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Citizenship

Dare Greatly



Nature

Think Boldly

Live

Passionately

Leadership

In the
Arena

Family

Conservation

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National History Day Guide

BISON CONSERVATION

National History Day: Rights and Responsibilities (2024–2025)

BISON CONSERVATION

When Europeans first came to the United States, the American bison covered the continent and numbered 30–60 million. Beginning in the mid-1800s, Americans began to hunt bison indiscriminately, pushing the population to near extinction by the 1880s. By 1900, fewer than 1,000 bison remained. At first, Theodore Roosevelt was eager to hunt this big game animal, killing his first bison in 1883.

However, as the number of American bison continued to diminish, Roosevelt and others started to realize there was a serious issue. In a handwritten draft of a chapter on bison for *Hunting the Grisly and Other Sketches*, Roosevelt wrote, “Mixed with the eager excitement of the hunter I felt a certain half-melancholy feeling as I gazed on these bison, themselves part of the last remnant of a doomed and nearly vanished race.”

When he became president, Roosevelt used his platform to advocate for conservation, including of the bison. In his Fourth Annual Message in December 1904, he became the first sitting president to argue for the preservation of the bison: “We owe it to future generations to keep alive the noble and beautiful creatures which by their presence add such distinctive character to the American wilderness.”

Roosevelt also supported the efforts of the American Bison Society (ABS), created in 1905 to raise public awareness about the bison and save the species from extinction. As Roosevelt, elected honorary president of the ABS, wrote in a 1907 letter to Ernest Harold Baynes, secretary of the ABS, “It would be a real misfortune to permit the species to become extinct, and I hope that all good citizens will aid the society in its efforts for its preservation.”

Country Life in America published this letter in the January 1908 issue at the beginning of an article by Baynes entitled “The Fight to Save the Buffalo.” Both men and women were invited to join the cause, and women contributed \$1,227.00 of the \$10,560.50 raised (roughly \$40,000 out of \$350,000 in today’s dollars), according to the 1908 annual report.

Thanks to the efforts of conservationists like Theodore Roosevelt, Indigenous people, and members of the American Bison Society, the bison is alive and well in the United States today. Roughly one-third of all wild bison—numbering around 10,000—in North America live in herds on public lands.

National History Day: Bison Conservation

The 2024–2025 National History Day theme focuses on rights and responsibilities. The story of the American bison is an excellent illustration of a historical event that addresses these big questions. In the mid-to-late 1800s, Americans with European backgrounds felt they had the right to hunt bison, including Theodore Roosevelt himself, which led to the near extinction of the species.

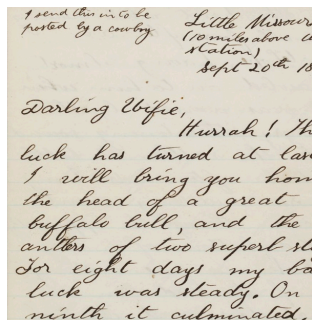
However, as people began to realize how perilous the existence of the American bison was, they started taking responsibility for their actions, promoting conservation efforts by the early 1900s. Although the bison population is no longer endangered, discussions surrounding rights and responsibilities regarding bison hunting and the species itself continue to this day.

Primary sources pertaining to Theodore Roosevelt and bison conservation are available in collections across the country. Students and teachers can find over 15 pages of primary sources in the [Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library](#) related exclusively to bison. **This resource packet includes 15 primary sources related to Theodore Roosevelt and bison conservation.**

1 Letter from Theodore Roosevelt to Alice Lee Roosevelt



[Download](#)



Source 1 is a letter from Theodore Roosevelt to his first wife, Alice Lee Roosevelt, who died just a few months later in February 1884. The letter describes Roosevelt's bison hunt, beginning with the words "Hurrah! The luck has turned at last. I will bring you home the head of a great buffalo bull . . ."

