

The Vanishing Beasts

How the buffalo is returning from the brink of extinction

About the Story

Lexile: 930L

For qualitative complexity factors,
go to Scope Online.

Learning Objective: to create an awareness campaign drawing on two nonfiction texts about the plight of the buffalo

Key Skills: author's craft, cause and effect, compare and contrast, key ideas, problem and solution, synthesis

Essential Questions:

- How does human activity affect ecosystems?
- How have the lives of Indigenous Peoples been affected by settler-colonialism?
- How do people preserve their culture?

Standards:

The article and lesson support these Common Core anchor standards: R.1, R.2, R.3, R.4, R.5, R.6, R.7, R.9, W.2, SL.1, SL.2, L.4, L.5, L.6

For more standards information—including TEKS—go to Scope Online.



Your Teaching Support Package

Find your full suite of support materials at scope.scholastic.com.

Audio:

- Author read-alouds
- Vocabulary
- Text-to-speech
- Podcast: Author Chat

Recommended pairings from the Scope archives:

- Nonfiction: "Saving America's Wolves"
- Nonfiction: "Stalking the Bat Killer"
- Nonfiction: "The Bear Attacks That Changed America"

Skill Building Activities to print, project, or share digitally:

- Vocabulary: Definitions and Practice
- Close-Reading and Critical-Thinking
- Preparing to Write: Protecting the Buffalo
- **Core Skills Workout:** Text Evidence*
- Choice Board
- Research Kit
- Quiz*
- Contest Entry Form

*Available on two levels

Step-by-Step Lesson

Close Reading, Critical Thinking, Skill Building

1. Preparing to Read

10 minutes

Note to Teachers:

- Students might ask why we use the term *American Indian* in the articles rather than *Native American*. We consulted with experts, who advised us that both terms are acceptable, although *American Indian* is often preferred by Native peoples. Whenever possible, we use the name of a specific tribe or nation. [Click here](#) for a more in-depth explanation from the National Museum of the American Indian.
- Buffalo or bison? We use the term *American buffalo*, or *buffalo* for short, in these articles, because *buffalo* is preferred by the experts we consulted. Scientifically, the American buffalo is the same animal as the bison. It likely became known as the buffalo because it was confused with the buffalo that are native to Africa and Asia.

Do-Now: Solve a Riddle (5 minutes)

- Post this riddle in your classroom or virtual hangout:

My ancestors were alive during the Ice Age. I'm the largest land mammal in North America, I stand at more than 6 feet tall and can be up to 12 feet long. I can weigh 2,000 pounds but can jump 6 feet high and run as fast as 35 miles an hour. There are 14 cities and 24 mountains named after me in the United States. What am I?

Reveal the answer: the American buffalo, also known as the bison. Then ask students: *Have you seen or heard of this animal before? Where? What do you know about it?*

Preview Vocabulary (5 minutes)

- Project or screenshare the **Vocabulary: Definitions and Practice**. Review the definitions as a class. (Optionally, have students complete the practice activity for homework.) Highlighted words: *adaptable, behemoth, culled, ecosystem, enable, felling, hides, opposed, undaunted*

2. Reading and Discussing

45 minutes

“The Vanishing Beasts”

- Have a volunteer read the **As You Read** box on page 13 of the magazine or at the top of the digital story page.
- Read the article once through as a class. Optionally, have students listen to author Talia Cowen read her article aloud while they follow along. The **audio read-aloud** is located in the Resources tab in Teacher View and at the top of the story page in Student View.
- Divide students into groups to read the article again and respond to the following close-reading questions. *Tip: If you're remote, you can have each group respond in a shared doc or discuss the questions in their own chat room; you can also use the questions as an asynchronous assignment.*

Close-Reading Questions (10 minutes)

The following questions can be shared in printable or interactive form.

1. **In the first section of the article, what techniques does the author use to bring readers into the world of the story? Explain.** (author's craft) *The author writes in second person, taking the reader back in time to the early 1800s in the middle of the United States. She also includes sensory details that enable readers to hear, see, and feel the peaceful majesty of the Great Plains and the power of the buffalo that lived there. These sensory details include "... this seemingly endless stretch of flat land is covered with grass so tall it tickles your nose," "All is quiet except for the rustle of swaying grass," and "But then ... the ground shakes. A deep rumble reaches your ears, causing your heart to skip a beat."*
2. **How did buffalo contribute to the Great Plains ecosystem? (cause and effect)** *Buffalo helped make the Great Plains what it is today by creating habitat for plant and animal species that live there. The buffalo stomped grass seeds into the ground with their hooves. They also loosened the dirt, allowing oxygen and rainwater to reach the roots of the grass. This grass was a source of food for animals on the plains. When buffalo died, their bodies became food not only for animals but also for the soil.*

