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## BISON AND THE FOOD DISTRIBUTION PROGRAM ON INDIAN RESERVATIONS

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**ABSTRACT**—In recent years, bison products have been incorporated into the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR). This paper examines the factors leading up to this particular development and the structural problems that have yet to be resolved within the program. Altogether, the findings illustrate that cultural traditions, health problems, and economic concerns instigated the federal government to embark upon this new policy. Unfortunately, while the program has responded to tribal demands in certain respects, it has not resolved underlying structural inequalities between tribal and nontribal communities. In particular, the FDPIR does not acknowledge the problematic nature of production-consumption networks within the program. These networks currently undermine some of the fundamental reasons for including bison in the FDPIR.

**Key Words:** bison, Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations, Great Plains, Native Americans

### INTRODUCTION

In 1997 the federal government established the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR). The FDPIR was created in response to the failure of other federal food programs to meet the basic needs of tribal communities throughout the United States. Previously, federal food programs had been designed with “mainstream” Americans in mind, and did not address the specificity of tribal life. For example, tribal communities initially received federal assistance under the Needy Family Program, which was created during the Great Depression of the 1930s. The magnitude of this economic upheaval permeated most segments of society, in part leading government administrators to adopt a utilitarian approach that met the requirements of the population at large. Unfortunately for tribes, however, these organizational decisions accelerated a transition in their dietary habits. Above all, this meant that the commodities distributed through the program were food items typically consumed in Euro-American, rather than tribal, cultures. That these foods were ill suited (or at least unfamiliar) to tribal communities was not deemed important enough to alter the character of the program. Consequently, the diet of many tribes was dramatically changed, in effect substituting high-fat modern diets for the traditional high-fiber, complex-carbohydrate diets of the past.

In the years to come, one outcome of this program was a substantial rise in obesity, diabetes, and heart disease

within tribal communities (Indian Health Service 2001). High rates of unemployment and poverty only exacerbated this problem. Due to high levels of economic dependence (which has persisted long after the Great Depression ended), tribal members were particularly reliant upon such food sources for many years. In the 1960s the Food Stamp Program was enacted and replaced the Needy Family Program. This new program allowed participants to select foods at retail establishments, but it proved problematic for some communities because they were too distant from such retail locations. Accordingly, the FDPIR was subsequently created. Through the FDPIR, food commodities are shipped directly to distribution centers in and around tribal reservations. Currently, tribal members may participate in the Food Stamp Program or the FDPIR, but they may not participate in both at the same time. According to the Indian Health Service (2001), by 1999 an average of 129,466 tribal members received food from the FDPIR each month.

Although the FDPIR was specifically designed with tribes in mind, for many the program continues to fall short in critical ways. As such, some tribal representatives continue their effort to mold the program into an ideal form that meets the needs of tribal communities in more precise ways. To accomplish this goal, tribal representatives have lobbied government officials. Legislators in the Great Plains have been particularly helpful, as they have

felt pressure from many tribes within their respective jurisdictions. By such political means, bison meat has been introduced as a food commodity within the program.

In many respects, the inclusion of bison products within the FDPIR was a watershed event in that it incorporated a central feature of premodern tribal life within a modern-day governmental regime. Yet the overall importance of this reconfiguration is uncertain, as familiar relations of power have come into play. Accordingly, this paper examines the process by which bison meat came to be included within the FDPIR and the lingering structural problems that still affect the program. Clearly, the struggle to include bison within the FDPIR reflects broader attempts to regain tribal autonomy, sovereignty, or control. Thus, the program is a microcosm of larger battles that seek to rearticulate the place of tribal life within the American landscape. Yet, as this paper suggests, the organizational structure of this new food chain reaffirms the modern relations of dependence that emerged after colonization. The purchasing decisions of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) are particularly important in this regard. As the following illustrates, the source of the bison products redistributed through the FDPIR frequently undercuts tribal objectives in critical ways. Present structural arrangements not only limit the potential economic benefits that tribes may accrue from the program, but also undermine some of the philosophical beliefs and priorities held by many tribal members.

In the following section, some general distinctions are made between tribal communities and the emerging bison industry in order to establish the context within which the FDPIR operates. The distinction between tribal and nontribal communities is central to understanding the paradoxical nature of the FDPIR, as these respective communities each embody different priorities and principles. After this dichotomy has been sketched out, a more precise description of the factors that led to the specific inclusion of bison in the FDPIR is presented. The political aspects that directed this process are given special attention, as they indicate how these diverse competing interests ultimately impacted the structure of this new food and agriculture system. In the final section, geographic aspects of the program are accentuated. More specifically, the broad scope of interest in bison products among tribal communities is contrasted with the relatively narrow source of animals that are purchased by the USDA to supply this demand. This geographic discrepancy is used as one means of explaining a fundamental problem that has not yet been resolved by administrators of the program.

Throughout this overview and analysis, a few primary sources of information are used to define the nature of these developments. These data sources include interview data collected from tribal, nontribal, and government sources. Documents published by the Inter-Tribal Bison Cooperative (ITBC) are also used to indicate the objectives of tribal communities. In addition, government data from wildlife management agencies and the USDA is utilized. The former include data on bison donations from the National Park Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The USDA data include information on the purchase and distribution of bison meat. Altogether, these sources of information are used to articulate the character of the nexus formed by relations between federal institutions and indigenous communities.