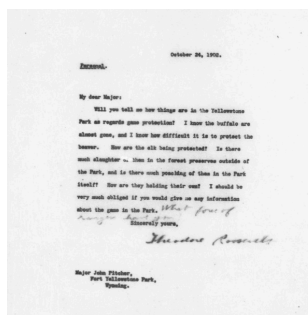
DATE: 09/20/1883 **CREATED BY:** Theodore Roosevelt

Courtesy of Harvard College Library, Theodore Roosevelt Collection, MS Am 1541.9 (103), Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library, Dickinson State University

2 Letter from Theodore Roosevelt to John Pitcher



[Download](#)



Source 2 is a letter from Theodore Roosevelt to John Pitcher, superintendent of Yellowstone National Park from May 8, 1901 to July 12, 1907. Roosevelt requests information about game protection, stating, "I know the buffalo are almost gone . . ."

DATE: 10/24/1907 **CREATED BY:** Theodore Roosevelt

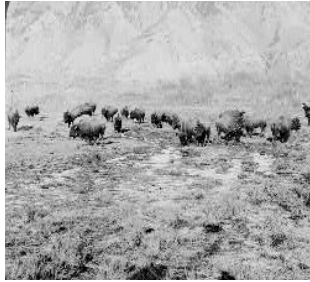
Courtesy of Library of Congress Manuscript Division, Theodore Roosevelt Papers, Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library, Dickinson State University

National History Day: Bison Conservation

3 Last remnants of the American Bison, Yellowstone National Park, U.S.A.



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Source 3 is a photograph of American bison at Yellowstone National Park taken around 1903. The title of the photograph, “Last Remnants of the American Bison,” suggests an increasing knowledge about the importance of bison conservation.

DATE: c. 1903

CREATED BY: American Stereoscopic Company

Courtesy of Library of Congress

4 Telling them all about it in Yellowstone Park



[Download](#)



Source 4 is a cartoon depicting Theodore Roosevelt and several wild animals, including a bison, around a campfire. The caption reads, “An appreciative audience hearing President Roosevelt relate his experience in the White House.”

DATE: 04/11/1903

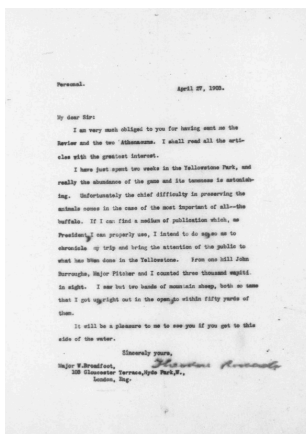
CREATED BY: Unknown

Courtesy of Library of Congress Manuscript Division, Theodore Roosevelt Papers, Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library, Dickinson State University

5 Letter from Theodore Roosevelt to Major W. Broadfoot



[Download](#)



Source 5 is a letter from Theodore Roosevelt to Major Broadfoot, likely Major William Broadfoot, 1841–1922, Royal Engineers. Roosevelt talks about visiting Yellowstone National Park, including mentioning bison conservation: “Unfortunately the chief difficulty in preserving animals comes in the case of the most important of all—the buffalo. If I can find a medium of publication which, as President, I can properly use, I intend to do so . . .”

DATE: 04/27/1903

CREATED BY: Theodore Roosevelt

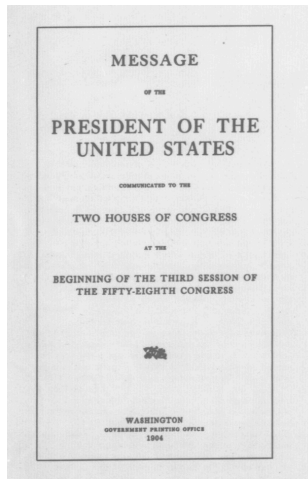
Courtesy of Library of Congress Manuscript Division, Theodore Roosevelt Papers, Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library, Dickinson State University

National History Day: Bison Conservation

6 Message of the President of the United States



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Source 6 is Theodore Roosevelt's fourth annual message to Congress in which he discusses bison conservation: "In connection with the work of the forest reserves I desire again to urge upon the Congress the importance of authorizing the President to set aside certain portions of these reserves or other public lands as game refuges for the preservation of the bison, the wapiti, and other large beasts once so abundant in our woods and mountains and on our great plains, and now tending toward extinction."

