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## **A DARING PROPOSAL FOR DEALING WITH AN INEVITABLE DISASTER? A REVIEW OF THE BUFFALO COMMONS PROPOSAL**

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**Abstract.** *In December 1987, "The Great Plains: From Dust to Dust, a Daring Proposal for Dealing With an Inevitable Disaster," by Frank and Deborah Popper appeared in Planning, a journal of the American Planning Association. While many alternatives have been suggested to solve the environmental, social, and economic problems of the region, the Poppers' Buffalo Commons thesis quickly made regional and national headlines. Since 1987, the Poppers, while writing and speaking on this topic at length, have failed to substantiate many of their arguments. Meanwhile, their somewhat facile assumptions have attracted a wide and sometimes favorable audience. This paper contains three sections: in the first, we will summarize the major ideas of the proposal; second, we will identify its major methodological weaknesses; and in the conclusion, we will link the proposal's implicit and controversial assumptions to a wider geographical context.*

Although many Great Plains land use proposals have been published in recent years, Popper and Popper's (1987) "daring proposal for dealing with an inevitable disaster" was the first to make both regional and national headlines. Their suggestion of encouraging the removal of some 413,000 residents and abandoning settlements, cultivated farmland, and range land uses to prairie and grazing buffalo is widely known as the "Buffalo Commons"

proposal. Since their original article appeared in *Planning*, the Poppers have written at least two other supporting essays (Popper and Popper 1988, 1989), and their ideas have been excerpted and discussed in both academic (Dallas 1990) and popular outlets (Matthews 1990). Knack (1990) discussed in *Planning* the controversy raised by the original piece.

Despite such publicity, few attempts have been made to evaluate the Buffalo Commons, particularly the methods used by the Poppers to select counties to be depopulated. Therefore, we review the Buffalo Commons proposal first by summarizing the principal articles written by the Poppers, and secondly by critically assessing the Poppers' ideas.

### **The Buffalo Commons Considered**

Frank Popper, an authority in land-use reform (1981; 1984), and Deborah Popper, a graduate student in geography at Rutgers University, developed the original proposal as an exercise in land-use planning. It was the Poppers' intention to create a public debate on the issue of land use in the Great Plains. However, many of their ideas seemed based on unstated assumptions and explicit generalizations. Unfortunately, their articles have appeared in sources that do not use a formal citation system, and their data and information are often difficult to verify. Since the style of writing used by the Poppers often enhances their argument, they will be quoted at length.

The Buffalo Commons proposal is based on the assumption that human interaction with the environment, as it has existed since European settlement, cannot continue on the Great Plains. The Poppers hypothesize:

Over the next generation the Plains will, as a result of the largest, longest running agricultural and environmental miscalculation in American history, become almost totally depopulated. At that point, a new use for the region will emerge, one that is in fact so old that it predates the American presence. We are suggesting that the region be returned to its original pre-white state, that it be, in effect, deprivatized (Popper and Popper 1987:12).

They predict that whole sections of the Great Plains will unavoidably lose their human populations. "All across the Plains," they say, "are future ghost towns" (Dawson 1991:6).

To define the Buffalo Commons, the Poppers used the following six criteria to identify counties in "land use distress" (Popper 1991):

