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Rethinking Indigenous Hunting in National Parks

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Designed to be “wilderness” spaces with minimal human impact, the establishment of national parks contributed to dispossessing Indigenous peoples from traditional territories across North America, preventing access to dwindling populations of wildlife essential to cultural and material well-being. With the systematic near extermination of buffalo during the nineteenth century and forcible relocation of Tribes onto reservations, Tribal food systems collapsed. Tribal Nations across the Great Plains are now restoring buffalo to support food sovereignty and political resurgence, while re-asserting a presence in national parks where Indigenous hunting remains prohibited. This article focuses on the Blackfoot-led Iinnii Initiative working to restore free-roaming buffalo (*Bison bison*) along the Rocky Mountain Front, supported by Glacier and Waterton Lakes National Parks. Recognizing Tribal rights to hunt buffalo in these parks would enable Tribal hunters to exercise practices that challenge the idea of national parks as wilderness. We coproduce this article as Blackfoot and non-Indigenous scholars and activists, drawing on interviews with restoration practitioners, Blackfoot knowledge holders, and park and other government officials to explore distinct narratives of what it would mean to enable Tribal hunting in national parks, with implications for food sovereignty, political resurgence, and wildlife management. We argue that openness within parks agencies to Indigenous hunting suggests a potential watershed moment for reimagining the role of people in parks. Through this, we examine important links between food sovereignty, political sovereignty, biodiversity conservation, and decolonization. *Key Words:* conservation policy, decolonization, ecological restoration, food sovereignty, wildlife management.

Along the Rocky Mountain Front, Glacier National Park shares a historically contentious border with the Amskapi Piikani (Blackfeet) Nation, whose members have hunted, camped, sung, and prayed in these mountain valleys since time immemorial. In 1896, facing acute food insecurity after the loss of the buffalo and enduring a devastating transition to reservation life under genocidal colonial policies, the Blackfeet negotiated an agreement with the U.S. government—signed under duress and lacking adequate translation—to cede 800,000 acres along the mountainous western edge of the reservation, while expressly reserving their rights to hunt, fish, and gather in the ceded land in perpetuity (Spence 1996; Presti 2005). By designating the land as a portion of Glacier National Park in 1910, the U.S. government claimed it was no longer public land and extinguished Blackfeet use rights

(Spence 1996). This dispossession from the “Ceded Strip,” which prompted more than a century of Blackfeet resistance, was thus rooted in the core construct of national parks as places where people come to visit, not where they live—and certainly not where they hunt.

Today, returning buffalo,¹ or *iinnii* in the Blackfoot language, are beginning to blur these boundaries. In June 2023, the Blackfeet Nation released forty-eight buffalo near Ninnaastako, Chief Mountain, close to the Canadian border and the boundary of Glacier (Figure 1), to roam freely on Blackfoot² territory for the first time since the 1870s (Upham 2023). The release was the decades-long result of efforts of the Iinnii Initiative, a Blackfoot-led initiative working to reintroduce buffalo and buffalo harvesting to restore ecological health while strengthening Blackfoot governance, language, and