This research adds to the spate of literature on bison that has been produced in recent years. Yet most of that literature continues to focus upon historical perceptions of the species, historical uses of the animal, or the demise of the U.S. bison population (Roe 1970; Flores 1991; Isenberg 1992, 2000; Carlson 1998; Krech 1999; Ostler 1999; Hamalainen 2001). In a certain respect, this literature bears little relevance to the present discussion because it refers to a time and place that existed before the discontinuity between tribes and bison emerged. Rather, this paper possesses more similarities with the work of Ostler (2001), who examined the transitional use of bison after the establishment of Indian reservations. This paper extends Ostler's analysis of a transitional food economy up to the present day.

## REEMERGENCE OF BISON

Bison have figured prominently in the history of the Great Plains. The species was a staple food for many tribes within the region, and many Euro-Americans utilized the population during the process of western settlement. The frequency of contact with bison diminished, however, as the number of remnant herds was quickly reduced. Tribes were placed on reservations, often at quite a distance from the wildlife refuges that secured bison. For their part, Euro-Americans converted the landscape to fit more familiar patterns of production. This situation persisted in large part until the end of the 20th century. A modest number of ranchers began to acquire bison in the 1970s, only to be succeeded by a buying frenzy in the 1990s as the value and popularity of bison increased (Dary 1974; Danz 1997). The most prominent company to arise out of this process was the North American Bison Cooperative (NABC) located in New Rockford, ND. Although

the NABC has experienced economic difficulties, it has nevertheless been the most influential player within the industry due to its magnitude of sales and the wide geographic scope of its activities.

Tribal herds developed along a different timeline. The first tribal herd was established on the Crow Indian Reservation in 1935. Eighty-three bison were donated to the tribe from Yellowstone National Park. In the same year, the Pine Ridge Reservation received nine bison from the same source. In 1936 Yellowstone National Park donated more bison to the Crow (99 bison) and Pine Ridge (10 bison). In 1942 the park donated 12 more bison to the Crow before it changed its management policies (USDA-NPS 1944). These dispersals were the exception to the rule, however. Most public herds under the supervision of the USDA National Park Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service did not sell or donate surplus bison to any substantial degree until the beginning of the 1970s.

Rather, surplus animals were slaughtered and the meat was sold or donated to various parties. Tribal communities often played a functional role in these culling practices. For instance, at the National Bison Range (U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service 1943, 3) it was noted that "Two cows were badly gored by other buffalo during the butchering period and when butchered it was found that half of each was so badly bruised and infected as to make the meat unsaleable. It was donated to the Flathead Indians." Similarly, at Fort Niobrara (U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service 1936, 2), "Two undesirable looking, apparently barren, fat buffalo cows were transferred to the Rosebud Indian Agency for meat purposes." As late as the 1950s, the managers at Fort Niobrara (U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service 1951, 2) stated that "The animals donated to the Indians were old substandard animals, not fit to put on the market." These patterns were an expression of the existing inequalities between tribal and nontribal society, as well as the ongoing dependence of tribes upon governmental institutions.

By the 1970s and 1980s, however, an increasing number of public herds began to sell or donate bison. Many of the donations to tribes had a regional quality. For example, the overwhelming majority of bison donated from Badlands National Park went to the Oglala Sioux and the Cheyenne River Sioux (USDI-NPS 2003). Many of the bison donated from the National Bison Range were given to the Confederated Salish and Kootenai in Montana (U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service n.d.). In the late 1980s, Wind Cave National Park donated bison to the Lower Brule Sioux and the Oglala Sioux in South Dakota (USDI-NPS 2002). Theodore Roosevelt National Park initially had a wider scope of dispersal, donating to tribes such as the

Sisseton-Wahpeton (SD), Round Valley (CA), Blackfeet (MT), Fort Berthold (ND), and Jicarilla (AZ) (USDI-NPS 2001). Nonetheless, prior to the formation of the ITBC in 1991, only about 16 tribal herds with 2,800 animals existed (ITBC 1997).

The number of tribal herds grew considerably after the formation of the ITBC. The ITBC is headquartered in Rapid City, SD, but has included as many as 51 tribes distributed throughout the western half of the United States. Most, but not all, of the member tribes have their own bison. Unlike the NABC, the ITBC is not an economic entity per se. Rather, in addition to promoting the economic welfare of tribal communities, the ITBC also addresses matters related to cultural preservation and health issues (ITBC 1994; Torbit and LaRose 2001). Due to this diversified set of interests, the goals of the ITBC do not always align with the goals of the NABC. Indeed, deep philosophical divisions distinguish these figurehead organizations. Thus, while these organizations parallel each other, it is more accurate to say that they are running on opposite tracks. Consequently, in the process of developing their herds, divergent economies emerged, reflecting different historical traditions and different priorities in the contemporary world.