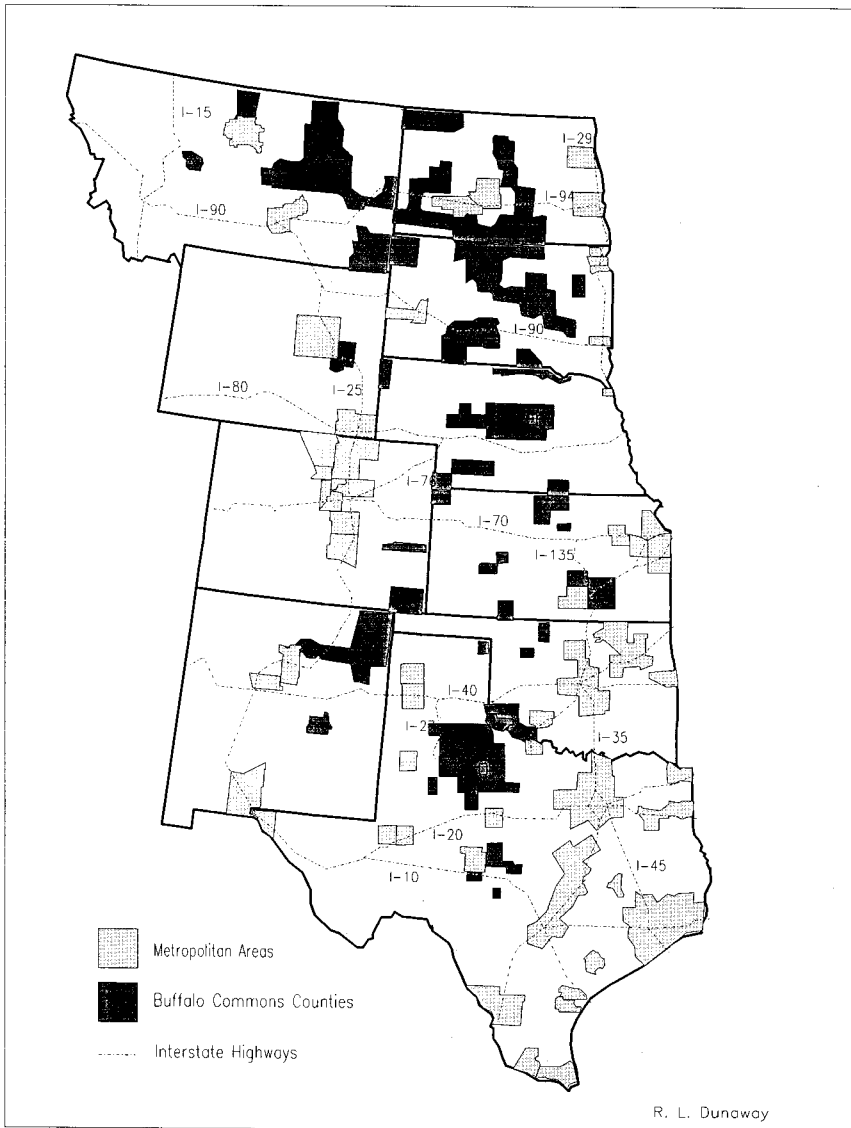


Figure 1. Buffalo Commons Counties, Metropolitan Areas, and Interstate Highways in the Great Plains. Map by R. L. Dunaway.

1. Population loss of 50% or more between 1930 and 1988.
2. Population loss of 10% or more in the 1980s.
3. Low population density, less than 4 people per square mile (in 1986 data).
4. Median age of at least 35 years in 1980.
5. 20% or more of the population in poverty in 1980.
6. \$50 or less new construction investment per capita in 1986.

A county was deemed to be in distress if it exceeded the threshold on three of the six variables, and in great distress if four or more of the thresholds are exceeded. Land incorporated in the Buffalo Commons (Fig. 1) would be purchased by the federal government, which would manage the reversion to natural prairie. Species of indigenous flora and fauna would be reintroduced in an attempt to return the land to pre-European settlement conditions, and terrain and soils would be stabilized. There would be a variety of activities in the Buffalo Commons, including tourism and open range hunting.

Frank Popper argued "we tried to force waterless, treeless steppes to behave like Ohio and got three or four boom and bust cycles for our trouble" (Matthews 1990:28). The Poppers noted in their original article that "three separate waves of farmers and ranchers, with increasingly heavy federal support, tried to make settlement stick on the Plains" (Popper and Popper 1987:16). They believe that the Great Plains represents a spectacular, large-scale, long term variant of Garrett Hardin's "Tragedy of the Commons" (Popper and Popper 1987:16). Hardin maintained that individual short-term rationality can lead to collective long-term environmental disaster (Hardin 1968).

The Poppers have been criticized for making sweeping generalizations, without regard for the diversity of the region, and with little consideration for the implications of the original proposal. Two years after their original article, a revised statement appeared in the *Washington Post* (Popper and Popper 1989). Here they reworded their original proposal, altering a few points (the notion of tourism in the Commons, for example, was quietly dropped). However, the tendency for sweeping generalizations remain. Joseph Luther, President of the Nebraska Chapter of the American Planning Association, noted their ability to make mythology rather than "policy" (Knack 1990:21). According to the Poppers:

Desertion of huge areas of the Plains is inevitable. The only remaining question is how soon. Government must start planning to keep most of the region from turning into a wasteland (Popper and Popper 1989:B3).

To this end, they again proposed a deprivatization program, in which the federal government would first negotiate “distress sale circumstance” and buyouts.