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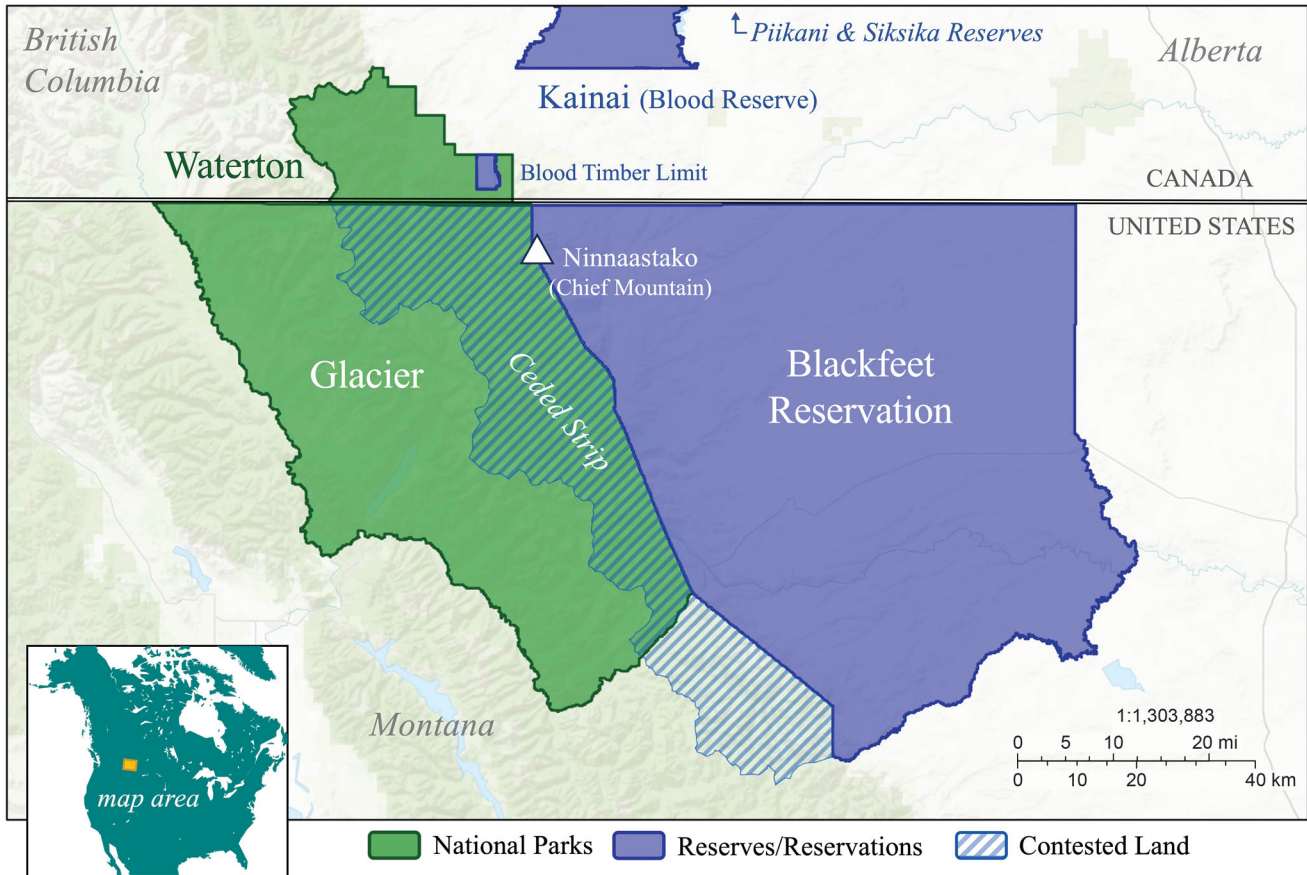


Figure 1. Map of the study area indicating the present-day boundaries of the Blackfoot Nation's reservation, Glacier National Park, and Waterton National Park. Reserves belonging to the three Blackfoot Nations in Canada (Kainai, Piikani, and Siksika) are to the north of the map area. The contested region known as the Ceded Strip is shaded, depicting a parcel of land sold to the U.S. government in 1896, which later became part of Glacier National Park upon its establishment in 1910.

lifeways. Both Glacier and Waterton Lakes National Parks have crucially enabled this restoration by supporting Blackfoot leadership and planning for buffalo to migrate into park lands.

A lingering question is this: What could it look like to have a Blackfoot buffalo hunt not delimited by the national park boundaries, which would open hunting inside parks? Considering diverse narratives of what it would mean for buffalo hunting to take place in Glacier and Waterton Lakes National Parks, we center Blackfoot perspectives to offer insight into how and why such a hunt might occur. Within and beyond the linnii Initiative, the issue of hunting in national parks and protected areas is increasingly pressing as the Indigenous-led restoration of culturally important species like buffalo gains momentum, and parks begin to confront their exclusionary histories in prioritizing reconciliation. We argue that histories of colonial dispossession are potentially being rewritten through the possibility of

restoring Tribal hunting in national parks. In detailing Blackfoot and parks officials' arguments highlighting many reasons Tribal hunting should be allowed in parks, we demonstrate that as much as this possibility is complex and uneasy, it is also profoundly transformative.

Indigenous Hunting in National Parks

The premise of national parks as preserving timeless spaces of pristine and unpeopled wilderness has been resoundingly challenged (Spence 1996; Stevens 2014; Eichler and Baumeister 2021). Not only are parks and protected areas affected by anthropogenic processes beyond their borders (Geldmann et al. 2019), many were established by dispossessing Indigenous peoples from lands long used, occupied, and stewarded (Binnema and Niemi 2006; Stark et al. 2022). Creating the romantic image of parks as wilderness involved deliberate erasure of Indigenous

presence to make way for tourism, with subsistence hunting activities believed to compromise the pristine aesthetic and threaten wildlife preservation (Stark et al. 2022; Sapignoli and Hitchcock 2023). North America's iconic early parks drew the blueprint for this approach, known as the Yellowstone model.

The confluence of several key processes tied to settler-colonial expansion defined this historical moment. By the end of the nineteenth century, many wildlife populations had collapsed due to unregulated hunting and habitat loss (Freese 2023). In the case of buffalo, this was facilitated by genocidal military policies motivated to eliminate the subsistence of Plains Tribal Nations, bringing a population of millions to near extinction (Mamers 2019). The early Western conservation movement emerged from growing public alarm about overhunting (Aune and Plumb 2019). As legislative attempts in the United States and Canada failed to curb the slaughter, the last remaining wild bison, a small herd in Yellowstone, inspired the hunter-conservationist movement that conceptualized national parks as refugia to support dwindling game species (Aune and Plumb 2019).