In actuality, the nature of activities on private ranches and tribal lands is too complex to adequately summarize here. For instance, contrary to many expectations, some private ranchers manage their bison in a hands-off manner that is more naturalistic than practices employed by some tribes. Nonetheless, a few general points can be mentioned in order to draw out distinctions between tribal and nontribal herds. In terms of management approach, conventional agricultural practices, such as weaning and the implementation of skewed sex ratios, are more widely accepted in the bison industry. Perhaps the most central discrepancy, however, is the prevailing attitude toward the use of grain in the management, handling, and production of bison. Grain feeding has proliferated within the bison industry during the last few decades in response to economic and cultural pressures. Although grass-fed production still exists within the industry, the prominent meat wholesalers who sell the majority of bison meat within the United States (such as the NABC) now incorporate grain into their production process. The demands of the marketplace only reinforce this trend, as American consumers expect their food to look and taste in a way that only grain feeding can produce. Due to such factors, the number of feedlots used to control the movement of bison during the final phase of production has increased. Conversely, the majority of bison meat procured from tribal bison is

consumed by the tribes themselves, and thus is not subject to such market forces.

In addition, this internal pattern of consumption is imbued with normative values that constrain the form that management regimes take. Individual tribes express these concerns in different terms, but commonalities clearly exist. The profile statements of individual tribes in the first annual report of the ITBC indicate the character of these perspectives in the contemporary world. For example, the profile for the Northern Arapaho stated that "When Native Americans lost their prairies full of bison they not only lost their primary source of subsistence, they lost the focus of their culture and their religion" (ITBC 1994, 18). For the Lower Brule Sioux, it was noted that

Since time immemorial the *Kul Wicasa* Lakota have believed that they are related to the buffalo. It is told that at one time the People were living in a world underground, and that at a certain point in the Black Hills, known as Wind Cave, the *Kul Wicasa* Lakota emerged from the earth. It is also told that while the People lived underground they were buffalo people, and that only as they emerged from Mother Earth did they take their human form. (ITBC 1994, 15)

For others, the sustenance provided by bison explained the nature of ethical obligations, exemplified by the Oglala Sioux statement that "The Oglala people are very proud to be taking care of the buffalo today, as their ancestors were taken care of by the buffalo long ago. The buffalo are *Wakan* or Holy and deserve great respect" (ITBC 1994, 20).

In large part, for each tribe this involved the creation of a religion or ethic that recognized the relations that surrounded them. As Harrod (2000, 43) has noted,

It is important to emphasize that these traditions made the point that what it means to be a human being required that one assume an appropriate relation with the other-than-human powers of the world, including the animals. Indeed, some traditions seemed to suggest that what it meant to be human was fundamentally intertwined with a relation to particular places and specific animals. The symbolic meanings evoked by these traditions constituted a sacred ecology that infused the everyday world with a dense and complex horizon of associations.

Because of its spatial implications, this realization explains local variations among tribes in the Great Plains as well as the more general distinctiveness of Plains communities. It also explains why tribes in other regions do not share this bond with bison, and why others, who have been dislocated or disrupted, must work to regain this association. Accordingly, in one instance it was noted that "Little is known about the significance of bison to Southern Ute People" (ITBC 1994, 29). In such cases, pantribal notions of the species' importance must be drawn upon.

Thus, for many tribes the conventional management practices noted above are unacceptable because they conflict with cultural and religious traditions. Feedlots in particular violate notions of wildness and autonomy because they enclose bison within small spaces. As such, they do not show proper respect for the animal that sustained numerous tribes for many generations. In line with these views, an ITBC representative noted:

One thing we try to strongly discourage is not confining them to real small areas and treating them more like livestock, and allowing them to maintain their own integrity as buffalo and respect that and not put them into like a feedlot situation, start feeding them artificial kinds of things that tend to turn them into something and destroy them from within.

From this perspective, what is good (or acceptable) for livestock is not suitable for bison. As one tribal herd manager commented,

I tell our people, or I tell the people around me, if you want a good Black Angus steak, I'll give you one, but I'm not going to take the buffalo and feed him like a Black Angus, and feedlot him. Because I think that should be the way that these animals were meant to be. They were meant to be grass fed and healthy because now you've taken that animal and you've changed it.

The shared history of tribes and bison (before and after Euro-American settlement) is likely the cause of some of these underlying sentiments (Garibaldi and Turner 2004).

Yet material factors also come into play. Indeed, for some tribal representatives, conventional practices negatively affect the quality of animals raised on private lands.

For example, another tribal herd manager described the deficiencies of grain:

Number one, you're missing out on all of, all of the holistic plant. You know, I mean these buffalo eat these different plants, and they go into their system, and they, they're, you know, it's in 'em. And when you go to grain feeding, all you're doing is actually building up fat. And with corn and grain fed animals, if you'll look when you, when they butcher 'em, buffalo have about this much yellow fat on. But after a grain fed animal, you'll see about another  $\frac{1}{4}$  or  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch of the white fat. And, and that's not the cancer fighting jazz.

In addition to the low fat and low cholesterol content of bison meat, grass-fed bison retain omega oils that are believed to reduce one's susceptibility to other diseases.

