water, it will be a precious resource. I think for me, the one I want to focus on most is this sense of ecosystem.

The Great Plains where by the 19th century, most of the buffalo were, as we said, estimated around 30,000 to 35,000, at the beginning of the 1800s. We had an American Serengeti, as many people call it, you know, this wonderful, filled with wildlife and diverse flora as well as fauna. And now there's kind of a monoculture, one or two different grasses or crops are planted — a kind of silence there as most of the big fauna are gone.

I think a challenge for us is, how in this underpopulated and an essentially depopulating area, might we have the courage to create these vast ecosystems necessary to be able to allow, as in one of Americans' favorite songs, you know, 'Where the buffalo roam and the deer and the antelope play.'

Tim Agne/KJZZ

KJZZ's Gabriel Pietrorazio interviews documentary filmmaker Ken Burns in September 2023 on his latest PBS project: "The American Buffalo."

I mean, that's, that's our job; let's go back there. If we love that so much, 'Oh, give me a home where the buffalo roam.' That's not, give me a home where the buffalo are encaged and going extinct — where the deer and the antelope are not there, all the elk and the Grizzlies have fled to the highest mountain peaks to avoid their slaughter, the wolves are gone.

You know, what kind of people do we really want to be? You know, do we want to be the authors of the death of the planet? Or do we want to be the enlightened saviors of it, and the dominant species that lives in interrelation, not in just complete, utter disregard for all of our brethren, Gerard would say.

PIETRORAZIO: And, you know, to that point, I think most people with the Great Plains, they would just assume that's how it was, you know, today, and I didn't realize to what extent the biodiversity existed there, at one time, not too long ago.

The end of the film, this part of the chapter hasn't been really written as you kind of alluded to. Let's listen to an excerpt from the end of your documentary.

The most important work of restoring bison to their homelands is being done in consort with the people whose lives have been intertwined with the buffalo for more than 10,000 years.

Back in 1991, representatives from 19 tribes gathered in the Black Hills to begin to form the InterTribal Buffalo Council and organize attempts to bring some of the bison from Yellowstone and other federal preserves back to their reservations. It was an act of healing that would reestablish the sacred connection with a buffalo that had been broken for more than a century.

An elderly Lakota woman took one of the founders aside, 'It's best you ask the buffalo if they want to come back,' she said. So the group held a ceremony to do exactly that. They said they wanted to come back, the man remembered that they said they didn't want to come back as cows. They wanted to be buffalo. They wanted to be wild again. Now, at least 80 tribes in 20 states control their own herds, grazing on nearly a million acres of tribal land.

Their group has closely collaborated with the Grand Canyon National Park, and has relocated at least 120 buffalo from that region by live capture methods. What role does this group, this council, play in this redemption story of America?

BURNS: Oh, it's a great question, and it's really at the heart of it, I think. We have so much to learn from people who have had such a long, 10,000 year relationship to this animal. They can sort of reconnect what has been severed among their various peoples.