Meanwhile, the loss of buffalo disrupted the long-standing cultural and ecological entanglement between Indigenous peoples and buffalo. Many Indigenous Nations, including the Blackfoot, faced starvation as their food systems collapsed (Paul 2015; Shamon et al. 2022). This hardship motivated treaty processes with colonial governments, often negotiating under false pretenses and coercion, which progressively narrowed Indigenous control of land and resources (Coyle and Borrows 2017). Yet many Indigenous leaders advocated for these treaties to protect hunting rights, including in traditional territories that later became Glacier and Waterton Lakes National Parks (Presti 2005; Bruised Head 2022). As wildlife dwindled, animals on park lands became increasingly important for Tribal subsistence and cultural continuance, while hunting access diminished steeply (Spence 1996). Although nominally protected under treaties, Indigenous hunting was increasingly criminalized in newly established protected areas (Presti 2005; Stark et al. 2022). The passage of the Organic Act (1916) formalized the prohibition of hunting in U.S. national parks, except with Congressional approval or as deemed necessary for wildlife management (Spence 1996). Across both

the United States and Canada, a century of conservation policy consistently upheld the wilderness paradigm of parks by excluding Indigenous hunting activities and denying Indigenous governing authority over wildlife—until recently (Charlton 2015).

Today, park managers broadly recognize that parks are not unpeopled places (Stevens 2014). Indigenous resurgence movements have resisted this “wilderness” doctrine since the time of dispossession (Eichler and Baumeister 2021; Hessami et al. 2021). They have also successfully achieved recognition of Indigenous subsistence rights across northern Canada (Snook et al. 2020), and in national parks in Alaska, where consumptive uses like hunting, trapping, and fishing are managed to maintain healthy wildlife populations (Green et al. 2022). Yet in most places, the power to determine whether hunting will or will not occur on Native lands was violently wrested from Indigenous Nations' control when parks were established and keystone species nearly exterminated. Increasingly, we are seeing a notable shift toward supporting Indigenous-led conservation and comanagement (Eichler and Baumeister 2021), along with recognition of the effectiveness of Indigenous stewardship of biodiversity globally (e.g., Corrigan et al. 2018), and in some cases reassertion of Indigenous practices of caring for land, for example, through cultural burning (Dickson-Hoyle et al. 2022). Despite this, many conservation actors continue to argue that Indigenous harvest imperils biodiversity conservation (Shultis and Heffner 2016). Indigenous scholars and activists counter that Indigenous Nations abundantly demonstrate the knowledge, tools, and philosophies needed to sustainably govern and harvest wildlife (e.g., Hessami et al. 2021; M'sit No'kmaq et al. 2021; Bruised Head et al. 2024), with many examples of Indigenous authorities regulating or suspending hunting to reduce pressure on cultural keystone species like salmon (Gavenus, Beveridge, and Satterfield 2023), moose (Priadka et al. 2022), and caribou (Lamb et al. 2023). We engage in this debate to ask how Indigenous hunting in national parks would challenge the paradigm of managing protected areas as wilderness.

Method

This article is grounded in qualitative interviews that explore how the Blackfoot-led Innii Initiative navigates colonial legacies of fragmentation to

restore buffalo, a culturally and ecologically significant species requiring large, connected habitat. Between October 2022 and October 2024, we conducted sixty semistructured interviews with sixty-two participants, including Linnii Initiative members, parks officials, Blackfoot Elders and knowledge holders, Montana state officials, and environmental nongovernmental organization staff. Given the significance of Glacier and Waterton to *iinnii* restoration, we discussed the evolving relationship between Blackfoot Nations and the parks, including the possibility of hunting buffalo on park lands. We coded the interview data thematically using NVivo12 software and applied a narrative analysis approach (Clandinin 2006) to reveal underlying narratives about the meaning of hunting in national parks. Quotes are attributed to participants' names or titles based on their preferences.

Our author team brings together scholarly and lived expertise in Indigenous resurgence, Blackfoot ways of knowing, global conservation practice and politics, and human–ecosystem interdependencies. Kimberly L. Paul (KP) and Termaine Edmo (TE) are members of the Blackfeet Nation. KP is a ceremonial knowledge holder, scholar, and founder of an organization focused on the collective well-being of the Blackfeet and their homelands. TE is a cultural educator and buffalo harvester working to revitalize buffalo foodways and climate resilience. Madison Stevens (MS) and Elizabeth (Libby) Lunstrum (LL) are non-Indigenous social scientists with expertise in conservation and restoration. Bruce Maxwell (BM) is a non-Indigenous biologist interested in the role of humans in managed ecosystems. MS and LL were responsible for data collection, with LL and KP involved in project design from the outset. Both KP and TE shared their knowledge in formal interviews and conceptual discussions to formulate the article. We undertook a collaborative article preparation process, reflecting on interpretations of the interview data through iterative conversations among coauthors. MS led the analysis and manuscript drafting process, incorporating feedback from all coauthors. Our approach ensures that Blackfoot perspectives are reflected in interviews but also the analysis, arguments, and findings, while drawing on other authors' scholarly expertise in global debates on ecosystem protection and Indigenous resurgence.