The federal government would have responsibility for overseeing transition to the Buffalo Commons. Government should also take responsibility for easing the social transition of people either bought or forced off the Plains. The government will have to invent a 1990s version of the 1930s Resettlement Administration, a social-work finance technical assistance agency . . . . Second, the federal government should take the newly emptied Plains and tear down the fences, replant the short grass and restock the animals, including many bison--creating what we would call the Buffalo Commons. The task would be time consuming and would take at least twenty to thirty years before vegetation and wildlife entirely reassert themselves (Popper and Popper 1989:B3).

Some areas would not be part of the Commons, leading to a mosaic. The Poppers singled out places such as those within the “urban shadows” of Denver and San Antonio, certain self-contained service centers such as Bismarck and Cheyenne, and towns on interstates or in locations where agriculture, energy developments or tourism are viable (Fig. 1). Nevertheless, the Poppers asserted in a March 1991 presentation in Billings, Montana, that the days are numbered for small inland communities dependent upon agriculture (Dawson 1991:6). Towns that serve counties redlined by the Poppers would be absorbed into the Buffalo Commons.

### **The Buffalo Commons Reconsidered**

The Buffalo Commons proposal has served a useful function in alerting the nation to problems long acknowledged in the Great Plains: environmental, economic, and social instability. A debate has begun which we hope will continue and result in a new direction for land-use policy, eventually leading to land-use stability; the need for some kind of adjustment in land-use

TABLE 1

KANSAS URBAN PLACES OF 10,000 OR MORE  
WEST OF THE 98TH MERIDIAN

City	1980 Population	1990 Population	Percent Change
Dodge City	18,001	21,129	17.4%
Garden City	18,256	24,097	32.0
Great Bend	16,608	15,427	-7.1
Hays	16,301	17,767	9.0
Liberal	14,911	16,573	11.1

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990 Decennial Census.

practices is imperative. William Riebsame (1991), for example, believes that Great Plains agricultural development reflects resilient as well as adaptive characteristics, and says that America will tolerate only a limited increase of failure and outmigration in the Great Plains. The Poppers have also helped to promote other land-use alternatives, such as Bret Wallach's (1985) idea of retiring farming acreage to create national prairie parks. The Buffalo Commons proposal, however, suffers from three major flaws: perceptual assumptions; methodological problems; and a failure to recognize and articulate the proposal's implications for Great Plains residents. In this section we assess the proposal based on these criticisms.

#### **Perceptual Assumptions of the Buffalo Commons Proposal**

At the outset of the original article, the Poppers create an image of a dying region by a vivid writing style and by exaggeration and misstatements found in nearly every paragraph on the first page. In the third paragraph, for example, they assert that the Great Plains "have the nation's hottest summers

and coldest winters” (Popper and Popper 1987:12). In fact, the coldest temperatures in January are found in the upper Midwest, the upper Northeast, and Alaska, and the warmest temperatures in July are found in the Southwest (Espenshade and Morrison 1987). Three paragraphs later, the Poppers equate overplowing with “sodbusting.” “Sodbusting” is derived from the noun, “sodbuster,” which is a Plains or Western farmer, but not someone who inherently abuses the land (Wentworth and Flexner 1975). Again, the Poppers have created a negative image through a half-truth. In the same paragraph, the Poppers mention droughts and locusts “hitting” the Great Plains in the early 1920s, but, the midpoints of the most extensive droughts in the Great Plains before the 1980s were 1892, 1912, 1934, and 1953 (Borchert 1971).

The Poppers (1987:12) create the image of a region almost devoid of people. By using one of the traditional eastern boundaries of the High Plains (98th meridian), the Poppers are able to speak sorrowfully of a region whose largest city is Lubbock, Texas, with 179,000 residents. Population loss and low population densities throughout the Great Plains region are important arguments used by the Poppers to promote the establishment of a Buffalo Commons. Their map shows only two other urban centers, Denver and San Antonio, on the margins of the region. However, some urban places in the region considerably smaller than Lubbock *are* thriving. Garden City, Kansas, for example, grew by more than 30% in the 1980s (Table 1).

### **Methodological Problems**

The proposal’s methodological assumptions reflect an urban growth bias. The Poppers fail to develop a measure of social and ecological sustainability for the region. By declining to link ecological and human well-being, the Poppers offer a proposal that, if implemented, could lead to the abandonment of significant portions of the Great Plains without addressing fundamental agro-ecological pressures that have contributed to current Great Plains problems.

