

# Conservation Corner

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I'll open this week's nature encounter with the Kiowa-Plains legend of "The Passing of the Buffalo" as retold in *Keepers of the Animals* by Michael J. Caduto and Joseph Bruchac.

Once, not long ago, the buffalo were everywhere. Wherever the people were, there were the buffalo. They loved the people and the people loved the buffalo. When the people killed a buffalo, they did it with reverence. They gave thanks to the buffalo's spirit. They used every part of the buffalo they killed. The meat was their food. The skins were used for clothing and to cover their tipis. The hair stuffed their pillows and saddlebags. The sinews became their bowstrings. From the hooves they made glue. They carried water in the bladders and stomachs. To give the buffalo honor, they painted the skull and placed it facing the rising sun.

Then the whites came. They were new people, as beautiful and as deadly as the black spider. The whites took the lands of the people. The buffalo loved the people and tried to protect their way of life. So the army was sent to kill the buffalo. But even the soldiers could not hold the buffalo back. Then the army hired hunters. The hunters came and killed and killed. Soon the bones of the buffalo covered the land to the height of a tall man. The buffalo saw they could fight no longer.

The legend goes on to tell how early one morning a Kiowa woman went to a spring to get water. As she bent to fill her bucket, she saw something moving in the mist. It was an old buffalo cow leading the last few young buffalo warriors, young cows, and calves. As she watched, the mountain opened up and the buffalo walked into the mountain where the earth was green and new, the sun shone, and the meadowlarks sang. It was as it had been before the whites came. Then the mountain closed behind them, and the buffalo were gone.

The destruction of the great herds of American bison was in part a deliberate action by the U.S. Army. Knowing the Plains people depended heavily upon the bison, the U.S. Army destroyed the bison herds as a means of bringing the Indians under their control. The great herds of Plains bison have been estimated at 50 to 75 million head, perhaps the largest population of any great mammal in Earth's history, yet by 1900 the buffalo were close to extinction.

To learn more about the American bison and their story, stop by the Nature Center this winter. We will be hosting an interactive display featuring buffalo artifacts and tools reproduced using historic techniques of the Plains Indians. Experience for yourself the warmth of a buffalo robe. Feel for yourself the textures of a horn spoon, bladder container, hair rope, or tail flyswatter. Encounter for yourself the American bison, creatures from our recent past who also called the prairies of Pocahontas County home.