All of this is not to say that tribes are uninterested in the economic potential of bison. Indeed, there are signs that some tribes may shift their management approach in order to place a greater emphasis upon economic variables. Currently, these divergent interests impinge upon one another within each of these individual communities, and those responsible for managing the bison are seeking to find an equitable balance. For example, the 1997 annual report of the ITBC stated:

Although tradition takes precedence over technology, the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe's Pte Hca Ka Inc. is taking steps to re-establish their buffalo herd as the central element of the Tribal economy. This dynamic, culturally sensitive project combines Lakota tradition and modern technology to establish a harmonious relationship to human, natural, and financial resources. (ITBC 1997: 13)

At the minimum, this chronicle of events suggests that the cultural and spiritual aspects of bison remain at the forefront of tribal considerations even in the midst of economic development. Presently, it is not necessary to say that traditional cultural priorities always prevail over economic considerations, but simply to note that these noneconomic factors weigh substantially upon the decision-making process. This indicates their continuing importance. Such matters must be considered when evaluating the relationship between bison and the FDPIR.

## INCLUSION AND ORGANIZATION OF BISON IN THE FDPIR

A number of factors ultimately led to the incorporation of bison into the FDPIR. Cultural, economic, and health concerns each held a place in this building process. Guided by these distinct concerns, individuals offered their own rationales with which to entice the federal government to join the species to the program. Some of these rationales were undoubtedly more successful than others in fomenting structural change, yet the power necessary to produce change really arose through the confluence of these diverse variables. In a piecemeal process, disparate individuals with divergent interests were bound to one another, thus providing the impetus for organizational transformation. The progression of events bears this out.

Food programs administered by the USDA are national in scope and primarily designed to provide for the utilitarian needs of the general public. Not only have these program attributes been reflected in the relatively homogeneous character of the food items offered, but also in the manner in which these foods are delivered—namely, canned or prepackaged foods. As one FDPIR administrator (and tribal member) recalled about foods of the past,

As I began to, to learn more and more about the program, I just couldn't get over the fact that, why do we have to accept these foods. And I always asked my wife, I said, how did you, how do you ever get us to eat those meats. I said, I can't stand the sight of them when I open up the can. I said some of them smell bad, you know, the canned pork are terrible.

For some tribal members, this led to disaffection with government food sources. Eventually, however, after the acquisition of freezers that enabled regional distribution centers to store foods for extended periods of time, administrators were able to purchase fresh beef products. While these events were initially unrelated to bison, the ability to purchase and store fresh foods of any kind opened the door for the inclusion of bison within federal food programs. Thereafter, in some respects it was simply a matter of switching from one type of bovine to another.

Yet such subtle transformations do not necessarily fit well with the formulaic nature of national programs. For one, the cultural (and spiritual) aspects of bison did not conform to the secular priorities of the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), who administered the FDPIR. Indeed, the

cultural aspects of bison may have been negatively perceived by the FNS as a threat or a Pandora's box. In this vein, one tribal member noted at length:

The other thing that I think scares FNS about this is that bison or buffalo, some people claim is a regional food. In other words, it's cultural or liked only by the Great Plains tribes. That's not really true, because I think all over the United States there are tribal members eating the product, I guess, but. . . . Then you turn around and you say, the Northwest tribes have said, Well, we'd like to freeze the fresh or smoked salmon into a package. The Midwest tribes, of which President Nertoli is a member of the Midwest region, they want wild rice and fish up on the northern peninsula. Southwest has always asked for blue corn meal. Oklahoma tribes down in there, they have some other products they want.

Consequently, the cultural aspects of food, which are viewed positively by respective communities, may be viewed negatively by federal agencies because of the pragmatic problems they may engender. As such, arguments for the inclusion of bison meat (or other products) solely on cultural grounds are likely to be unsuccessful because they fall outside the comparatively narrow purpose and purview of the FDPIR.

Inasmuch as this portrayal is accurate, other strategies that conform better to the nature of the program may be more successful. This likely involves the use of a language that the administering agencies can understand. In the present case, the FNS, as part of the USDA, is fundamentally concerned with matters relating to the health of program participants. Fortunately for tribes, the qualities of bison meat qualify for consideration under this mandate. Moreover, the healthy characteristics of bison meat may be contrasted with the unhealthy characteristics of food items now offered by FNS in order to convince federal authorities to restructure the FDPIR. Combined with the health statistics on obesity and diabetes in tribal communities (acknowledged by the IHS in official documents), these arguments had the potential power to realign relationships within the FDPIR if the connections between these variables were clearly drawn out. To this point, in articulating the negative affect of historical relations upon the health of many tribal members and the options for remedying such problems, one ITBC representative commented:

It's all been attributed to diet, and even specifically to government-rationed diet. That goes back to the destruction of the buffalo and destruction of traditional food sources. So, that's pretty well documented and understood throughout the medical and scientific community as well. But, you know, so we're just asking the government to acknowledge the fact that, you know, all the documentation is there, that they pretty much put us in that situation, so they should have a responsibility to help us back out of that situation by providing healthier food. So in the interim, as we're trying to build our herds and develop some good sources of returning this [bison] as a staple food, you know, we don't see that it's unreasonable to suggest that they try to provide this in some of the federal food programs.

This statement directly links together distant historical events, modern food programs, and bison, thereby creating a strong nexus with which to convince relevant actors to change existing policies. From this perspective, obligations created by acts of the past are not forgotten until reparations are complete.

