

The Grand Canyon is struggling to control its buffalo population. Tribes are stepping up to help

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Published: Monday, October 16, 2023 - 4:00am

Updated: Wednesday, October 18, 2023 - 7:23am

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Coverage of tribal natural resources is supported in part by [Catena Foundation](#)



Drivers from a pair of white pickup trucks briefly parked to move a couple of construction cones blocking off a windy dirt service road next to a grassy meadow along State Route 67 inside Grand Canyon National Park near the border of the Kaibab National Forest.

They were checking an enclosed pen on that Saturday morning in early September.

And sure enough, two mature buffalo bulls were successfully baited. "But they're very hard to transport because they hurt themselves and or other bison. And we have an agreement with Arizona, that we would not ship those large bulls, because you know, those are desirable for people that have tags for hunting," said Greg Holm.

Holm is based on the South Rim and runs the National Park Service's Wildlife Program at the Grand Canyon. That weekend was this season's last chance to capture them in partnership with the InterTribal Buffalo Council, or ITBC, a collection of more than 80 tribes across 20 states that steward the species on their homelands.

Around 11,000 buffalo are managed across 17 wild herds on public lands in 12 states from Arizona to Alaska. And Charles Jesse "Buffalo" Jones brought them to the North Rim more than a century ago.



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. Gabriel Pietrorozzi/KJZZ

"Bison are ultimate survivors, whether it is extremes of heat, or cold, they're adapted to both," said Dennis Jorgensen, bison program manager for the Northern Great Plains at the World Wildlife Fund. "That fact that bison thrive, you do always have to think about how you're going to manage a surplus."

Authorities say that area between the Kaibab National Forest and Grand Canyon National Park where the herd roams can accommodate around 200 buffalo. But in recent years, the count has even surpassed 600 animals.

"That herd has been spending the majority of time in the Grand Canyon, 'Oh, I'd say for at least a couple of decades.' There's no hunting or any population check in the park," said Rob Nelson, terrestrial wildlife manager at Arizona Game and Fish Department. He says that 247 buffalo have been harvested during seasonal public hunts between 2018 and 2022.

His state agency helps whittle down that same herd on the Kaibab side but admitted: "Hunting alone is not going to be the only tool to solve this population explosion problem. And so, what tools can also be done inside the park to contribute to getting that population in a better balance?"

National Park Service tribal program manager Mike Lyndon has an answer: "Live-transfer is and always has been our preferred management tool."



A forked dirt service road next to a meadow along State Route 67 is where a corral was staged to round up buffalo inside Grand Canyon National Park in early September. *Gabriel Pietrorazio/KJZZ*

It's one of three sustainable methods, two of which are tribal programs, that the National Park Service utilizes today, including lethal culling. Holm says the National Park Service worked with tribes, the state and other federal agencies to finalize a science-based management plan in 2017. Their goal is to reduce the herd size by 2025.

"Essentially, we're right around 300 bison after our last count," said Holm. "There's some wiggle room. If we get under 200, it's not a big deal, but that's kind of what we're shooting for."

For the first time in five years, due to staffing constraints and wetter weather conditions, none will be shipped off.

They typically wait until September to trap the animals after the breeding season, hoping the newborn calves are calm and mature enough to be safely transported a few months removed from being birthed around May.

It's around that same time when the monsoon starts to taper off, bringing drier conditions. But a snowy winter and unusual monsoon season disrupted this year's schedule.



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

Gabriel Pietrorazio/KJZZ

Since the North Rim didn't open to the public until July, and not May, as usual, Holm said, "Everything was two months behind." It also affected baiting, so the buffalo "really had no incentive to come into the trap," according to Holm.

Each day, Holm monitored a remote camera on his cellphone that overlooked the pen.

"We had 60 to 80 come into the corral, like two days after we shut it down," Holm said. "We called it, sent everybody home and then you can look at it on my phone. And it's like, 'Oh, great. There they are.' It was a bit of a letdown."