Results and Discussion

Across our interviews, we see four overarching narratives (Figure 2) regarding the significance of buffalo hunting especially for Blackfoot people in the national parks. Here, hunting in parks (1) supports food sovereignty by resituating knowledge and practices around harvest of free-roaming *iinnii*; (2) advances Blackfoot political resurgence by affirming sovereignty and treaty rights while facilitating reconciliation with colonial conservation institutions; (3) provides a management tool for effectively and ethically managing growing buffalo herds; and (4) challenges the construct of national parks as wilderness, hence offering meaningful opportunities to reconceptualize parks by reasserting Indigenous presence. We explore each of these narratives as they inform ongoing discussions about hunting in the parks, then conclude by reflecting on their implications for the future of parks–Tribal relationships more broadly.

Hunting as Food Sovereignty

In the Blackfoot (Piikani) language, buffalo is known as *nitpakiksisako*, real meat. The reverence in this term reflects that beyond physical nourishment, harvesting, eating, and using the material gifts of buffalo is integral to Blackfoot identity, providing emotional and spiritual connection to *iinnii* as a relative. As for many Indigenous cultures, participating in hunting strengthens collective identity and generates place-based knowledge (Nadasdy 2007; Reo and Whyte 2012; Carroll 2014; Atwood et al. 2024). Each time coauthor TE leads a cultural harvest (Figure 3), she shows youth how receiving the gift of food enfold the harvester in a relationship of kinship with the harvested being and land, with responsibilities for mutual well-being. The destruction of the buffalo and loss of access to hunt, including in parks, heavily disrupted this relationship: “They gave us the gun and took away the bow and arrow, they took away the buffalo and gave us the cow, and they made us hunt their way, so they really took away that culture of hunting as part of land stewardship” (TE). Reestablishing buffalo hunting is thus key to returning Blackfoot *food sovereignty*, which encompasses collective control over all aspects of the food system, including distinct values and practices (Whyte 2018; Shamon et al. 2022). Blackfeet Elder Lori Tatsey shared the hope in this return:



Figure 2. Narratives of Blackfoot buffalo hunting in national parks, categorizing into four themes the potential implications of reinstating Blackfoot buffalo hunting within the boundaries of national parks, as described by project participants across diverse perspectives. Largely speaking to positive impacts, participants discussed hunting as a pathway to (1) support Blackfoot food sovereignty; (2) advance Blackfoot political goals and governance; (3) support effective and ethical management of wild buffalo; and (4) prompt people to rethink the role of people in park ecosystems, while acknowledging challenges for visitor safety and ecological management.

People are getting reintroduced to eating whole meat again. But we have to relearn how to use everything. ... I'm glad because I see a lot of people are really happy that the buffalo are back, and I think it'll also help re-teach the people how to be people.

For Blackfoot food sovereignty, what is the difference between hunting free-roaming buffalo and managing them as livestock? Although the latter also supports food sovereignty (Shamon et al. 2022), free-roaming herds can potentially play a unique role in revitalizing Blackfoot hunting protocols, skills, and knowledge. According to a Blackfeet environmental scientist,

[Food sovereignty] could look like our people having access to buffalo as a hunting right, ... having the ability to harvest that meat ... not fenced in, but out on the land to bring that relationship back. I think that alone brings a piece of connection back in that experiential learning ... of being able to hunt the

animal. They're learning out on the land where these animals will be and how their movement will change depending on the season. ... For me, it's that learning.

Although the meat provided by a wild herd might not significantly increase food availability, hunting within the Ceded Strip would enable hunters and their communities to practice traditional lifeways on lands from which they have long been excluded.

For some, securing freedom for buffalo to roam addresses the injustice of their destruction and ongoing confinement, paralleling the reservation system and other colonial boundaries used to limit and control Indigenous peoples. Coauthor TE argues that buffalo

are like cattle [now]. ... They're the only wild game species that are domesticated and managed to the extent that they are. And I think that still has a little bit to do with genocide, ... a way to control our Native populations.



Figure 3. Blackfoot traditional buffalo harvesters (including coauthor Termaine Edmo, facing the viewer) teach middle school children from the Blackfoot Nation about cultural protocols and traditional processes for honoring, butchering, and using the body of a harvested buffalo in Blackfoot culture. These harvests are part of a broader educational effort to reconnect youth with buffalo and foster cultural knowledge transmission and food sovereignty across the Blackfoot Confederacy.

This sense that buffalo—the foundation of Blackfoot foodways—remain managed under a colonial paradigm underscores a key motivation for enabling hunting within colonized spaces like parks: While being on the land, the experience of encountering park boundaries beyond which hunting is no longer permitted reinforces the trauma of dispossession, undermining the place-based learning and cultural affirmation that makes hunting buffalo (and other species) so important to food sovereignty.

