

Grizzly Times
Transcript
Episode 13
Stephany Seah, Buffalo Field Campaign
June, 2016

Grizzly Times: This is Louisa Willcox and you're listening to the Grizzly Beat, and we're here today with Stephany Seay, media coordinator for the Buffalo Field Campaign. Stephany is on the front lines of protecting Yellowstone's buffalo, for which there is sadly still great hostility in Montana and among cattlemen. She and other members of Buffalo Field Campaign monitor buffalo year round, and they bear witness to the government's mistreatment of them, such as last winter when about 600 animals were killed.

Stephany, you grew up in rural Virginia in the company of horses. What drew you to the company of buffalo?

Stephany Seah: Well, I've always kind of had a special feeling for buffalo. My family was very much attracted and always had high respect for native cultures, and the buffalo are always part of that. But it was when I was working in Washington D.C. -- of all places, for a large non-profit, I learned about the winter kill of 1996/97, when all the buffalo were being run down and slaughtered. And I couldn't believe that it was going on. And it was very shortly after that that Mike Mease and Wynona Laduke and some others were starting to share video footage -- footage that Mike had gotten -- and they were appealing to other groups to help so we could try to stop this.

And the organization I worked with was pretty wishy-washy about it. I don't think we need to talk too much about them, but ultimately I stayed in touch. I signed up for BFC's updates from the field and I just stayed in touch with them. And I would put out their newsletters, get footage and show to my friends. And a few years after that there was a bunch of organizations that decided they did want to help BFC. And so there was going to be some solidarity work to try to help raise money for BFC, get the word out, make sure BFC stayed on the front lines. And one of the organizations I worked for was one of those groups.

And the first thing we did, kind of silly, but the first thing we did was an information table at an environmental journalists' conference in Baltimore, Maryland. And the group I was with sent me out and BFC sent out Dan Brister. And Dan and I hit it off and the following year I came to visit, and we went into Yellowstone to go backpacking and I met buffalo. And it was the first time I had ever met wild buffalo and I looked into their eyes and that was pretty much it. I remember shedding tears and just feeling completely committed, and the following winter I moved to Montana and have been here ever since.

GT: Wow. That's a great story. Well, Stephany one of the very weird things about the management of buffalo is how stigmatized they are, and ostensibly because they carry the disease brucellosis, which of course theoretically could be transmitted to cattle, although

that's never occurred. And the chances are so remote that it will occur given how the disease is transmitted. Buffalo are the only wildlife species to be managed as livestock. And you and others at Buffalo Field Campaign are asking the buffalo to be managed as elk, which is a very reasonable request. What do you think the root problem of buffalo management is?

SS: I think the root problem goes back a few hundred years. And that basically stems down to control. When European invaders arrived here, they wanted this land and they wanted the indigenous people out of the way. And so one of the ways that they attempted to do that was to kill the buffalo, because indigenous people were so dependent and lived so symbiotically with the buffalo, that to destroy the buffalo, they would be able to try to control the native people. And so I think it boils down to control.

And when you look at this issue from all the different perspectives, whether it's brucellosis or whether it's just big animals on the landscape, what it really comes down to is grass. It's all about the grass and who gets to eat it. The cattlemen who started to fill up the landscape with cows and their own presence after the buffalo had been nearly annihilated, they wanted to maintain that control over the grasslands. And so those wild buffalo in Yellowstone, the last remnant population of wild buffalo, as they started to rebound and leave the borders that man had set up for them within Yellowstone National Park, the cattle industry was very afraid of that -- and they're still very afraid of that.

Because wild bison, unlike a lot of other animals, they have the ability to restore themselves. We simply need to get out of the way. And because of their migratory nature, they cross those boundaries, they cross those fences, and the livestock industry wants to keep them contained, because they don't want to have competition for their cattle for grass. They feel that the grass is theirs for their industry, and they don't want to share it with the native bovines.

And so they've come up with all these other ways to kind of smoke screen the real issue, and all those other excuses are really being put to the test. Brucellosis is the prime example. It's full of holes, that argument, and the truth is, is that it's about the grass and who gets to eat it.

GT: Buffalo Field Campaign is really different from other conservation efforts because it was founded with the tribes and it relies a lot on one woman, Rosalie Little Thunder, a Lakota Sioux. Can you describe how she and tribal people shape this work?

