

The Great Plains and the Buffalo Commons

by Deborah E. Popper and Frank J. Popper

http://www.gprc.org/programs/buffalo_commons/great_plains_buffalo_commons.html

The Great Plains region, North America's grassland and breadbasket, is a vast, beautiful, charismatic place with a volatile settlement history. Since the end of the Civil War, the Plains has suffered three large cycles of population, economic and environmental boom and especially bust. Seventeen years ago the present authors proposed a solution for the region's difficulties, a vision of the Plains' land-use future that we called the Buffalo Commons. Our idea took hold in the Plains, has lasted and promises to affect the region's development.

The Great Plains occupies almost a sixth of the Lower 48 United States' land area. By conventional definition its east edge is the 98th meridian, where Oklahoma City and San Antonio lie (Webb 1981 [1931], 3-9). Its west edge is the Rockies. The region consists of parts of ten US states, from North Dakota and Montana in the north to Texas and New Mexico in the south, plus parts of three Canadian provinces, Alberta, Manitoba and Saskatchewan.

The Plains are the burnt right flank of the Western desert. The region has high winds and few trees, and the climate is semiarid, with average rainfall of 12 to 20 inches annually. The vegetation is mainly midgrass in the east, shortgrass in the west. The topography rolls in the north, flattens in the south. The prime crops are cattle, corn, wheat, sheep and, in the south, cotton. The prime minerals are coal, oil and natural gas. The Plains once were nearly entirely deep-rural and small-town, but these areas have long been losing population to cities in the Plains and elsewhere. Still, the largest city in the northern half of the US Plains is Billings, Montana, with a population of only 90,000 in 2000. The region's total US population is under 6 million people, about that of a mid-size state such as Indiana.

The Plains are the land of the Big Sky and the Dust Bowl, one-room schoolhouses and settler homesteads, straight-line Interstates and custom combines, Little House on the Prairie and Dances with Wolves. The oceans-of-grass vistas of the Plains induce the somber-serene awe that enthralled early literary observers like Washington Irving and George Catlin and contemporary ones like Sharon Butala and Wallace Stegner. All of them knew the difficulties the settlers would find there.

Large-scale Euroamerican habitation, which began soon after the Civil War, shows a basic pattern: federally subsidized settlement and cultivation produce a boom, which then leads to overgrazing and overplowing, which then leads to a bust, which features heavy depopulation, especially in the region's most rural sections. Plains settlement has repeatedly displayed what University of North Dakota historian Elwyn Robinson called the "Too-Much Mistake"--too many people, farms, ranches, towns, railroads and roads for the land to take (Robinson 1966, VII). Nature and the economy inevitably rebelled.

The three great cycles of short-boom/long-bust have now played out. The first originated with the 1862 Homestead Act, which gave settlers 160 acres of free federal land if they could live on it for five years. By 1890 a series of hard winters and cattle die-ups forced a bust, with failed homesteading, widespread starvation and large convoys of fully loaded wagon trains headed east, out of the Plains. The second cycle began in the early 1900s with additional homesteading laws that allowed claimants up to 640 acres of free federal land. Plains locusts and a national rural depression hit in the early 1920s, followed by the 1929 Great Depression and the ecological catastrophe of the 1930s Dust Bowl, when huge clouds of Plains soil blew away across large parts of the region. By the late 1930s the federal government prohibited new homesteading, and John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* Okies were driving, hitchhiking or rail-hopping west to California.

As a result of the cycles, many deep-rural Plains towns and counties had their largest populations early in the last century and have been steadily emptying since. Young people are particularly prone to leave, and so the local population ages. Maps of the Plains show many towns that have been essentially unoccupied for decades—Keota, Colorado, say, or Hoover, South Dakota. Kansas alone has hundreds of ghost towns. Nebraska has 5,000 to 10,000 deserted farmhouses.

Since the late 1980s, the present authors have argued that a third great boom/bust cycle was well under way and likely to go farther than the other two (Popper and Popper, 1987). It began with the New Deal advent of large modern federal subsidies from the Agriculture Department. It peaked in the 1970s, when the Department encouraged fencepost-to-fencepost cultivation, and the energy crisis made Plains coal, oil and natural gas particularly profitable. By the middle 1980s the environmental, economic and demographic toll was clear, and the bust phase set in. Soil erosion approached Dust Bowl rates, although it was less visible than in the 1930s because it was mainly water- rather than wind-borne. Despite wider use of water-conservation methods than in earlier periods, the Ogallala Aquifer, the source of agricultural and urban groundwater for the southern two-thirds of the Plains, was dropping fast, especially under its largest consumer, Texas (Opie 2000 [1993]).

Much of the region's farm, ranch, energy and mining economies suffered near-depression. Americans ate less beef, substituting lower-cholesterol and lower-fat chicken and fish, which the Plains did not produce. The Interior Department's Bureau of Reclamation stopped building big dam-and-irrigation projects, such as the 1940s and 1950s Missouri River ones that underwrote large chunks of Plains economic development. As in the other two cycles, failing farmers and ranchers mostly sold their holdings to more successful ones, but now depopulation reached the point where entire counties lost their churches, doctors, hospitals and banks.