Another argument for reestablishing buffalo hunting in the Glacier–Waterton region is that existing treaty hunting rights, exercised outside the boundary of Yellowstone since 2012, are inaccessible to most Blackfoot people. A Blackfoot leader and longtime hunter argued for bringing such opportunities closer to home:

I'm lucky ... I have the resources and availability to pay for myself and my family to go to [the boundaries of] Yellowstone and harvest buffalo. ... I want to have that [opportunity] in Blackfoot country so [every

Blackfoot person] can experience [hunting] buffalo [and] work together to harvest that buffalo, ... and share with the people around us.

Hunting, processing, and sharing the harvest creates meaningful space to reclaim Blackfoot identity in connecting with community. These broader reasons for hunting buffalo become even more significant in parks like Glacier and Waterton that offer important habitat for free-roaming buffalo in a highly fragmented landscape.

Hunting in the Park as Resurgence

Hunting free-roaming buffalo in the parks enables political resurgence by affirming Blackfoot sovereignty through asserting Blackfoot environmental governance and treaty rights, while also fostering reconciliation with colonial governments through dialogue, relationship-building, and potential comanagement (Bruised Head et al. 2024). Existing before

colonial treaties, Blackfoot law provides the basis of Blackfoot sovereignty to hunt buffalo in the park. Blackfoot scholar Gabrielle Weasel Head (personal communication 2023) explained that this is grounded in treaties as “relational agreements” enshrining reciprocal care for the land and fellow beings, as articulated in the modern 2014 Buffalo Treaty (Crosschild et al. 2021). A Blackfeet leader and hunter explained:

The buffalo hunting is the avenue for us to get back in [the park] and use it, and follow our own cultural, traditional regulations on ourselves without having an outside influence. Once you do that, then you become true sovereign, because you’re following your own rules. Nobody is regulating you. You’re using your own resources for the benefit of the people.

Hunting on national park lands thus exercises Blackfoot land stewardship on its own terms outside colonial relations.

In addition to affirming inherent sovereignty, exercising hunting rights on lands subject to treaty holds colonial governments accountable for commitments they broke when they established Glacier and Waterton and criminalized Blackfoot presence and use therein. In 1855, Blackfeet signatories to the Lame Bull Treaty and contested 1896 cession of the Ceded Strip maintained off-reserve hunting rights, as did Blackfoot signatories to Treaty 7 in Canada in 1877. Despite Blackfeet resistance, treaty hunting rights in Glacier were repeatedly struck down throughout the twentieth century, yet the legal doctrine of extinguishment might be shifting (Presti 2005; Coyle and Borrows 2017). Several participants argued that if tested in court, Blackfeet treaty hunting rights would likely prevail based on the landmark 2019 *Herrera v. Wyoming* case, which overturned precedent in upholding off-reservation treaty hunting rights on “unoccupied lands.” Recent cases involving salmon in the Pacific Northwest further argue that Indigenous treaty rights to hunt, fish, and gather not only protect subsistence activities, but crucially require populations of sufficient abundance and distribution to enable these rights. Thus, treaty rights can be interpreted as an Indigenous rights-based mandate to restore cultural keystone species like buffalo to a level of abundance that can support hunting (Lamb et al. 2023).

Despite this promise, some participants, including a U.S. National Park Service official, confessed hesitation to pursue a treaty rights approach to the question of hunting. For one, legal processes can be

lengthy, expensive, and inherently adversarial. Because current precedent does not recognize Blackfeet treaty hunting rights in Glacier, the park would be forced into the position of defending this status quo regardless of the intentions of its leadership to open space for such recognition; this dynamic could erode hard-earned trust among partners. Moreover, a loss in the courts could potentially set back efforts to reestablish Blackfoot presence in the parks. Some parks officials and conservation organization staff hence preferred an alternative, more conciliatory model in which parks cooperate with Tribes and First Nations to enable hunting through costewardship as a less fraught path forward. An Iinnii Initiative leader elaborated:

You could use [treaty rights] as a hammer, right? And you could force the situation ... or you could say I’m going to accept that we’re all working toward justice and rights. But I don’t need it expressed [legally], right?

This reconciliatory approach represents a different manifestation of political resurgence through hunting, grounded in relationship-building and acknowledgment of historical harms.

Clashes between Blackfeet and park officials enforcing hunting prohibitions in the Ceded Strip entrenched a deeply antagonistic relationship throughout the twentieth century. This has begun to shift, however, in part because conversations about returning buffalo—including the idea of hunting them in the park—have brought new and needed dialogue and relationships focused on decolonizing parks. A Blackfeet leader involved in the Iinnii Initiative explained, “It’s an opportune time. ... [The buffalo] have brought us a long way already ... toward actually sitting down with [the park].” Although respondents suggested there may eventually be a stronger focus on treaty rights and working through legal mechanisms, the process of collaboratively managing hunting in the park through potential costewardship arrangements also might afford opportunities to build more trusting relationships between park managers and Blackfoot Nations (Bruised Head et al. 2024).