SS: That's kind of, I don't want to generalize anybody or anyone nation that way, but Rosalie, to the Lakota people and to a lot of the Plains tribes, the buffalo and the people are one. They're relatives. You can't separate them. And so to learn when Mike sends out all that footage -- he sent out footage to various tribal leaders, and Rosalie responded and responded with force. She came out to Yellowstone and she saw a lot of what was going on and she saw this as a repetition of history. The same genocidal situation, which is exactly what it is.

So, I can't speak for native people individually or collectively as various nations, but I don't know how you compare it. I'm not a Christian either, so I can't say, but it's like if someone was going around destroying churches or burning churches. It's something that's so personal and so interwoven into the culture and spirituality and once day-to-day lives of native people, that we had to do something. Something had to be done.

This last herd was still there. The native people are still here, and together we're going to fight like hell to make sure that both continue. From Buffalo Field Campaign's perspective, obviously we, as an organization, as individuals within the organization, cherish wild buffalo for who they are and for what their role is on this planet. And also we honor the indigenous wisdom and relationship with the buffalo. And so we aim to do what we can with learning from native people about the buffalo and what is the appropriate way to live, coexist, in a respectful way with the buffalo. And so we're learning all the time.

I'm kind of getting stuck on this one because it is so intense. There's so much of an intricate relationship here that I don't think anyone within white culture can really grasp, no matter how much history we read. There's something so profound in that relationship and so Buffalo Field Campaign, we're trying to follow the lead of the people who have this millennia-long relationship with these sacred beings. And we're trying to do the best that we can for the buffalo, for native people to help to restore not only the buffalo, but the relationship that the Indian people and the buffalo have with each other. And it's a sacred path and so there's a lot that we do and don't do. The way we walk the earth. We try to be respectful in all ways, not only to the buffalo themselves, but also to the native people whose relatives these are. Does that answer your question at all?

GT: Yeah, and it is a path. I mean you speak about a path and it is a lifestyle path for all of you who choose to work with Buffalo Field Campaign and you live together communally in remote cabins in West Yellowstone and some in Gardiner now. And the Buffalo Field Campaign attracts volunteers from all over the country, and indeed the world. And of course winters up in West Yellowstone are bitter cold, and you burn immense amounts of wood to stay warm, and people are keeping track of buffalo on skis and in frigid temperatures, some with very little experience in such conditions. So what is living in that environment like for you?

SS: It's awesome. I love it. I think most of us that are there, we thrive in that. Bring on the next Ice Age really. But it's challenging, it's wonderful and those of us that do this, I don't think any of us would want to live any other way. We get to go out into those formidable temperatures, into that deep, deep snow, in negative 40 days and stand with the buffalo who are just living in it. They don't get to go home and change into warm clothes and sit by a hot fire. They're out in their element all the time. And it's a gift everyday to be able to be on the landscape with the buffalo like that.

It's a unique thing in this entire country, and I would say on this continent in regards to buffalo, because Yellowstone is the only place where we have this wild migratory herd left. And it's not as if we're just driving a road, and there's buffalo behind fences and,

"Oh they're over there, see the buffalo," It's like no, we're walking in their trails, we're following their tracks, we're smelling them as we get close to a herd. We're picking up their shedded hair on the ground or following the tracks that they've left, or the hair that's caught in the pine cones of the trees. And it's an invigorating thing, and it helps us realize that we're living with them on their home -- that it helps us with the perception of our place in this world, which is as a co inhabitant with them.

They humble us, and they are our greatest teachers. As you mentioned, we do live in a community, and buffalo in herds live in community. And so we try our best to look to them to see how they interact with each other and try to emulate that within our own community, and certainly it's challenging. It's always challenging to live with a lot of people, and especially when there's a constant turnover, with new volunteers coming all the time. But it's also truly invigorating and we learn so much. And the buffalo have been one of our greatest teachers in helping us learn how to live together cohesively in a manner that is respectful to the earth, respectful to each other, respectful to other non-human nations.