3. **Compare how American Indians viewed and treated buffalo with how newcomers to the land viewed and treated buffalo.** (compare and contrast) *American Indians hunted the buffalo for food and used its bones and skin for clothing, shelter, and tools. They viewed the buffalo as an important creature worthy of special ceremonies and dances, and hunted buffalo sustainably. Newcomers and hidemen arrived with horses and guns and hunted buffalo at alarming rates. They saw buffalo simply as a way to get rich and killed the animals for their prized hides. Knowing that the American Indians relied on the buffalo for survival, the U.S. Army slaughtered buffalo in order to force American Indians off their land.*

“Return of the Buffalo”

- Read the article as a class. Optionally, have students listen to author Elise Broach read her article aloud while they follow along. The **audio read-aloud** is located in the Resources tab in Teacher View and at the top of the story page in Student View.
- Discuss the following close-reading and critical-thinking questions, some of which draw on both articles.

Close-Reading Questions

(5 minutes)

The following questions can be shared in printable or interactive form.

1. **Author Elise Broach writes, “On American Indian land in Montana, after a 120-year-absence, these buffalo are coming home.” Why does she use the phrase “coming home”?** (key ideas) *Broach is expressing not only that these buffalo are returning to their native habitat on the Great Plains, where millions of their kind once roamed, but also that they are returning to a place where a deep connection exists between the buffalo and the people who live there. As Jonny BearCub Stiffarm explains, for the Fort Peck tribes, seeing the buffalo return is like seeing a long-lost relative. (Students may enjoy [this short video](#) of buffalo at Fort Peck in 2012 being released from a holding pen and dashing out onto the plains as a drumming group plays in the background.)*
2. **What problem initially prevented the Fort Peck tribes in Montana from bringing buffalo back to tribal lands? How was this problem resolved?** (problem and solution) *Some buffalo carry a disease called brucellosis, which can infect cattle. This caused concern among Montana cattle ranchers. After a long legal battle, judges agreed to let tribes have some buffalo on their lands. Now, when buffalo arrive at Fort Peck, they are quarantined until they are tested for brucellosis, keeping them isolated from the herds to prevent spreading the disease.*

Critical-Thinking Questions

(5 minutes)

The following questions can be shared in printable or interactive form.

1. **What do we lose when an animal goes extinct?** *When an animal goes extinct, we lose a part of Earth that can never be replaced. This can have consequences for humans, other animals, and the environment. For example, the articles explain how important buffalo were to American Indians' way of life: Buffalo were used for food, clothing, shelter, tools, and spiritual celebrations. In addition, buffalo helped keep the grasslands healthy, affecting bird and plant life. All animals are part of a food chain, and if one species disappears, the whole chain is disrupted and plants and other animals will die. Finally, students might say that it's sad to lose any creature—and sad to lose diversity of life on Earth.*
2. **Broach writes, "For the Assiniboine and Sioux, the buffalo bring joy, pride, and hope . . . " Why do you think these tribes feel joy, pride, and hope over the return of the buffalo? What does the buffalo represent to them?** *The return of the buffalo brings joy, pride, and hope to the tribes because it represents a connection to their past and hope for the restoration of their land and traditional way of life. The return of the buffalo may also represent a kind of healing after suffering terrible injustice and trauma.*

3. Skill Building and Writing

20 minutes

- Have students complete **Preparing to Write: Protecting the Buffalo**. This activity will help them organize their ideas in preparation for the prompt on page 17 in the printed magazine and at the bottom of the digital story article.
- Alternatively, have students choose a task from the **Choice Board**, a menu of differentiated culminating activities.

4. Meet the Authors

10 minutes

- Have students listen to the **Author Chat podcast** in which Scholastic Kid Reporter Lincoln Miller interviews authors Talia Cowen and Elise Broach. (You may also want to share the transcript with students. Both the podcast and transcript are available in the Resources tab.) Then discuss: *What did you find most interesting or surprising in the episode? What follow-up questions would you ask Cowen and Broach?*

Recommended pairings from the *Scope* archives that explore human/animal relationships that have changed over time:

- Nonfiction: [“Saving America’s Wolves”](#) (May 2018)
- Nonfiction: [“Stalking the Bat Killer”](#) (May 2019)
- Nonfiction: [“The Bear Attacks That Changed America”](#) (May 2020)