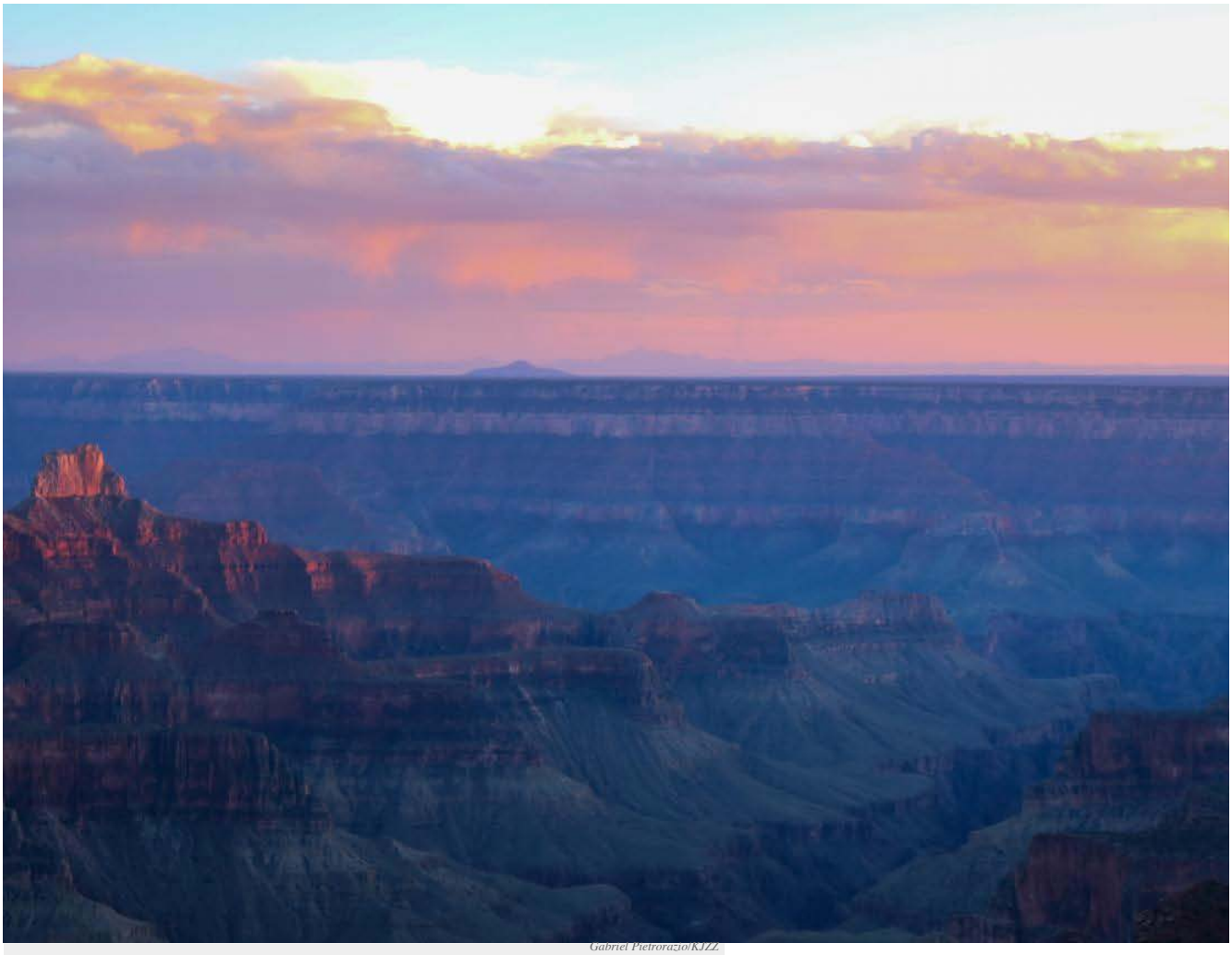
You begin to think nothing will undo the crimes. Nothing will un-shoot the buffalo. Nothing will un-savage the Native populations, and I mean that the savagery was from us. But you can begin to repair, and that's what all history is about is human nature doesn't change.

You know, history doesn't repeat itself. Mark Twain is supposed to said, it doesn't repeat itself, but it rhymes. And if he did say that he's absolutely right. Human nature doesn't change. And so we see that human nature is superimposed, and by studying our history, and these echoes and, and rhymes, we can begin to better ourselves and our posterity for our children's children's children, as Theodore Roosevelt would say.

PIETRORAZIO: And I can't thank you enough for your time, but is there anything you wanted to say to our listeners that I missed in our conversation?

BURNS: No, I think you asked some really great questions. I'm so happy and pleased after a long day of talking about the buffalo and thinking about the buffalo that I could end on such a nice and thoughtful and intelligent note.

PIETRORAZIO: Well, thank you, Ken. It really was such a pleasure to have this conversation. And on behalf of the KJZZ newsroom and our dedicated listening audience, I thank you for all of your time.



Gabriel Pietrorazio/KJZZ

The North Rim of the Grand Canyon.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Audio from "The American Buffalo" documentary film in this conversation is courtesy of PBS.

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