And so much heartbreak as we do witness, and that also intensifies the heartbreak, getting to live with these animals in this manner. We are truly blessed and we also have this little saying that: "The buffalo, they call the people, they call their people to come and stand in their defense." And ultimately it is them that are teaching us how to save us from ourselves rather than us really coming in to save the buffalo. The buffalo have it all figured out. They're waiting very patiently for us to learn, and to reawaken and to catch up.

GT: So as media coordinator, Stephany, you write the weekly updates, the weekly news updates for Buffalo Field Campaign, and some of them are angry, and some of them are sweet, and at least one that I've read was incredibly sad after you watched a mother buffalo standing over her baby who couldn't get up, and days later she still wouldn't leave it's body. So what's it like to be the voice, week after week after week, for wild buffalo?

SS: It's an honor and it's a challenge sometimes. And it's all of our voices collected. It just kind of gets filtered through me, and then also through Dan Brister who does a wonderful job of editing. But it's something that I take very seriously because we are trying to be a voice for the buffalo.

The buffalo have their own voice, it's just most people can't hear it or have refused to hear it, and so to be able to try to tell their story from what we witness from our perspective and try to share it as if it was their perspective. It's an honorable place to be and it's challenging at times, because sometimes there's things that you want to say that you are pretty certain that the buffalo are telling you that maybe isn't going to go over so well with some people. And so it's weird, you kind of have to be careful sometimes with the things that you say and how you say them, because the buffalo may be screaming something very clearly, and yet we have to try to convey it in a way that will reach a lot

of humans and help them understand where the buffalo are coming from. But ultimately it's an honor to do this, and it never gets old.

Sometimes the buffalo channel through you and other times the volunteers pour right through you. And so it's a collective effort all the time.

GT: Here's maybe one of those examples. So last March, Yellowstone Park conducted a media tour of its operations to capture 75 buffalo solely because Buffalo Field Campaign had legally challenged government attempts to keep its handling of buffalo secret. And you and members of the press witnessed mother and baby buffalo being jabbed and prodded and forced into a squeeze chute, after most of which were sent to slaughter. So what was that experience like for you?

SS: First I have to say that the legal challenge came with the help, it's not Buffalo Field Campaign that's actually doing the lawsuit, it's my journalist friend Christopher Ketchum and myself are being represented by Animal Legal Defense Fund. And in response to that lawsuit, the Yellowstone National Park issued a media tour, an access tour, because access is what we're asking for. So this media tour, Mike Mease and I went on for Buffalo Field Campaign and I can't -- it's really hard to describe what we saw.

We were standing there watching what we've come to feel as our relatives, also definitely our friends, go through what can only be described as a buffalo's hell or a buffalo's worst nightmare. To stand there and document it and be there, and hearing the sounds that the buffalo make, and not doing something to stop it, was really difficult.

But we know how important it is to document these things so that we can show other people what is taking place in there, inside Yellowstone National Park. These are the guys supposedly in green, wearing buffalo on their badges, running these poor animals through the gauntlet. And it was awful. I think Mike and are probably going to have nightmares for the rest of our lives. I mean he's seen a lot in the early days, he got to see a lot of really horrible things too, which was a catalyst for a lot of the video documenting, showing people what was taking place. But this particular tour, we were given the most access we've ever had before. And it was very difficult but it was very important.

It's hard to talk about even, but if you wanted to you could look on our YouTube channel, BFC Media and look at a video called "The Buffalo Trap" and that's from this past tour, and it's very difficult to watch but it's really important for people to see what's happening. And so we're hoping that the more people see what's taking place in there, coupled with all of the science that's coming up and the political and public sentiment changes and the landscape changes, we can help eventually shut this trap down. That's the ultimate goal.

And also something else that came from being at the trap at the last IBMP (Interagency Bison Management Plan) meeting in April. A Umatilla gentlemen asked the agencies: "Were there any injuries or fatalities at the trap this year?" And the microphone was handed over to Rick Wallen, who's Yellowstone's bison biologist, and he simply said

"No." And we were able to call them out on that. That was a blatant lie. I had happened to have my laptop with me at that meeting that day, so when I went up to give my public comments, I pulled up my photos of calves, yearlings, almost yearlings who had had their horns torn off during the squeeze chute operation -- and there's numerous things that we didn't get to see even being on the media tour. But because we were allowed to be there, we were allowed to catch the government in a lie and tell the public that, "Yes you were just lied to by Yellowstone National Park," and show them the actual truth. And otherwise if we hadn't been able to be there, everyone would have had to just take the word of "No" and accept that as the truth and, in fact, it was a lie.