Whether this line of reasoning was solely responsible for the transformation of the FDPIR is far from certain, however. Rather, it is just as likely that these health concerns were layered together with economic factors to create a more formidable force for change. Around the time bison were first introduced into the FDPIR, the bison industry was beginning to experience a downturn. In the early 1990s the demand for live bison had instigated a breeder's market, which eventually led to an oversupply of the animal. By 1999 the value of bison dropped dramatically. Members of the industry sought support from their congressional representatives to alleviate the problem. Thus, the inclusion of bison in the FDPIR allowed congressional representatives (particularly those in the Northern Plains) to respond to tribal and nontribal communities at one and the same time. They were thus able to kill two birds with one stone.

Subsequently, bison products have been purchased under different legislation, but the largest buyouts have come under the Section 32 program. Created during the Great Depression, Section 32 allows the government to purchase foods that are in oversupply in order to stabilize prices. Through such mechanisms, bison were incorporated into an institutional framework, with all of its costs and benefits. As in other contexts, institutionalization mandates

a degree of conformity, even when it accommodates the participation of different actors. In its connection with the FDPIR and bison, tribes have attempted to contend with this rigidity but have frequently been unsuccessful in their attempts to further transform the program. Most obviously, the technical specifications outlined by the USDA (regarding the composition of the final product and processing standards) tend to favor grain-based, conventional modes of production. This set of requirements marginalizes not only tribal communities but also grass-fed producers within the bison industry itself.

In the midst of these developments, tribal representatives have tried to ensure that a significant percentage of the bison meat acquired by the federal government is purchased directly from tribes. Ideally, these animals would be managed in a manner consistent with tribal ethics. To this end, negative perceptions of nontribal bison have been expressed during this process. As the FDPIR staff member noted above described the situation, "They didn't want to mix their product with the white man's. This is exactly the way it was told to me. 'We don't want to mix our buffalo with the white man's buffalo. You know, it's a poor grade.'" Presumably, these distinctions are not based upon the natural characteristics of the animals, but rather the effects generated by different systems of production.

While this may be a valid goal, tribes are hindered by the fact that they do not have enough bison to supply such a program by themselves. The exact numbers vary, but tribes own only about 10,000 bison. An increase in the use of these animals could potentially deplete some herds. To change this situation, tribes would either have to increase the intensity of production or gain access to more grazing land. Both options present problems. One suspects the former option would not be acceptable to many tribal members because it resembles other forms of domestication. Conversely, due to prevailing power structures, a realignment of property rights (or grazing rights) is unlikely to occur any time in the near future.

Altogether, the narrow economic emphasis of private ranchers, the specifications of the USDA, and the limited resources of many tribal communities place tribes at a disadvantage within the FDPIR. Combined, these factors represent substantial barriers that hinder the ability of tribes to create the program they envision.

#### **DISTRIBUTION OF BISON IN THE FDPIR**

In many respects, what tribes are trying to do is establish a "native food and agriculture system" (Deweese 2003). Theoretically, such systems not only include the

consumption of traditional foods but also employ the use of traditional production methods (or some approximation thereof). Thus, a community's ability to forge appropriate connections between sites of production and sites of consumption may have a decisive impact upon a group's ability to institute such native food systems. In this regard, the method of distribution utilized by tribes may be critical, as some distribution channels may be more capable of fulfilling these objectives. It is in this manner that the impact of the FDPIR may be assessed.

Tribes have developed several distinct distribution channels to disseminate bison meat within their community. Many of these are deeply embedded within the life of the society. In most of these channels, tribes utilize meat from bison raised on their own lands. Bison meat may be distributed during ceremonial events, such as powwows or Sun Dances. Bison may also be consumed during memorials for deceased family members. In some cases, bison meat may be distributed through eldercare facilities and school programs. In each of these examples, the circuit along which bison meat travels is interwoven with the structure of the community. Indeed, the use of bison meat may reaffirm and refortify these social bonds. In addition to these systems, some tribes distribute meat through newly created diabetes programs. These patterns of consumption illustrate the irreducibly social nature of food and diet. And while these tangible networks emphasize the world of consumption, they are frequently matched by a distinct set of tribal production practices because they are still connected with (and indeed emanate from) herds in the field.

Although these food networks are mostly local in scale, on occasion they may be extended to encompass a number of distinct tribal communities. Bison, as one part of a diet, may play a limited but important part in these systems. For example, one tribal manager stated:

Actually, in order to get that bull from Lower Brule, what we did was we traded them a thousand wildlife fingerlings for that bull. And they in turn took the wildlife fingerlings from us, traded them to Rosebud Sioux tribe for turkeys. So we took the fish down, dropped them off at Rosebud. Rosebud took the turkeys, dropped them off at Lower Brule, and then on the way back from Rosebud, we went over to Lower Brule, picked up that bull buffalo.