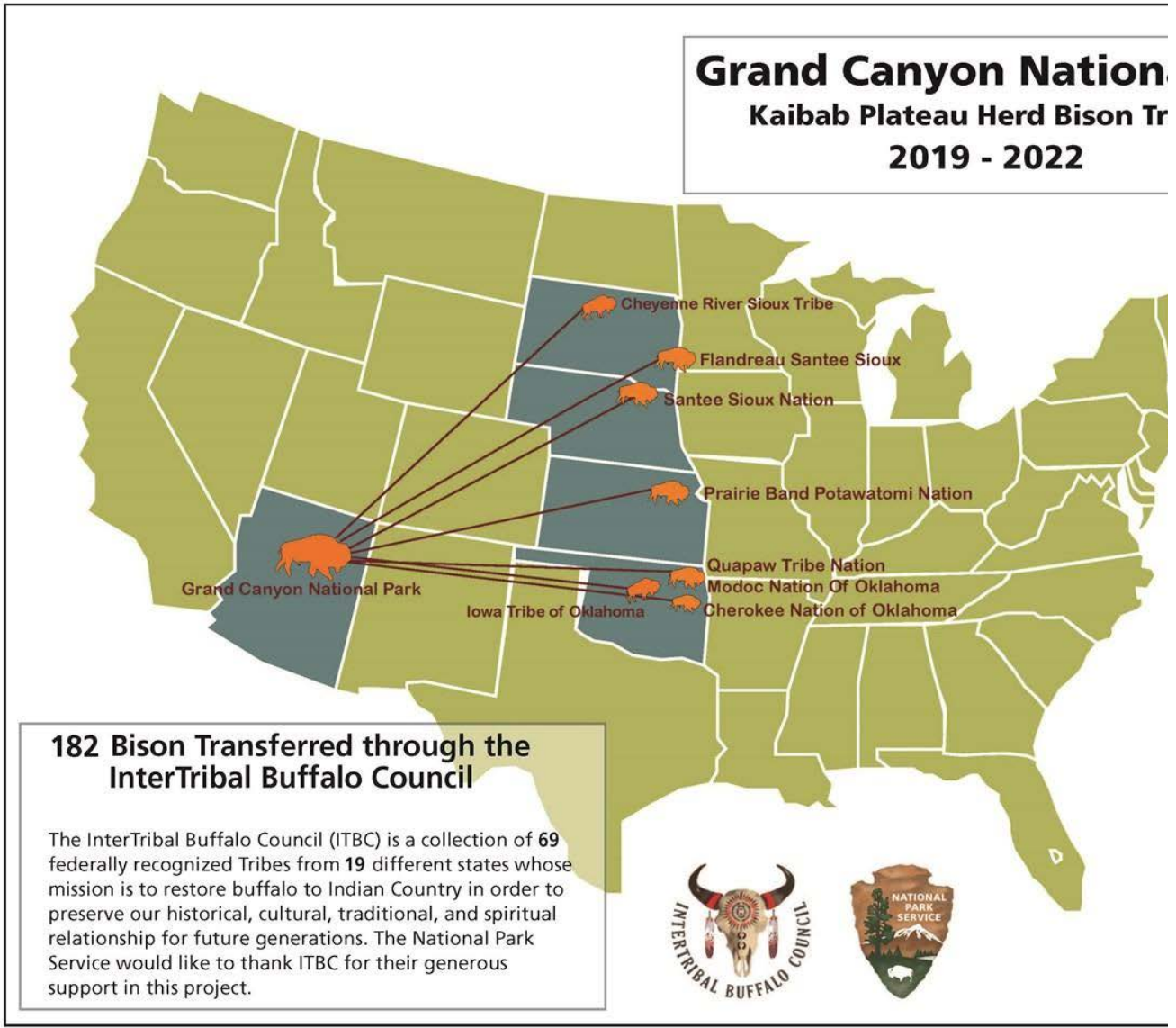
"It's maybe just luck of the draw, right? We've been really lucky for four years and this year didn't pan out that way," said Holm.

Despite that, 182 buffalo have been hauled by ITBC from Arizona since 2019.

Lyndon said "they are really superb partners for us," from offering technical and cultural expertise to providing the resources to transport buffalo from the remote North Rim. "And do that safely is a big deal. It's not something that the Park Service would be able to do on our own. I just don't know how else we would have a live-transfer program."

These animals have been relocated to at least eight tribes in South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas and Oklahoma.

Grand Canyon National Park Kaibab Plateau Herd Bison Transfer 2019 - 2022



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.

"With that overarching purpose being, restoring buffalo for that cultural and spiritual connection to those communities," said Troy Heinert. He's the executive director at ITBC. "Everything we do is connected to that vision and that mission."

Arizona's buffalo are feeding and healing Indigenous communities out on the Great Plains, whose centuries-long connections with these animals, likened to kin and relatives, had been severed.

Today, ITBC member tribes manage more than 20,000 buffalo throughout Indian Country. While another 420,000 buffalo remain in the feedlots of commercial herds, kept away in private hands.

Last month, the Interior Department unveiled \$5 million to strengthen buffalo conservation and expansion, improved management of existing herds and ecosystem restoration efforts in native grassland habitats through tribally-led efforts.

Among those allocated monies, \$3.5 million has been set aside from the Inflation Reduction Act to support ITBC's herd development and apprenticeship program.

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"What we're trying to do is recreate this tribal buffalo economy while being able to use the entire animal like we once did," Heinert added, "being able to distribute that meat to our membership as well as the other parts of the buffalo that have ceremonial meaning to us."

And Lyndon has also been trying to bring that opportunity to 11 traditionally associated tribes of the Grand Canyon through lethal culling, which, unlike traditional hunting, is considered a management strategy, not sport.

"So far, five tribes have signed on to that agreement that basically says, 'Yes, we would like to partner with the Park Service on these operations,'" said Lyndon.

This inaugural program was supposed to happen in the fall, following the conclusion of ITBC's live-capture until "the bison did not cooperate," as Lyndon explained, "and so, we were not able to implement that pilot tribal culling operation."

Unlike live-capture, Lyndon says lethal culling may be used sparingly going forward, if at all. "But if we do, we see local tribes being a big part of that management process," he added. "We are providing access to these really important animals, which are very hard to obtain in the southwestern United States."

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