There's a very strong importance -- that was just one underlying piece of it -- that we need to have access to that trap. We need to see what's going on in there. The public is paying for this, the buffalo are paying with their lives, and this is on public land, public money, we have a right to be in there and documenting what's happening.

GT: Absolutely. Stephany you also recently experienced a big win. And a new policy allows buffalo to live hassle-free year round on Horse Butte near West Yellowstone in Montana for the first time, for a long time in history. And you watched mother buffalo raising their babies peacefully, and not having to run from helicopters or cop cars with lights flashing and sirens blaring. What do you think the key ingredients of success were for the new Horse Butte arrangement?

SS: To quote Brock Evans [a heroic environmental activist]: "endless pressure, endlessly applied." We have been fighting for Horse Butte for almost 20 years, and the science, the landscape situations, the public support, everything pointed to this makes perfect sense. Obviously it's the buffaloes' land to begin with, but all of their excuses we were breaking them down, breaking them down, breaking them down. And it just took years and years of that kind of pressure, and years and years of showing how ridiculous and how harmful these operations were, and not to mention costly, if economics is your thing. It was a no brainer to have this decision come to play in the grand scheme of things but politically, this was gi-normous, especially in Montana. We actually -- there's a crack in the dam now.

We're still swirling around in our heads how significant this win is. We're still trying to learn how to celebrate, because we've been so used to being on call and ready for these war zone types of events day after day after day, year after year after year, and so all of the sudden there's been this cease fire, and buffalo they are being buffalo and the people that live around the village are grinning from ear to ear, they're loving it. Everyone's loving it. Just to be able to know that those buffalo right there on the public land, on the private land, wherever, they're ok now.

We got this for them and so many had to die to get to this point, and we have to always apologize to those buffalo that we weren't able to save. And now this first new generation of calves for the most part, none of them will hopefully ever have to experience those brutal activities ever again. So we look at those little guys and were like, "Welcome to the world," and that's a true welcome this time. It's not being born and then having a

helicopter chasing you for 15 miles. They get to just be buffalo. And it's the most beautiful thing. And we're still, like I said, we're still trying to wrap our heads around how great this is. It's a huge victory. On the landscape terms it seems very small, and it is very small because buffalo covered most of North America, but to get Horse Butte and those surrounding lands it huge, and it's only the beginning. We're not going to stop there.

GT: Well congratulations! And here's to many more, and many more landscapes open to buffalo. So back to your other love, or one of your other loves, horses. A habit that you've been able to pick back up here in Montana. And you're working with a trainer, Buck Branaman, a cowboy no less. [note, Buck Branaman is known as "the horse whisperer"] Different than the sorts you've had to deal with at the Department of Livestock. So what have horses taught you, and are there different lessons than those that buffalo have taught you?

SS: Yeah, horses. Teaching and learning from horses is a lot like teaching and learning from children. Although children that are almost your elders in most ways. Horses have taught me and continue to teach me how to be a better human being, how to enter into relationships with my friends and coworkers. And all my coworkers are my friends, but how to be with other people. It's very similar, because with horses they mirror you. What you give to them, they give back to you.

If you screw it up, they're going to let you know. They're very honest with how they are, and that's much different from most people. But it is a lesson in how you can be a better person with other people. They basically challenge you to be the best human being that you can be which is constantly a challenge, because we're always striving to be better and none of us are ever going to reach perfection, but it's the journey itself. It's the day to day kind of challenges and rewards that happen in those horse and human relationships that really do reflect a lot of what goes on in your own personal human relationships. And so they've been a huge gift to me as far as trying to become a better person and seeing things in a clearer perspective. Being a more congruent human being and being clear and direct. Learning how to set boundaries, learning when to say "no" or learning when to let it go.