Networks of this type tap into the emergent wildlife that has surrounded local communities for generations and



TABLE 1  
REGIONAL DISTRIBUTION OF  
FDPIR BISON MEAT, 2003-2004

Region*	Frozen Bison (cases)	Ground Buffalo (cases)	Bison Stew (cans)
Northeast	0	64	33
Southeast	0	30	140
Midwest	2161	365	931
Mountain Plains	4621	1777	3146
Southwest	3381	3786	9040
West	2365	1669	4886
Total	12528	7691	18176

\*The demarcation of these six geographic regions is based upon the categories defined by the USDA in the available data. Although most aspects of the designated "regions" agree with common conceptions, some of the designations may create misunderstanding. In particular, tribes in Oklahoma were included in the Southwest region. Given the significant involvement of Oklahoma tribes in this program, this categorical decision must be taken into consideration.

become an integral part of their way of being. The word "native" takes on a more fundamental meaning when applied to this biologically diverse community of species.

The downside of such food networks is that they can only service local, or at best regional, communities. The infrastructure necessary for a broader reach is not in place. In contrast, the organizational structure of the FDPIR enables foods to be distributed over large expanses and among many desiring communities. Recent data from the USDA indicate the widespread interest in bison products among tribal communities (USDA 2003/2004). The FDPIR presently distributes bison meat in three forms: frozen bison, ground buffalo, and bison stew. **Upon the request of tribes, "buffalo" is distinguished from "bison" in order to designate products that were acquired from tribal sources.** The bison products are procured from animals raised for commercial production in feedlots.

The extent of interest in these products can be illustrated in two different ways: the aggregate amount of bison consumed in different geographic regions, and the percentage of FDPIR outlets that distributed bison products to tribal members. Perhaps not surprisingly, tribes in the Mountain Plains and the Southwest consumed the largest amounts of frozen bison and ground buffalo (Table 1). This conforms to expectations based upon the traditional importance of bison in these regions. Nonetheless, the appeal of bison products extends beyond the Great Plains, as

TABLE 2  
NUMBER OF PARTICIPATING FDPIR OUTLETS  
BY REGION, 2003-2004

Region	# of Regional FDPIR Outlets*	# Receiving Frozen Bison	# Receiving Ground Buffalo	# Receiving Bison Stew
Northeast	2	0 (0%)	2 (100%)	1 (50%)
Southeast	3	0 (0%)	1 (33%)	1 (33%)
Midwest	23	23 (100%)	14 (61%)	21 (91%)
Mountain Plains	31	27 (87%)	15 (48%)	22 (71%)
Southwest	19	13 (68%)	12 (63%)	16 (84%)
West	34	28 (82%)	26 (76%)	30 (88%)
Total	112	91 (81%)	70 (63%)	91 (81%)

\*Although most FDPIR distribution outlets serve a single tribe, some outlets serve multiple tribes located in close proximity to one another. Thus, given the available data, the figures noted herein refer to FDPIR outlets rather than tribes.

tribes in other regions, most notably the Far West, nearly matched some of these levels of consumption. Overall, more bison product was distributed than buffalo product.

In virtually all regions, a high percentage of the FDPIR distribution outlets transmitted bison products to tribal members (Table 2). In the Midwest, 100% of the outlets distributed frozen bison meat. In the Mountain Plains and West, more than 80% of the outlets distributed frozen bison. In four of the six regions, more than 60% of the outlets processed ground buffalo. Similarly, in four of six regions, more than 70% of outlets distributed bison stew to tribal members. Altogether, 81% of all outlets received frozen bison, 63% received ground buffalo, and 81% received bison stew.

More specifically, demand for each of these products varies considerably both within and between each of these geographic regions. Tribes in Oklahoma and the Dakotas consumed the largest amount of frozen bison meat (Fig. 1). The three largest consumers were the Oglala Sioux (633 cases), the Turtle Mountain Tribe (602 cases), and the Chickasaw Nation (550 cases). Tribes in other regions consumed frozen bison as well, but in much more modest amounts. The distributional pattern for ground buffalo meat was more skewed (Fig. 2). Southwestern tribes, notably those in Oklahoma, requested substantially more ground buffalo meat than tribes in other regions. This imbalance, however, was largely due to the provisions

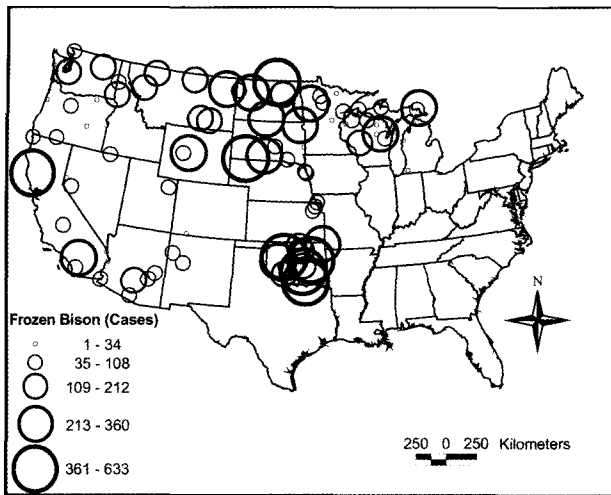


Figure 1. Distribution of frozen bison meat, 2003-2004, by the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations.