The major methodological flaw of the proposal is that the variables used to identify counties in land-use distress are not land-use indicators. Instead, the authors have produced an indication of the socio-economic well-being of counties, reflecting on urban-growth bias. Population density, new construction investment, median age, and poverty rate, specifically, suggest an assumption that urban character is necessary for provision of services. More fundamentally, the bias may be that growing urban settlement pattern is



higher quality than, and to be promoted over nonurban settlement. The Poppers not only fail to consider environmental problems, but could misinterpret counties where overuse of resources leads to short-term economic well being at the cost of long-term ecological sustainability.

Two major agricultural land-use concerns in the Great Plains are soil erosion and water scarcity. While the national average for soil erosion from cropland is five tons per acre per year, the Kansas average, for example, is three times that amount. Erosion is particularly severe in northeast Kansas, which has steeper slopes than the rest of the state and deep erosive soils (Kansas State Board of Agriculture 1984). The Poppers include nine Kansas counties in their proposed Buffalo Commons (Fig. 1). Yet, the "distressed" counties are not in this area of the state.

Water scarcity, like soil erosion, has historically been a problem on the Great Plains. The lack of precipitation cannot be used simply to predict farm failure and presumed outmigration, as drought in the Great Plains today does not necessarily lead to agricultural contraction but can lead to expanded and more intense farming (Riebsame et al. 1991). The region partly depends upon the Ogallala Aquifer for its water. In this region, population stability is the norm, and the presence of water appears to be a stabilizing influence (White 1991). While both soil erosion and water depletion are mentioned anecdotally by the Poppers, they do not attempt to measure land use distress using these criteria. Resource issues such as soil and water must be considered more thoroughly.

Finally, the Buffalo Commons proposal relies on analysis of county-level data from federal sources. Use of these data as the major source for important policy decisions is questionable at best. County-level data misses the variability *within* counties, as well as rural-urban difference. In addition, Frank and Deborah Popper have not presented evidence of any extensive use of material widely available at every governmental level. In the case of Kansas for example, *Kansas Statistical Abstracts 1989-90*, the annual edition of *Kansas Farm Facts*, and the 1988 edition of the *Kansas Census of Permanent Citizens* might be useful. The *Kansas Statistical Abstract 1990-91* offers county profiles for comparisons *within* individual counties (Helyar 1991). Also, the Poppers have not indicated that they have consulted contemporary literature on the Great Plains in detail. Photographs of impoverished small towns and portraits of worried farm families often have been used to support their arguments. Any broad solution to Great Plains problems, especially one which threatens the well being of so many people, deserves more thorough documentation.

### **Implications of the Buffalo Commons Proposal**

The economic impact of the Buffalo Commons proposal, if implemented, is unknown, making it a calculated gamble with half a million livelihoods. The Poppers have made no serious attempt to specify the broad implications of the proposal for the region as a whole, or for the rest of the nation. The establishment of the Buffalo Commons would have substantial economic impact on areas not included in the Commons itself, since long commuting distances are typical in the Great Plains (Cyr 1991) as is long distance travel for services. For example, airport limousine services for Kansas City International Airport extends as far as Fort Riley, Kansas, a distance of over one hundred miles. Many towns have hinterlands as large as several counties. The removal of people from affected counties could well aggravate the very boom and bust cycles the Buffalo Commons proposal seeks to end. The forced abandonment of the four counties in the North-Central Regional Planning Area of Kansas, for example, would have economic implications for the entire state (Cyr 1991).

The importance of major transportation routes on economic conditions was not considered in the Poppers' classification system. Interstate highways are frequently associated with economic viability in the Great Plains, as they alter accessibility within a region reducing travel times and compressing the effects of distance (Giuliano 1986). Since the Buffalo Commons is segmented by major interstate highways that cut across the Plains, it is not spatially contiguous (Fig. 1). Several Buffalo Commons counties, particularly in Texas (Fig. 1) are contiguous to metropolitan areas and located on or near interstate highways. While it is impossible to measure the current effect that the creation of the Commons would have on those metropolitan areas, it does seem possible that another possible Commons effect, not considered by the Poppers, would arise. The Commons would effectively curtail any future suburban or exurban growth from those urban areas into the contiguous counties. The location of metropolitan areas adjacent to Buffalo Commons counties suggests that the Popper's arguments are methodologically flawed.