They're amazing creatures and as far as Buck Branaman goes, he's definitely my horsey guru. I wish I could be with him every day that I'm not with the buffalo, and playing with horses with him. But I do get to check in with him when he comes into town. And Montana is his old stomping grounds, so it's kind of like his homecoming when he gives clinics around here. And I had one opportunity to bring my own mare, Starlet, to do a clinic with him. And as much as I loved him, it was definitely horsemanship boot camp, because he's tough. I mean he's serious, but he speaks horse like nobody else if people listen to him.

We joke to the DOL (Department of Livestock) all the time, like: "You guys!" Because they're so sloppy and they're so cruel, not just to the buffalo but to their own horses. And so we'll joke with them, "You guys need to check in Buck Branaman, your horse will

thank you." Like Buck says, he's a pagan cowboy, none of these guys that have been doing this same old stuff are interested in learning a better way. But it would help everyone's horses to check in with him for sure.

GT: Absolutely. Stephany, you recently submitted comments on the government's proposal to strip federal protections from Yellowstone grizzly bears. And obviously buffalo and bears have long been connected, with bears being so widely dependent on buffalo for food. And Yellowstone is the only place left where both are still functioning parts of the ecosystem. Can you share your thoughts on this?

SS: First of all it was a huge honor, Buffalo Field Campaign was very excited to help grizzly bears in this way. And we look to you and to Dave Mattson, a lot of our words came from you guys as well as Doug Peacock and Hey Bear GOAL tribal coalition.

Grizzly bears, we live with grizzly bears especially in the spring when they're awake, the buffalo are migrating through there. We come across fresh griz tracks, fresh sign, we see bears from time to time in the areas that we patrol. And it's such an awesome feeling when you come across fresh grizzly bear tracks. "Oh they were going the way we're going. I guess we're going to probably head a different way for today."

But it's really exciting. But grizzly bears depend on winter-killed buffalo and elk of course when they wake up in the springtime -- it's their first good huge source of protein. And so when there's more buffalo on a larger landscape that's going to be a benefit to grizzly bears. And so we'd like to figure out ways where grizzly bears and buffalo can help each other out in gaining more ground, and increasing their populations and being in healthier, a symbiotic relationship.

One thing that grizzly bears did to help buffalo is in the first few years of hazing a lot of that hazing was done in the winter time and so the agencies never considered the impact to grizzly bears, because they considered, "Well they're hibernating so it's not going to bother them." Well as the years went by, more and more hazing started happening in the springtime and that was right when grizzly bears were starting to wake up. And the Department of Livestock would fly their helicopter just above tree lines, low down to the water, all over the habitat where we see grizzly bear sign. Where we know that bears are living.

So, the Alliance for the Wild Rockies ended up filing a lawsuit using BFC as expert witnesses to try to ground the helicopter. Because of not only the impact that it had on buffalo, but the impact that it had on federally protected grizzly bears. And ultimately we ended up losing the actual lawsuit but changes came because the U.S.D.A. Animal Plant Health Inspection Service, which -- they are the dark, dark lords of the universe on the buffalo issue. But they were funding the DOL helicopter and its response to this lawsuit said that they would no longer do that until and unless grizzly bears were removed from the endangered species list. So the helicopter was essentially grounded. The DOL campaigned for it. They need the federal handouts to do all this stuff and so grizzly bears helped ground that helicopter.

We were able one time to catch an actual grizzly bear in a buffalo herd. This bear was actually feeding on two separate buffalo carcasses while buffalo were grazing all around him. And we got footage of a helicopter coming in and disturbing this whole scene. The bear stood up on its hind legs and the area was closed, and then all this other stuff fell into place, and eventually that helicopter was grounded.

And in turn, grizzly bears need buffalo to be on the landscape because as we know, with climate change, more and more of the bears' main food sources are disappearing and the buffalo meat is becoming more and more important. Which is also very dangerous for bears because there's more competition with either wolves or other bears, which is bad for cubs so it seems. And the human caused mortality is increasing with the increased need for meat.

So we need to spread it out. We need more buffalo on a larger landscape. It will help grizzly bears. It will be a benefit to the buffalo and the land herself. It will be a benefit to tribes who want buffalo to return in a respectful manner. So all in all, I think these two others can help each other out and help heal the land together and help heal each other in the process.

GT: Thank you very much Stephany. You're listening to Stephany Seay with the Buffalo Field Campaign. Thank you so much.