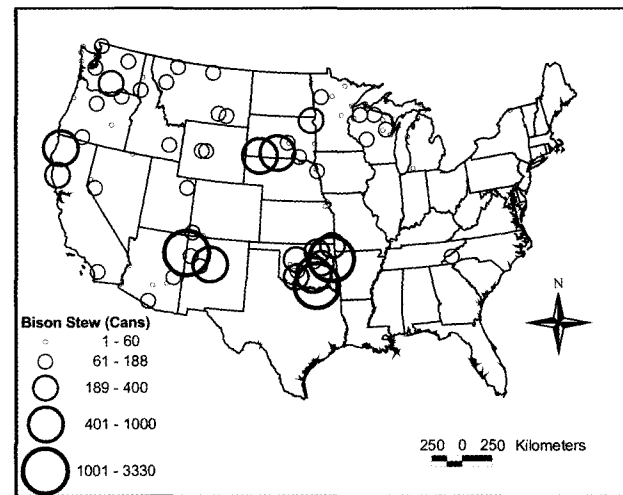


Figure 3. Distribution of bison stew, 2003-2004, by the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations.

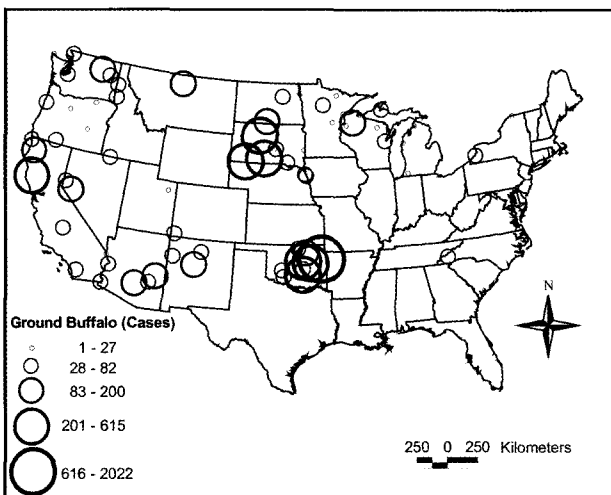


Figure 2. Distribution of ground buffalo meat, 2003-2004, by the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations.

shipped to the Cherokee Nation, who alone received 2,022 cases of ground buffalo meat. By itself, this total exceeded the amount of ground buffalo distributed to each of the other regions. Other prominent tribes included the Oglala Sioux (615 cases), the Sac and Fox Tribe (380 cases), and the Muscogee (340 cases). The consumption of bison stew exhibited yet another pattern (Fig. 3). In this particular case, the Choctaw Nation received the most cans of bison stew (3,330), far surpassing any other tribe. The Cherokee Nation (Southwestern region) and the Navajo (Western region) each received 2,000 cans.

The rationale for acquiring these products varies somewhat from tribe to tribe. A representative for the Oglala Sioux mentioned the importance of cultural traditions. The

food manager for the Sac and Fox stated that they purposely acquired more “buffalo” than “bison” in order to promote tribal production. Although the Cherokee do not have a strong historic association with the species, they have also acquired these products in part to support the tribes who occasionally win contracts with the USDA. The large amount of bison products procured by the Cherokee and the Navajo are partially generated by the high level of participation in the FDIPIR within these communities. Consequently, for some tribal food administrators, pragmatic secular concerns overshadow the traditional cultural concerns noted above.

Thus, in addition to cultural and nutritional concerns, bureaucratic influences appear to impact the geographical distribution of these products. Some food managers noted that they acquired bison products from the FNS on an experimental basis in order to see if there was any interest in the products. Even when there was not a clamor for these products, several food managers found that tribal members readily requested and consumed these products. In part, this was prompted by the fact that bison products were designated as a “bonus” item, which meant these products did not count against the personal allotments of individuals. For such reasons, some food distributors intended to acquire bison products in the future, even though there is no strong cultural tie to the species.

The extent of interest suggests that bison is not a “regional” food. Indeed, the apparent lack of interest shown by the Northeast and Southeast was actually due to the relative lack of reservations in those regions. (Only five FDIPIR distribution outlets are located in the Northeast and Southeast.) The widespread interest in bison products

TABLE 3  
SOURCE OF BISON PRODUCTS  
FOR 2003 SECTION 32 BUYOUT

Company / Cooperative	Pounds Sold to USDA	Price of Products Sold to USDA	% of Funds Awarded by USDA
North American Bison Cooperative (NABC)	1,720,000	\$5,135,936	58%
Land of Oz Meats	920,000	\$2,729,268	31%
Medicine Lodge Bison Meat	200,000	\$591,220	7%
Western States Bison Cooperative (WSBC)	120,000	\$357,280	4%
Total	2,960,000	\$8,813,704	100%

may indicate that other concerns, namely nutritional and bureaucratic concerns, extend the scope of tribal interest in bison beyond cultural tradition.

At first glance, this extension of interest may seem beneficial, but it may also be problematic. A tension may ultimately develop between the national character of the food and the regional character of the species. The regional character of the animal is important because ethical attitudes developed out of the long association between bison and Plains tribes. Moreover, these attitudes seem to possess a holistic quality that places bison within a wide social context. In contrast, many of the tribes in the FDPIR have had limited engagement with bison in the past. While emerging dietary and bureaucratic regimes entail a new means of finding value in the species, there is no guarantee that individuals with health concerns or bureaucratic responsibilities will have the same priorities as those who emphasize the importance of cultural traditions. Conceivably, cultures of the Great Plains could come into conflict with outlying tribal communities. Similarly, the fact that many of these tribes do not own bison themselves may also create problems, as they may not be as invested in the fate of the animals. Consequently, matters of consumption may become disconnected from matters of production.