The Poppers have not proposed any specific management plan. They suggest a management scheme modelled in part after the National Grasslands program, however, the use of this model for the Buffalo Commons is questionable. Lewis (1989:161) observed that National Grasslands were not successful as agents of land-use reform in the Dust Bowl because land owners were not willing to sell viable cropland or grassland areas. The federal government's attempts to procure land for a prairie national park in Kansas

also have been frustrated by local residents' opposition. William Least Heat-Moon in his new book *PrairyErth* noted that:

the residents admire the beauty of the land . . . but most of them disliked the park proposal . . . a couple of groups organized meetings, leaned on legislators, printed bumper sticker threats, and finally drove the park proponents toward a site ninety miles south in Oklahoma, a state as much associated with the tallgrass prairie as Georgia is with the Appalachian Mountains (Least Heat-Moon 1991:54-55).

The cooperation of residents with any major federal acquisition plan must be questioned. Reactions to the Buffalo Commons proposal have been negative in most parts of the region. Emphasizing the large federal subsidies received by many farmers in the region may help the Poppers' arguments nationwide, but merely serves to irritate Great Plains farmers who believe that federal farm subsidies keep food prices low for the American consumer. Michael Quick, a Montana farmer and national family farm activist said to the Poppers in March of last year: "You stepped right in the middle of my belly. I don't believe we need another buffalo wallow in Montana" (Dawson 1991:6).

The Poppers also do not discuss changing overall priorities in agricultural policies (Popper and Popper 1987; Popper and Popper 1989). Such a shift is necessary to deal with agricultural land-use problems not only in the Great Plains states, but across the whole nation. Without the cooperation of the people affected by the Buffalo Commons proposal and a shift in farm policies, the success of any regional plan is doubtful.

Finally, the Buffalo Commons are disconnected counties scattered over ten states. The Buffalo Commons counties, although often contiguous, would be ecological islands in the middle of farmland and range. It is questionable whether the fragmented Buffalo Commons are extensive enough for habitat preservation and species protection.

### **Conclusion: The 'Redlining' of a Region?**

In their Buffalo Commons articles, the Poppers first promote the image of an entire region that is destined to die, then proceed to define their proposed Buffalo Commons more narrowly. Most critics have attacked the Poppers' portrayal of the Great Plains, rather than criticizing the assumptions and methods on which the proposal is based, or potential implications

of their ideas. Thus, the Poppers have appeared as practically minded social scientists to many critics. The Poppers are thus allowed merely to restate their definitions for land use categories, and to avoid serious confrontations (Knack 1990:21). Most critics have been deflected from the specific problems inherent in the Poppers' ideas. In this paper we have criticized the proposal more directly, with the intention of pointing out its inherent flaws.

Another troubling aspect of the Buffalo Commons proposal is its possible influence on national public policy. The Poppers fail to recognize several crucial points about the Great Plains perhaps because these are atypical of the United States as a whole, and certainly of Megalopolis, from which the Poppers come. But, as John Fraser Hart (1986:204) has noted:

When you stop to think about it, it goes against the very essence of geography to assume that any single critical value, no matter how carefully chosen, could be equally significant over an area as large as the Midwest, much less the entire nation, yet national policy makers demand definitions that are nationally applicable. Perhaps one of the most useful contributions geographers could make to the formulation of public policy could be to try to educate policy makers to the fact that regional differences make hash of national definitions.

Joseph Luther noticed the Poppers' thesis emphasis on economic factors. While he agreed with the Poppers "up to a certain point," he believed that they didn't emphasize the social and cultural strengths of the Great Plains' communities enough. Luther believes that policy makers have used the Poppers' "neutral" descriptions as an excuse for disinvestment (Knack 1990:21).

The Poppers have evoked powerful and romantic images which threaten future policy decisions in our region. We distrust such mythic visions, particularly when supported by slight research and inadequate documentation. Finally, although the Buffalo Commons proposal is broad and imaginative, it remains incomplete as a long range solution for problems in a region used to thinking in terms of short range solutions and in terms of local individual rights and needs. It is difficult to find a program covering such a large geographical area that has been a political and economic success. Despite heightened social and environmental awareness, many people in the Great Plains, even of the most economically deprived counties, are as yet unwilling to believe they have been defeated, and to give their land back to the

buffalo. Great Plains residents await an alternative solution to the problems of the region.

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