Hunting as a Management Tool

Whereas many restored wildlife species require ongoing intervention to maintain viable populations, buffalo rebound easily, quickly encountering conflict

with neighboring land uses, especially cattle ranching, as they push the boundaries of available habitat. Natural predation has little population effect, so buffalo herds confined to parks risk die-offs and can cause ecological damage (Waterton ecologist Rob Found). Park managers in places like Yellowstone thus face challenging ethical dilemmas regarding how best to maintain bison populations within the ecological and social carrying capacity of the park and its surroundings. Parks in the United States and Canada have historically managed bison populations through culling, in some cases donating the meat to Tribes and First Nations. Yellowstone's shipment-to-slaughter program, motivated by political pushback against bison leaving the park due to the risk of disease transmission to cattle (Stark et al. 2022), has garnered significant criticism, including from senior parks officials: "For Yellowstone to capture bison and ship them to their death, there's something fundamentally wrong with that." As Yellowstone's recent proposed management plan underscores, Tribal hunting outside the park can complement other management strategies, such as transferring live animals to Tribes, to keep bison populations in check without shipping to slaughter (National Park Service 2023).

Outside Yellowstone, Tribal members exercise treaty hunting rights in a narrow corridor of land where buffalo leave the park for winter forage. Because the park boundary starkly defines where hunting activity occurs, the hunt is highly localized and visible, generating public criticism. Despite the controversy, for many Blackfeet the Tribal hunt around Yellowstone is a meaningful way to exercise sovereignty and ethically manage buffalo under habitat constraints. As Blackfeet hunter and rancher Joe Kipp emphasized, maintaining the population through hunting is

the most ethical way. Because no matter how much of a shooting line it is, [for] the animals that get shipped out of Yellowstone to slaughter—can you imagine how terrible that must be for them? These are wild animals that have never been inside of a cage in their life. ... That has got to be the most inhumane thing I've ever heard of. But it's out of sight, out of mind. We allow them to do that to the buffalo people.

Through a Blackfoot lens, hunting is a core component of treating buffalo as wildlife and kin. Yet the conditions of the hunt make it difficult to exercise Blackfoot protocols for harvesting buffalo with respect, as Blackfeet Elder and coauthor KP explained:

We're grateful in our hearts to be there on our traditional land and hunt, but it's demeaning to have to kill an animal on this tiny strip of land, in front of people's houses, to try to practice something culturally relevant in these ugly conditions. At home, it'll be a different story.

These responses reflect the trauma of the existing management paradigm, underscoring the importance of rethinking the hunt closer to the Blackfeet reservation (closer to Glacier) and decentering park boundaries.

The practical and ethical challenges of the Yellowstone hunt make it a cautionary example for the Iinnii Initiative. Reflecting on the controversy, Glacier National Park superintendent Dave Roemer explained,

I hope we're able to avoid the lightning of negativity that surrounds the issue [in Yellowstone]. I hope that we're able to avoid having that lineup of bison migrating out, and there being a line of hunters. ... If we can make that boundary go away, [then] it doesn't become such a spectacle.

Considering how to manage a hunt in and around Glacier, cultural educators including coauthor TE advocate for the inclusion of cultural harvest protocols as part of hunter safety education required by the Blackfeet Nation (which would also apply in the Yellowstone region). In addition to addressing public safety and ethics concerns, this approach would enable culturally meaningful hunting to take place on park lands, while revitalizing knowledge transmission and language.

Addressing an important management objective (McGowan and Possingham 2016), park officials and Blackfoot knowledge holders also suggested hunters could usefully shape bison movement and migration. Coupled with traditional land care practices like cultural burning, Blackfoot knowledge-based adaptive buffalo hunting could potentially keep growing herds out of conflict areas, an important tool for building tolerance for buffalo on the landscape. While noting legislative challenges for allowing hunting within park boundaries, officials in Glacier suggested when compared to treaty-based hunting, park policies might more readily evolve to accommodate Tribal hunting as a form of management:

Wildlife management is not impossible in a park. So, it seems to me like a fairly elastic concept of saying who can be authorized to do ... wildlife management.

Cultural practices and traditional practices are a stated value in our park policy documents, so I see a future avenue there [for Tribal hunting].” (Glacier superintendent Dave Roemer)

Waterton officials indicated that the Canadian legal framework, which provides more flexibility for Indigenous harvesting in parks, might offer a blueprint. The possibilities for applying hunting as a wildlife management tool within parks are wide ranging and present opportunities for ecologically and ethically sound management.