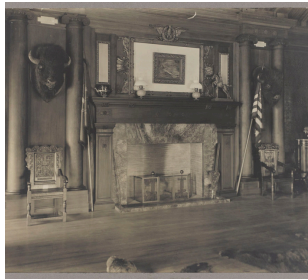
DATE: 12/06/1904 **CREATED BY:** Theodore Roosevelt

Courtesy of Library of Congress Manuscript Division, Theodore Roosevelt Papers, Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library, Dickinson State University

7 Sagamore Hill, President Roosevelt's country home, the north room



[Download](#)



Source 7 is a photograph of the north room in Sagamore Hill with two large mounted bison heads on either side of the fireplace.

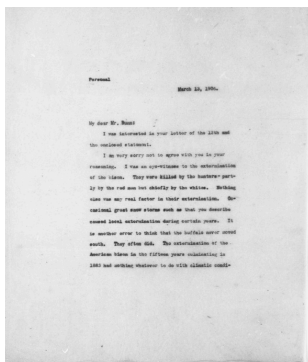
DATE: 09/14/1905 **CREATED BY:** Unknown

Courtesy of Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library, Dickinson State University

8 Letter from Theodore Roosevelt to Roy N. Bunn



[Download](#)



Source 8 is a letter from Theodore Roosevelt to Roy N. Bunn in which the former disagrees with the latter's reasoning regarding the demise of the bison: "I was an eye-witness to the extermination of the bison. They were killed by the hunters—partly by the red man but chiefly by the whites. Nothing else was any real factor in their extermination."

DATE: 03/13/1906 **CREATED BY:** Theodore Roosevelt

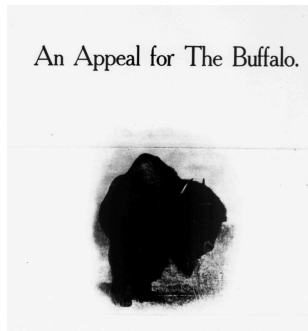
Courtesy of Library of Congress Manuscript Division, Theodore Roosevelt Papers, Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library, Dickinson State University

National History Day: Bison Conservation

9 An appeal for the buffalo



[Download](#)



Source 9 is a petition published by the American Bison Society asking Americans to take active measures to preserve the bison, noting, "The extinction of the Buffalo would be an irreparable loss to American fauna; more than that, it would be a disgrace to our country."

DATE: c. 1907 **CREATED BY:** American Bison Society

Courtesy of Library of Congress Manuscript Division, Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library, Dickinson State University

10 Membership application for the American Bison Society



[Download](#)

Source 10 is an application form to become a member of the American Bison Society either as an associate member, member, or life member with associated fees of \$1.00, \$5.00, or \$100.00 respectively (\$33.41, \$167.00, or \$3,341.00 in today's dollars).

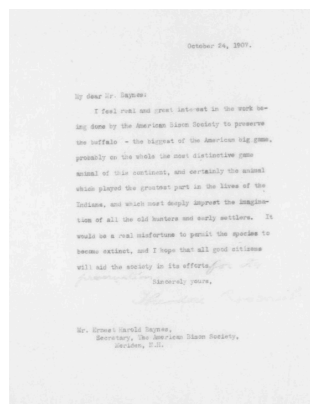
DATE: c. 1907 **CREATED BY:** American Bison Society

Courtesy of Library of Congress Manuscript Division, Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library, Dickinson State University

11 Letter from Theodore Roosevelt to Ernest Harold Baynes



[Download](#)



Source 11 is a letter from Theodore Roosevelt to Ernest Harold Baynes, secretary of the American Bison Society, in which Roosevelt expresses his support for bison conservation: "It would be a real misfortune to permit the species to become extinct, and I hope that all good citizens will aid the society in its efforts for its preservation." This letter was later printed in a magazine article.

DATE: 10/24/1907 **CREATED BY:** Theodore Roosevelt

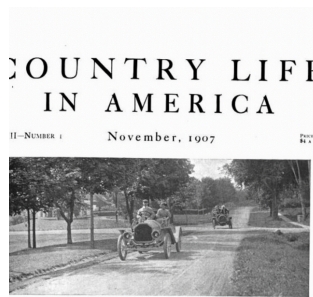
Courtesy of Theodore Roosevelt Papers, Library of Congress Manuscript Division, Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library, Dickinson State University

National History Day: Bison Conservation

12 “The Fight to Save the Buffalo”



[Download](#)



Source 12 is an article in *Country Life in America* written by Ernest Harold Baynes, secretary of the American Bison Society, encouraging people to get involved to help save the bison: “We are called upon at this time to save from extinction the noblest of all American animals—our national animal—the bison or buffalo.”