Presently, looking at the program from an administrative position, one that takes into account all of the actors involved in the processing of bison, this disconnect has already occurred. Most of the bison procured by the USDA comes from nontribal sources that utilize conventional agricultural practices, most notably grain

feeding (USDA 2003). Data regarding the latest Section 32 buyout illustrate this point (Table 3). The NABC was the company that won the largest number of contracts with the USDA. The cooperative sold more than \$5 million worth of bison meat to the USDA, accounting for 58% of all bison products purchased under the buyout. Land of Oz Meats, which is a much smaller company, utilizes a similar approach. Together, these two businesses received 89% of the government contracts. Ultimately, this is the crux of the problem. Despite the unification of bison and the FDPIR, the program does not eliminate the persistent presence of philosophical divisions separating tribal and nontribal communities. Rather, the program may perpetuate these divisions by disconnecting production from consumption.

To be sure, the USDA has purchased some bison directly from tribes, but the amount is much smaller than that purchased from nontribal entities. In order to resolve this problem, tribal members have openly discussed ways to achieve greater access in the program. One option mentioned is to gain control of the means of production. Presently, only one tribe owns a federally authorized slaughter facility. Tribal representatives believe that such a facility would allow tribes to be more competitive in bidding for government contracts. It is unclear, however, to what extent (if at all) this would allow tribes to circumvent some of the specifications outlined by the USDA. In either case, this process would likely draw tribes further away from traditional relations with bison in the field.

Overall, the present structural arrangement runs counter to the concept of a native food and agriculture system, since it does not employ traditional methods (or an approximation thereof). Indeed, in a very fundamental way, the dichotomy between production and consumption seems to mimic the modern relationship to food in contemporary western societies. In such systems, food producers often attempt to shield the public from information regarding methods of food production. For their part, consumers are complicit in the process to the degree that they ignore or actively avoid information regarding the untidy or ethically questionable aspects of agricultural systems. In the case of bison, however, these relations have important economic, cultural, and religious implications. Unfortunately, in the process of administering the program, the USDA often treats tribal concerns as though they are obstacles to be overcome. This may be so because the connection between production and consumption is not granted the weight it is accorded within a native food and agriculture system. Pragmatism is thus allowed to trump cultural responsiveness.

## CONCLUSION

From this brief depiction, it is evident that several divisions permeate the structure of the FDPIR. Some of these divisions have old historical foundations, while others are in the midst of emerging. The longstanding division between tribal and nontribal societies is reinforced by the program's division of production and consumption. This is true even though many of the prominent players within each group are located in the same region, the Great Plains. Due to the pragmatic character of its responsibilities, the USDA reinforces the secular character of modern society, despite potential objections from tribal groups based on cultural and/or religious grounds. These governmental regulations do not acknowledge that the significance of food extends beyond issues of food safety and calorie counts. Lastly, these developments point to a potential division between tribal members throughout the country who may envision their relation to bison in different ways. Some tribal members are undoubtedly concerned about maintaining the vitality of bison in the midst of a 21st-century landscape. Yet others, particularly those separated from the live presence of bison within their communities, may be primarily interested in the nutritional value of bison products. It is not inconceivable that these two "communities of interest" could eventually come into conflict with one another. An FDPIR staff member recounted the following discussion:

He said, . . . "I realize that it comes from a white man and that it's surplus, but, you know, at least if it's a better food for them than what we're getting. So you have my blessing to accept it." Because there were some people [who] didn't want me to, because they were opposed to surplus, a surplus buy.

This comment suggests that different priorities emerge within different contexts, some of which have been partially created by the institutional structure of the FDPIR itself.

Tribal communities must take these factors into consideration when estimating the value of the FDPIR. Above all, they must decide whether the structure of the FDPIR is the best means of incorporating bison into a native food and agriculture system. This is not simply a choice between consuming bison or foregoing consumption entirely. Rather, it is a matter of comparing such mechanisms with other viable means for distributing such items. As the foregoing analysis indicated, tribal patterns of interaction

already provide opportunities for such dispersals. Such social processes may allow tribes to have more autonomy than the FDPIR allows for, in particular with regard to how bison are managed. Within such formats, tribes may not be required to make concessions that affect a culturally significant species.

The FDPIR forces tribes to make concessions in two general ways. First, the USDA specifications require tribes to manage and handle their own animals in more precise ways that mimic domestication and may conflict with notions of wildness. There is no indication these USDA requirements will change any time soon. Second, the program supports and legitimizes the conventional practices utilized by nontribal bison producers in other locations despite the objections of tribal representatives.

Yet if tribes limit themselves to the consumption of their own bison via traditional distribution systems, the scale and magnitude of bison consumption would be constricted for the time being. Local and regional economies could persist, but many tribes without live bison might lose access to such foods. For some, this reduction may not mean much, given the availability of other healthy foods and the cultural importance of bison. Nonetheless, tribal representatives, particularly among influential organizations, must evaluate the costs and benefits of each approach.

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