Hunting as a Challenge to the Wilderness Ideal of Parks Without People

There is a common Western unease with the prospect of hunting in national parks, which have a mandate to reduce human intervention and allow ecosystem dynamics to play out “naturally.” Yet this wilderness narrative obscures both the long-standing ecological role of Indigenous hunting and the effects of mass tourism in shaping wildlife behavior, both directly and by defining management priorities. An ecologist for the Iinnii Initiative explained:

One of the original sins of the Park Service is that they removed the people from the parks, [who] are an integral part of that ecosystem as a keystone species. And that’s created a lot of problems across the national park system. ... There’s always been this moratorium on any kind of human hunting or harvest of animals inside national parks. You look at Yellowstone and you see how profoundly that’s created issues down there. ... Not knowing how this system worked and knowing that there was Indigenous harvest that was part of that system, why are we excluding them from national parks? I think we’re seeing for the first time here, both Waterton and Glacier are open to the idea that there could be cultural harvest inside a park to manage this species. (Brent Brock)

Indeed, diverse participants expressed that parks are not natural systems precisely because they exclude human hunters. Their observation echoes Cronon’s (1996) broader critique of the wilderness ideal that treating protected areas as places without human involvement allows people to imagine that human actions outside these boundaries do not matter, worsening unsustainable practices. As perhaps the most direct way in which humans participate in our ecosystems, hunting reshapes how we think about our ecological roles and responsibilities.

The challenges of managing wildlife when hunting occurs alongside tourism exemplify how these distinct understandings of people’s role in nature—as participants or as observers—can clash. As Blackfoot hunter and rancher Joe Kipp explained, hunted buffalo might avoid people altogether. Because “the National Park Service has developed quite a reputation of having habituated animals ... readily seen by the tourism business,” this changes the nature of how people can view wildlife. Conversely, Waterton ecologist Rob Found worried about the public safety risks of wildlife moving into tourist-populated areas to avoid hunting, explaining:

[The bison] are going to learn that they aren’t hunted in the human-disturbed areas. And there are lots of cases where wildlife do exactly that, they learn that humans are a refuge. And they’ll actually use humans as human shields from other humans.

Management difficulties aside, the wilderness ideal of parks is characterized by a profound irony: In excluding the effects of humans on park ecosystems, parks facilitate and privilege one set of human–wildlife interactions—characterized by tourism and habituated animals—over another set of interactions in which human hunters engage in an ecological and cultural relationship with wildlife as kin. As coauthor TE emphasized, “these were our places of existence before they were places of visitation.” Enabling space specifically for Indigenous hunting across colonial borders, along with the values of kinship and connectedness that underpin it, may thus prompt a broader rethinking of how we exercise environmental values—as well as environmental justice considerations—in parks and protected places.

The prospect of hunting inside national park boundaries is neither inherently unmanageable nor novel. Globally, hunting supports numerous ecological, management, subsistence, and cultural goals in protected areas (Bachmann et al. 2022). As former Glacier superintendent Jeff Mow reflected, “Having managed subsistence [hunting] in Alaska National Parks, ... it can be done. I think the big question is whether the lower 48 is ready for that.” Indeed, the narrative of hunting as a threat to parks runs deep in the culture of conservation organizations and federal parks agencies, a source of ongoing frustration for Blackfoot land managers like coauthor TE: “The government is still telling us how and when to hunt and regulating our way of life, which really takes away from our culture of land stewardship.”

Discussing Tribal gathering of medicinal plants in parks, Glacier superintendent Dave Roemer also expressed disappointment with the persistent culture of opposition to Indigenous harvest in parks:

[The old guard] was very, very worried about what would happen if you just threw open the gates and said, “Come on in and do traditional gathering,” and if that would lead to traditional hunting There was a moment where it seemed like ... we were going to make a leap, and then it got tied up in controversy, and a lot of think pieces saying this is the wrong thing to do.

Participants noted that this reluctance to “allow” Indigenous harvest in national parks is rooted in a deeper discomfort about ceding control back to Indigenous governance.

Colonial and racist discourses still shape the perceived legitimacy of hunting activity (Bachmann et al. 2022), often underlying resistance to ceding authority within established conservation institutions. Former Waterton superintendent Locke Marshall acknowledged,

Yes, there will be some people who work for the park who will find that distasteful. There will be visitors who find it unacceptable. There will probably be environmentalists who find it unacceptable to see any kind of hunting in a national park. I don’t think so, though. I think that mindset is somewhat changing.

As in Waterton, managers in Glacier are seeing attitudes on this topic shift among park staff, as one official pointed out:

[Buffalo] is representative of a culture and of people’s lifeways. ... It really wraps that cultural and natural resource together. So when you start to talk about harvest [from a traditional perspective] it’s meeting these traditional cultural hallmarks in life, and it has a totally different meaning that we don’t necessarily recognize from a strictly administrative Western [perspective]. So it’s really fascinating when you start working with new [parks staff learning about this], and you can just see their eyes just sparkle, and they’re like “Oh!” and they have a totally new understanding of where this is coming from and how it’s different from the separation that has happened for so long in the National Park Service.

