News
EarthBeat



One of the 35 Denver Mountain Park bison stands in a corral as it waits to be transferred to representatives of four Native American tribes and one memorial council so they can reintroduce the animals to tribal lands Wednesday, March 15, 2023, near Golden, Colo. (AP Photo/David Zalubowski)

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Dozens of bison from a mountain park outside Denver were transferred Wednesday to several tribes from across the Great Plains, in the latest example of Native Americans reclaiming stewardship over animals their ancestors lived alongside for millennia.

Following ceremonial drumming and singing and an acknowledgement of the tribes that once occupied the surrounding landscape, the bison were loaded onto trucks for relocation to tribal lands.

About a half-dozen of the animals from Colorado will form the nucleus of a new herd for the Yuchi people south of Tulsa, Oklahoma, said Richard Grounds with the Yuchi Language Project.

The herd will be expanded over time, to reestablish a spiritual and physical bond broken two centuries ago when bison were nearly wiped out and the Yuchi were forced from their homeland, Grounds said.

He compared the burly animals' return to reviving the Yuchi's language — and said both language and bison were inseparable from the land. Bison were "the original caretakers" of that land, he said.

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"We've lost that connection to the buffalo, that physical connection, as part of the colonial assault," Grounds said. "So we're saying, we Yuchi people are still here and the buffalo are still here and it's important to reconnect and restore those relationships with the land, with the animals and the plants."

The transfers also included 17 bison to the Northern Arapaho Tribe and 12 to the Eastern Shoshone Tribe — both of Wyoming — and one animal to the Tall Bull Memorial Council, which has members from various tribes, city officials said.

Wednesday's transfer came two weeks after U.S. Interior Secretary Deb Haaland issued a bison conservation order meant to further expand the number of large herds on Native American lands. Haaland also announced $25 million to build new herds, transfer more bison from federal to tribal lands and forge new bison management agreements with tribes, officials said.



Some of the 35 Denver Mountain Park bison wait in a corral to be transferred to representatives of four Native American tribes and one memorial council as they reintroduce the animals to tribal lands, Wednesday, March 15, 2023, near Golden, Colo. (AP Photo/David Zalubowski)

American bison, also known as buffalo, have bounced back from near-extinction in the 1880s but remain absent from most of the grasslands they once occupied.

Across the U.S., 82 tribes now have more than 20,000 bison, and the number of herds on tribal lands have grown in recent years. The animals have been transferred to reservations from other tribes, from federal, state and local governments and from private ranches.

Tens of millions of bison once roamed North America until they were killed off almost entirely by white settlers, commercial hunters and U.S. troops. Their demise devastated Native American tribes across the continent that relied on bison and their parts for food, clothing and shelter.

The animals transferred to the tribes Wednesday descend from the last remnants of the great herds. They were under care of the Denver Zoo and kept in a city park before being moved to foothills west of Denver in 1914.



Jason Baldes, of the Eastern Shoshone Tribe, backs up his pickup truck to position a trailer to pick up some of 35 Denver Mountain Park bison being transferred to

representatives of four Native American tribes and one memorial council as they reintroduce the animals to tribal lands Wednesday, March 15, 2023, near Golden, Colo. (AP Photo/David Zalubowski)

Surplus animals from the city's herd were for many years auctioned off, but in recent years city officials began transferring them to tribes instead, said Scott Gilmore, deputy executive director of Denver Parks and Recreation.

Gilmore said the land acknowledgement statement read out loud during Wednesday's ceremony underscored the historical importance of the area to the Cheyenne, Arapaho, Ute and dozens of other tribes that once lived in the area. But he added those were just "words on a piece of paper."

"What we're doing is putting action to those words for Indigenous people. Buffalo are part of the land, they are part of their family," Gilmore said. "They are taking their family members back to their ancestral home."

To date, 85 bison from Denver have been transferred to tribes and tribal organizations. City officials said the shipments will continue through 2030.