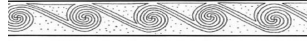


Iti Fabussa



Choctaw and buffalo

Two are
possibly
connected
more
strongly
than ever
today



Photo provided

Over the last couple of years, the writers of Iti Fabvssa have received a number of questions about the relationship between the Choctaw people and the American bison, or “buffalo.” While the Choctaw never relied upon bison to the same extent as the Plains Indian Tribes, such as the Comanche and Pawnee, Choctaw communities did hunt bison and use bison products during certain times in history. Today, through a pan-Indian identity that emphasizes this animal, the bison is connected with the Choctaw people perhaps more strongly than ever before.

The American bison, known as “yvnnash” in the Choctaw language, is an amazing native creature. A mature bison bull can easily reach 2,000 pounds at maturity. Although these wool-covered, grass-eating ruminants might look sluggish and clumsy, they are not. A bison can run 40 miles per hour (as fast as a race horse), and do a standing jump over a six-foot-high fence (National Bison Association 1990)! Bison are also very tough. In 1906, promoters took two bison down to El Paso, Texas, to pit them against some of the best fighting bulls from Mexico (Johnson 2009). The first match saw a hobbled bison, whose leg had been injured during the long train ride, pitted against one of the fighting bulls. The fierce bull charged the calm bison at an angle, and glanced off. The bull then charged again, this time at a more direct angle. On impact, the bison stood unmoved; the fighting bull fell to its haunches.

The bull recovered and charged again, but this time the bison met him head-on. The fighting bull crumpled to the ground, then began running around the ring looking for a place to escape! A second bull was brought out and the bison sent him running, too. The bored bison eventually fell asleep in the spot it had been standing since the match began. Later, a third fighting bull was brought out, and soon the limping bison was chasing it plus the other two bulls around the ring!

The American bison has its early origins in ancient forms of animals that lived in Asia. By 2.5 million years ago, some of the herds had come to North America and began to diverge from their Asian relatives. Through the millinnea, other groups of bison immigrated from Asia and mixed with the bison already in North America. Eventually, several different North American species of bison evolved. One of these, *Bison latifrons*, had horns that spanned 7 feet from tip-to-tip. *Bison antiquus*, another giant species of bison, lived in the Choctaw homeland at the time of the earliest people in the area, during the end of the last “Ice Age.” In north Florida, a skeleton of one of these animals dating back 12,000 years was found with a stone spearhead stuck in the skull (Webb et. al 1984). The hunters could well have been ancestors of today’s Choctaw.

Around 10,000 years ago, a major climate shift took place across

Choctaw and buffalo

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the globe, with environmental conditions eventually becoming like those of today. Bison antiquus evolved into a smaller form of animal, today's bison. The habitat of these modern bison consists primarily of the Great Plains, an area spanning from central Texas to Canada and from the foothills of Colorado to the Cross Timbers of eastern Oklahoma. An estimated 30-60 million bison roamed this area, making them the most numerous hoofed animal on the planet. Bison are a keystone species of the prairie and help other plants and animals from this ecozone to survive. For example, in the spring, as bison shed their coats, they get itchy and will rub on trees, which knocks off the bark and kills the trees, creating available sunlight for prairie grass to grow. Also, the sharp hooves of the bison tear up the ground and make excellent places for the seeds from prairie plants to get established.

Little direct evidence exists of bison living in the Choctaw homeland between the end of the "Ice Age," about 10,000 years ago, and the arrival of the French in the 1600s. In the 1540s, Hernando de Soto and his men traveled across the Southeast from as far as the east coast to some distance west of the Mississippi river. During this four-year journey, they never encountered a single live bison. Clearly the animal was rare to non-existent across the region. However, the de Soto expedition did observe native communities using bison products with increasing frequency from Georgia westward. Apparently, these communities had been using bison products for some time. Archaeologists have uncovered bison horn core fragments at Moundville, an ancestral Choctaw settlement in western Alabama that dates to several hundred years before European contact (Knight and Steponaitis 1998). One may wonder how these communities came to have bison products if the animals themselves did not live in the area. The bison products were supplied through an extensive trade network that linked the Tribes in the Southeast with Tribes living on the southern Plains. The Southeastern Tribes exchanged things like agricultural produce and good bow wood for bison hides and meat (c.f. Canete 1993:307 [ca. 1565]). The Spiro site, located in LeFlore County Oklahoma, may have been one center for this plains/woodlands trade (Schambach 1999). Later the Wichita villages served the same role.

From the late 1500s to late 1600s, few or no Europeans came through Choctaw country. When Europeans did again enter the area, they unlike De Soto, found many bison living in the Southeast. Herds ranged all the way to the east coast and down into peninsular Florida. Choctaw oral history describes bison living in Lowndes and Neshoba Counties in Mississippi, right in the heart of the Choctaw homeland during the early 1700s (Bowman 1904:428). According to another account from the mid-1700s, nomadic tribes who lived off of bison occasionally came through the Choctaw homeland following these herds (Anonymous 1918:72 [1755?]).