Several park interpreters suggested that although uncomfortable, Indigenous hunting could also expose visitors to a more truthful story of national parks in recognizing the long-standing ecological and cultural

role of hunting as a sign of Indigenous presence. As Blackfoot hunters who have harvested buffalo near Yellowstone pointed out, the visibility of the hunt might provoke negative public responses but also opens space for dialogue about Indigenous lifeways and Indigenous lands, potentially contributing to a narrative shift in whose values parks are representing. This in turn opens space for rethinking the role of humans in parks, including the legacy of dispossession and how to address it.

Conclusion: A Watershed Moment for Parks

What is it about this political moment that is enabling national parks officials to seriously consider the question of Tribal hunting in national parks? On both sides of the U.S.–Canada border, our interviews with park officials showed an unprecedented openness to the possibility of Blackfoot hunting buffalo inside park boundaries occurring amid a broader shift in parks–Tribal relations. A senior ranger in Glacier described from personal experience:

I’m fully wrapped around restoring bison into our natural ecosystem, and buffalo into our cultural landscape in the park. When it starts getting into the Tribal members being able to take bison in cultural practices, that piece I still haven’t fully wrestled with internally. ... I had a different perspective, a different approach, different lanes I was sitting in, and the Linnii [Initiative] kind of let me pull it back a little bit and see it a little differently. I still haven’t embraced it all, or understood how it all means and fits in the big picture ... of how does this shift into a Tribal co-stewardship [arrangement]. I don’t see that clearly—but I’m not opposed to it. I’m open to being present in those kinds of conversations.

These dialogues reflect national trends in parks beginning to acknowledge and take on responsibilities for reconciliation and supporting Indigenous resurgence. Added to this, the successes of ecological restoration, restoring free-roaming buffalo being a case in point, raise new questions about how to manage national parks for conditions of abundance, rather than the extreme scarcity from which the wilderness preservation model of parks emerged.

If buffalo are indeed hunted in Glacier and Waterton in the near future, the responses are likely to be complex and emotionally profound. For Blackfoot hunters, this would represent a deep sense

of healing and affirmation of a relationship with land and animal that have existed since time immemorial, and a pathway to political resurgence and food sovereignty that promises real change in many Blackfoot individuals' lives. Many national park managers are uneasy at the prospect of ceding control, and the idea of wildlife being killed inside park boundaries can be viscerally upsetting. There is also a widespread and growing sense, though, that non-Indigenous authorities' gatekeeping role in wildlife management is unjust and harmful (Hessami et al. 2021). There will inevitably be disagreements about how such a hunt might unfold, from practical management concerns to ontological disagreements about the role of people in parks. Yet there appears to be an opportunity to shift the balance of decision-making toward costewardship. Glacier superintendent Dave Roemer highlighted this complexity:

As a manager, thinking about the optics and the politics and the potential blowback that might happen ... it would be great if the bison come into the park for some of the time, and they go out, and the traditional harvest could happen outside of the park. Gosh, that would make my life a lot easier. But I don't think it's going to be as cut and dry as that. I would expect that there are important reasons why a Blackfoot person would want to harvest a bison in the Belly River [inside Glacier]. We don't have a way in current law and policy to make that happen inside Glacier but things can change, hopefully in a way that supports costewardship of bison for the full set of values.

Charting a more just course forward requires challenging the very foundations of parks stewardship, which will demand humility and a willingness to work through the discomfort of rethinking wilderness, a theme frequently brought up by Blackfoot interviewees as well as Glacier and Waterton managers.

For numerous reasons, reestablishing Indigenous hunting is likely not to occur in every park or for every species. Conservation actors argue persuasively that many species are too vulnerable to support harvest at all, facing anthropogenic threats from which parks are vital refugia (Bachmann et al. 2022). Yet the fact that parks are beginning to reconsider these policies in certain cases, based on long-standing grievances and growing dialogue with Tribes, is transformative. What is more, our findings suggests that Blackfoot buffalo hunting in and around Glacier and Waterton might

represent not an affront to parks and their conservation missions but rather an alignment of goals in supporting conservation mandates while advancing Blackfoot well-being. There are multiple potential pathways forward, from parks using hunting as a management tool, to Blackfoot Nations pursuing legal restitution of treaty hunting rights, to buffalo itself acting as an agent of reconciliation. Regardless of the path, the confluence of Indigenous resurgence and the restoration of buffalo offers a key opportunity to blur the boundaries—including the physical spatial boundaries—between parks and the Nations they have long excluded. Here, hunting can shape buffalo movement, treat buffalo honorably, and advance ecological restoration goals while affirming Indigenous presence and ways of being. We argue that far from being anomalous, this case represents a nascent and needed paradigm shift in how parks understand and approach Indigenous Peoples and Indigenous hunting, especially in the context of reconciliation and restoration.

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Notes

1. Both *bison* and *buffalo* refer to the same species scientifically known as *Bison bison*.
2. The Blackfoot Confederacy comprises four Blackfoot Nations: Amskapi Piikani (Blackfeet) in the United States and the Aapatohsipikáni, Siksika, and Kainai in Canada.

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