

Honoring the spirit of the bison



Preparing for a traditional ceremony to release the buffalo spirits, Lakota Chief Arvol Looking Horse arranges a drum and bison skull Tuesday near the Stephens Creek holding facility in Yellowstone National Park. The skull was from a bison killed in the park, he said, eliciting hushed groans from some of those gathered for the ceremony.

By **JODI HAUSEN**
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GARDINER — As the wind blew across the valley in Yellowstone National Park on Tuesday, about 100 people gathered in a circle a few hundred yards from the Stephens Creek bison-holding facility.

They were there to participate and witness a releasing of the buffalo spirits ceremony led by Lakota Chief Arvol Looking Horse.

"These buffalo that lost their lives in Yellowstone did not die by natural law, nor were their spirits honored with ceremony," Looking Horse told the gathering of mostly non-Indians. "This is why we must go there to perform a ceremony of honor for those that lost their lives by the misunderstanding of humankind and pray to Great Spirit for pity of how these gifts were unappreciated."

The ceremony marks the deaths of 1,598 park bison this year, including those killed by hunters and 1,276 sent to slaughter from the Stephens Creek facility. The number of bison slaughtered surpassed previous records under a program designed to prevent the spread of brucellosis to cattle.

The last time the buffalo spirits rite was

performed in the park was in 1997, when a then-record-setting 1,084 bison were killed.

The 2000 state and federal interagency management plan intended to prevent bison from straying outside the park and potentially spreading a livestock disease drew harsh criticism earlier this month by the Federal Government Accountability Office. The report said the agencies failed to expand a free-ranging area for the bison despite tens of millions of dollars spent on land easements and bison management.

Tuesday's ceremony was organized by the Buffalo Field Campaign, a nonprofit group that advocates against the killing of park bison.

During the ceremony, in the center of the circle and flanked by singer and interpreter Rosalie Little Thunder, singer Paula Horn and drummer Dave Pratt, Looking Horse spoke to participants in Lakota as Little Thunder repeated his words in English.

"We see this as an unnecessary massacre," Looking Horse said. "We have known that this particular herd is the last original buffalo nation that still follows their migration pattern, the little that is left in tact; they are the sign of our connection to our well-being of living in harmony."

Ken Wharton came from Livingston to participate in the ceremony.

"I came out because I'm interested in the grizzly bears, the buffalo and the wolves — symbols of a fast-disappearing western landscape," Wharton said. "I think the slaughter is symbolic of the U.S. Army — if you kill the buffalo, you kill the Indian."

Bev Axelsen lives in Livingston and owns a 3,000-acre ranch in Miles City. She is developing a buffalo refuge on her ranch — a safe place for the buffalo to come, she said.

"I'm here today to invite their spirits to return to this place we're preparing for, with their purpose to teach and heal humanity," Axelsen said, choking back tears immediately following the ceremony. "They need to teach us how to live in a symbiotic relationship with nature, to teach us how to be."

Standing in the Eagles Hall Gardiner Community Center where people were sharing a meal after the ceremony, Looking Horse explained:

We are descendants of the buffalo and they are teachers, he said. "We are supposed to live gently on the earth. With our ceremonies at sacred sites, we maintain the balance of life that we pray for, not only for today, but for future generations."

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