Why did the bison suddenly move into the Choctaw homeland, after it had been absent for 10,000 years? Erhard Rostlund (1960) has made a convincing case that the bison population boom in the Southeast during the 1600s, is directly linked to the catastrophic decreases in the human population of the region after first European contact. When Europeans arrived in the Southeast in the early 1500s, they brought a variety of deadly diseases with them



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(Cabeza de Vaca 1905:34-35, 64 [1542]). It is estimated that these diseases may have killed as much as 95 percent of the Native American people. With few people left to hunt the bison, its numbers grew rapidly, and herds pushed eastward into areas where live bison had not been in thousands of years. The peak in bison population probably came around the year 1700 (Rostlund 1960:403).

Choctaws and other Southeastern groups are known to have used bison products in a number of ways. Fur-on robes were made from the winter hides of females and small males (Cabeza de Vaca 1905:93 [1542]). According to an early observer: "These [hides] serve as beds and quilts and are very warm ... I can certify that they are fully as good as a good mattress" (Dumont 1758, Swanton 1946:443). During the 1700s, Choctaw women made elaborate cloth clothing from a mixture of spun bison wool and fibers from the dogbane plant (Anonymous 1918[1755]:67-68). A Choctaw spoon made from a bison horn before the Trail of Tears can be seen today at the Oklahoma History Center. Choctaws also made use of bison meat for food and the interior part hooves for glue, and probably also the tendons for making bow strings, bones for tools, and hoof covers for rattles or containers. In the mid-1700s, Choctaw communities are known to have had a dance known as the "bison dance" (ibid. 68). The details of this dance appear to have been lost, but it was probably done to honor the animal for its unique traits and significance to the Choctaw people.

The bison herds did not live in the Choctaw homeland for very long. According to Choctaw oral history, the animals left what is now east-central Mississippi in the early 1700s. One herd concentrated on the Yazoo River in western Mississippi for some time, but eventually left as well (Claiborne 1880:484). These traditions say that the animals left during an extended drought.

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Continued

While drought may have delivered the final blow to bison herds in Choctaw country, hunting by native people and Euro-Americans is the main reason for the disappearance. By 1800s, no bison were left east of the Mississippi River (Haines 1995:156). Due to over-hunting, game such as deer, bear and turkey also became scarce in Choctaw country. Choctaw hunters began extending their ancient winter hunts into what is now Louisiana, and eventually into what is now southeastern Oklahoma. Their primary focus was deer, but they hunted bison as well (e.g. Conlan 1928:220). If they kept the bison hides, the numbers must have been small, or they must have held onto them tightly. Records from the hide factory at Fort Confederation show that Choctaw people brought hundreds of thousands of deer hides along with a number of hides from other animals, during the first decades of the 1800s, but not a single record for a bison hide exists (Halbert n.d.)

During the Trail of Tears, Choctaw people emigrated much closer to the Great Plains and the prime area of bison habitat. The presence of bison in Oklahoma Choctaw country is memorialized in the names of the town of Yanush and also Buffalo Valley and Buffalo Mountain in Latimer County, as well as Buffalo Head Hill, in Atoka County. Bison apparently disappeared from what is now southeastern Oklahoma not long after the Trail of Tears, but a vast herd, numbering in the millions of animals, still continued to live in central Oklahoma for quite some time. From 1872-1875, this herd was systematically and intentionally annihilated by Euro-American hunters, eager to make a profit on hides, and to starve out the Plains Indians by destroying their main source of food and supplies (Hornaday 1889:492-502). The destruction of this southern bison herd was just part of a continent-wide effort that extended into the northern Plains and Canada. Estimates in 1889 put the total number of remaining wild American bison on the whole continent at 85, and the total number of living animals at 1,091 (ibid. 525). Through human greed and wastefulness, what had been the most numerous hoofed animal on the planet less than a century before was now on the very brink of extinction.

The utter annihilation of this amazing animal was prevented by

just a small handful of individuals who saw what was happening and did something about it. As the animals began to disappear, they captured small herds of wild bison and brought them onto fenced ranches where they could be protected (Haines 1995; McHugh 1972). The first of these herds was put together in 1872, by Walking Coyote, a member of the Pend d'Oreille Tribe in Montana. Three other small breeding herds were established by other individuals on the Plains during the 1870s and 1880s. Today's bison are descended mostly from these four small herds, as well as a few animals that continued to live wild in Yellowstone Park and in Canada (Haines 1995). With the hunting pressure off, the herds grew rapidly during the early 1900s, and offspring were sent all over the country to zoos, private ranches and national parks. One of the first public herds was started in the Wichita Mountains of Oklahoma in 1906. Visitors can still see the descendants of these animals in the park today. The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma established its own bison herd in the early 1990s, near the Tushka Homma Council House grounds. Today, the heard numbers approximately 60 animals.

In 2012, approximately 500,000 bison are living across North America; with about 20,000 in more or less "wild" conditions (Wildlife Conservation Society). The herds continue to grow. Organizations such as the National Bison Association, and Oklahoma Bison Association work to promote bison, ensure genetic diversity, and establish sustainable markets for the meat and other products. The continued survival of the species is no-longer in question. Bison, the premier symbol of the American West has come back from the brink of extinction thanks to the efforts just a few individuals and to the hardiness of the amazing animal itself.

If you have any questions concerning Choctaw history or culture, please mail to Iti Fabussa c/o BISKINIK, P.O. Box 1210, Durant, OK 74702, or e-mail to biskinik@choctawnation.com with "Iti Fabussa" in the subject line.

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