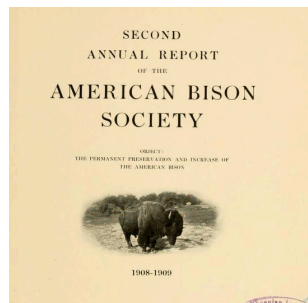
DATE: 01/1908 **CREATED BY:** Ernest Harold Baynes

Courtesy of Country Life in America

13 Second Annual Report of the American Bison Society



[Download](#)



Source 13 is the second annual report of the American Bison Society, which includes reports from various leaders and a list of members. One interesting list is on page 11, which details the summary of subscriptions by states. New York had the most subscriptions, followed by Massachusetts and Minnesota.

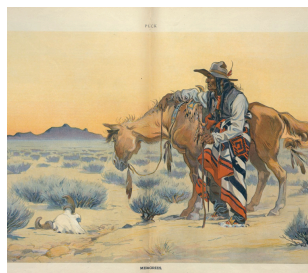
DATE: 1909 **CREATED BY:** American Bison Society

Courtesy of American Bison Society

14 Memories



[Download](#)



Source 14 is an illustration entitled “Memories” published in *Puck* magazine in which an elderly Indigenous man stands beside a horse on the plains with a bleached bison skull in front of them.

DATE: 10/08/1913 **CREATED BY:** Unknown

Courtesy of Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library, Dickinson State University

15 Bison grazing



[Download](#)



Source 15 is a photograph of a bison herd grazing in the South Unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park in 1958.

DATE: 06/1958 **CREATED BY:** Louis Kirk

Courtesy of National Park Service, Theodore Roosevelt National Park, Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library, Dickinson State University

National History Day: Bison Conservation

IMPORTANT DATES

- **September 8, 1883:** Theodore Roosevelt arrives in Medora, Dakota Territory, to hunt bison.
- **1902:** A captive herd of 21 plains bison are introduced to Yellowstone National Park.
- **December 6, 1904:** Theodore Roosevelt is the first sitting president to mention bison conservation in an annual message to Congress.
- **January 21, 1919:** The last reintroduction of bison facilitated by the American Bison Society occurs in Pisgah National Forest in North Carolina.
- **May 9, 2016:** The American bison is named the national mammal of the United States.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Books/Documentaries

- Aune, Keith, and Glenn Plumb. *Theodore Roosevelt & Bison Restoration on the Great Plains*. Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2019.
- Burns, Ken, dir. *The American Buffalo*. 2023. Public Broadcasting Service. <https://www.pbs.org/kenburns/the-american-buffalo/>.
- Rinella, Steven. *American Buffalo: In Search of a Lost Icon*. New York: Random House, 2008.
- Roosevelt, Theodore. *Hunting the Grisly and Other Sketches*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1889.

Articles

- McKee, Alison. "Bison Conservation." Theodore Roosevelt Center at Dickinson State University. Accessed June 26, 2024. <https://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/Learn-About-TR/TR-Encyclopedia/Conservation/Bison%20Conservation>.
- Mott, Nick, and Taylar Dawn Stagner. "Treaty Rights, Bison and the Country's Most Controversial Hunt." *High Country News*. Last modified July 1, 2023. <https://www.hcn.org/issues/55-7/indigenous-affairs-hunting-treaty-rights-bison-and-the-countrys-most-controversial-hunt/>.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What rights do people have to wildlife like the American bison? What responsibilities do people have to wildlife like the American bison?
- How does Theodore Roosevelt embody changing perspectives on rights and responsibilities toward the American bison?
- What rights do people have regarding public lands? What responsibilities do people have regarding conservation?
- How have rights and responsibilities toward bison changed over time? And is it different for different people?
- How does the responsibility of stewardship pertain to caring for wildlife like the American bison?
- Who should have bison-hunting rights? What responsibilities do bison hunters have?