The middle-1980s third-cycle pressures have persisted, and others emerged. The large population losses, especially of young people, continued in the 1990 and 2000 Censuses (Popper and Popper, 2002, 21). All Plains states and provinces suffered severe drought, and some saw at least ten years of it over the last fifteen. Friendlier US-Russian relations and bigger federal budget deficits eliminated many military bases and missile silos in the Dakotas, Montana and Wyoming that gave localities much-needed subsidies. Deregulation of the airline, trucking, railroad, bus and telephone industries further isolated many remote Plains communities, as did cutbacks in medical, educational and other public services. The United States and Canada, increasingly urban and suburban, became ambivalent about big federal farm subsidies that rose as farm populations fell and farm overproduction swelled. Beginning in the late 1990s, white Plains Nebraska cattle counties supplanted Indian Plains South Dakota ones as the poorest in the nation (Rural Action, 2000, 1). Global warming seemed likely to put new stresses on Plains agriculture.

In the late 1980s the present authors offered the Buffalo Commons as an alternative to the boom-and-bust cycles (Popper and Popper, 1987 and 2002). The Buffalo Commons suggests ecologically and economically restorative possibilities for large stretches of the Plains. We foresaw a Plains with new land uses that fell somewhere between traditional agriculture and pure wilderness. Environmental protection and ecotourism would supplement existing agricultural and resource-extraction methods. Buffalo and other native animals and grasses would in some places replace cattle, a nonnative species. The shift from corn-fed cattle to grass-fed buffalo would diminish the overall environmental pressures on Plains agricultural land.

The Buffalo Commons proposal created an ongoing national debate about the future of the Plains (Matthews 2002 [1992], Wheeler 1998 and Williams 2001). Since the late 1980s, a robust range of Buffalo Commons initiatives has emerged on private, public, Native American and nonprofit holdings. The total number of buffalo on US and Canadian private and public lands approaches 400,000--a remarkable figure for a large species that nearly went extinct less than a century ago. A thriving buffalo industry appeared, touting the animal's high-protein, low-fat, low-cholesterol, no-preservative, no-biocide features. The industry had three

main sectors. Ranchers, such as the members of the North-Dakota-based North American Bison Cooperative, were usually fleeing the boom-and-bust cycles of running cattle. Indian tribes and ranchers, exemplified by the 51 tribes, primarily from the Plains, that formed the South Dakota-based InterTribal Bison Cooperative, often sought spiritual, psychological, self-determination and cultural values from buffalo as much as financial ones. Ted Turner, the Atlanta billionaire, bought nearly two million acres of Plains cattle ranches, converted them to buffalo ones, primarily for their environmental values, and now owns a tenth of US buffalo. Buffalo prices rose at first and then in the last few years dropped sharply because the industry expanded too fast. But the industry, tiny half a generation ago, today is not.

The Buffalo Commons idea flourishes elsewhere. Beginning in the early 1990s, the Nature Conservancy, the leading US land-preservation organization, made big Plains purchases and restored buffalo and other native animals and plants on them. Environmental groups promote the Buffalo Commons—for instance, the Denver- and Fort Worth-based Great Plains Restoration Council, whose main goal is to create it. Government agencies have taken Buffalo Commons steps. Saskatchewan created Grasslands National Park, eventually to encompass 350 buffalo-filled square miles, but already open to visitors. Several state and provincial governments now offer ranchers loans and technical assistance to run buffalo, and private banks lend for buffalo as well. In 1996 North Dakota's agriculture commissioners said the state would one day have more buffalo than cattle. By some estimates buffalo are already its second-leading agricultural product. In 2001 and 2002 it hosted two federally sponsored national conferences on Plains rural depopulation, and the Buffalo Commons figured prominently. In May 2001 the state's new governor, several of whose predecessors had attacked the concept, told the New York Times, "There is a lot of that Buffalo Commons idea that's probably true... It's never going to look like it did before, when all the farms and ranches were healthy" (Egan 2001, 20). In August 2001 South Dakota's Rosebud tribal government became the first public body formally to endorse the Buffalo Commons. More such public-sector actions are predictable in coming years. The issue is no longer whether the Buffalo Commons will happen, but how.

Great Plains Restoration Council is a 501(c)3 multicultural, multiracial non-profit organization building the Buffalo Commons step-by-step by bringing the wild buffalo back and restoring healthy, sustainable communities to the Great Plains. From the Indian Reservation to the prairie outback to the inner city and beyond, GPRC organizes specifically where the areas of environment, human rights and human health, and animal protection interact in social change.

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Deborah E. Popper teaches geography at the City University of New York's College of Staten Island. Frank J. Popper teaches land-use planning, geography and American studies at Rutgers University and is a board member of the Great Plains Restoration Council. In fall 2003, 2004 and 2005 the Poppers taught environmental studies at Princeton University as visiting professors.

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