

'The American Buffalo,' by Ken Burns, welcomed in Montana

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"The American Buffalo," the most recent series by renowned historian and documentarian Ken Burns, will premiere this fall on PBS with footage and experts from Montana — and it recently earned a warm welcome from a Montana audience.

Earlier this month in Missoula, Burns and his collaborators, producer Julie Dunfey and writer Dayton Duncan, plus researcher and historian Rosalyn LaPier, talked about the series after a 50-minute preview to a packed audience at the Wilma.

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The story of the buffalo connects to the history of the United States, but the series also had to be centered on experiences of Indigenous people, Burns said.

They had a relationship with the animal before the European "discovery," he said, and for thousands of years.

In the early 1800s, 30 million buffalo lived on the landscape, and in a little over a decade, the population collapsed, according to the series. Burns said one question that drives at the heart of the story was spoken in the film by elder George Horse Capture, Jr.,

Aaniiih, of Fort Belknap.

"Why do you have to destroy the things you love?"

HOW TO WATCH

"The American Buffalo" will air Oct. 16 and 17, at 6 p.m.-8 p.m. MT (check local listings) on PBS, PBS.org and the PBS App. The series will be available to stream for free on all station-branded PBS platforms, including PBS.org and the PBS App, available on iOS, Android, Roku, Apple TV, Android TV, Amazon Fire TV, Samsung Smart TV, Chromecast and VIZIO. PBS station members can view the documentary via PBS Passport as part of a full collection of Ken Burns films. For more information about

PBS Passport, visit the PBS Passport FAQ website.

At the event, panelist LaPier, an Indigenous scholar and ethnobotanist who is Blackfeet of Montana and Metis, talked about one element she wanted to be sure the series included in response to a question from moderator John Twiggs of Montana PBS.

LaPier, author of a book called "Invisible Reality: Storytellers, Storytakers and the Supernatural World of the Blackfeet," said she was interested in particular to explore for her book the transition to reservation life after the loss of bison at the turn of the century.

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Buffalo/ from A3

"I thought I was going to find a lot of stories of hardship," said LaPier, a former faculty member at the University of Montana.

The series does share some of the hardships, like how Native Americans didn't have enough to eat after white people decimated the buffalo population. But LaPier, history professor at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, said she found instead in her research stories about people's relationship to the natural world.

"I couldn't find any stories of hardship," LaPier said. "I found all of these amazing stories of how people view their world through a rich religious lens, and how they develop relationships with lots of different animal species, plant species, and how that was the most important thing for them to tell and to leave behind."

So LaPier wanted to be sure the story about bison, tagged "spirit of a people," a story of resilience, conveyed the idea that bison are a sacred animal, and that their significance was common across the plains.

The series contains footage from Montana, including landscapes in eastern Montana and the Bison Range in the west, information from the C.M. Russell Museum, Mansfield Library at the University of Montana, and family collections, among other archives. It includes interviews with Montana authors Steven Rinella and Michael Punke, expert LaPier and elder Horse Capture, and other experts from the state or with connections to it.

At the preview, Burns received a standing ovation, and the Montana audience also erupted in applause when Dunfey, the producer, explained the reason the time was ripe for the topic. Writer Duncan noted the team drew up the proposal after talking about it for roughly a decade, and Dunfey said they knew about the buffalo being saved from their work on "The National Parks: America's Best Idea."

They also knew the tale of the Dust Bowl from their work, "an ecological, environmental morality tale," Dunfey said. That documentary told the story of the ecological disaster humans inflicted on the plains and the exodus of people that ensued, and Dunfey said the story of the buffalo is similar.

She said the timing was right in part because she and Duncan both talked about retiring. Also, to applause, she said the buffalo story is also an ecological morality tale, but it's one that hasn't ended yet.

"It speaks to us. It speaks to, 'We can make choices to go in a different direction, to reverse that,'" Dunfey said.

The line to get into the screening wrapped around part of a downtown block in Missoula. Discover Montana puts seating capacity at the Wilma at 850, and the theater was full for the viewing and panel discussion.

Given the location of the screening, in a state where the animals are a topic of debate, Twiggs also asked the panelists about their choice in naming the series: "Buffalo? Bison? Bison? Buffalo?"

Burns said the filmmakers nailed down the title pretty early. People use the terms fairly interchangeably, he said, but one is a scientific designation, bison, and the other is the application of a name, a designation made by cultures around the world.

He said the series wasn't going to parse the difference, and the team wanted to simply make sure people weren't uneasy about it in the story.

To laughter, Duncan, the writer, said they thought about changing the posters to "Bison Bill's Wild West" show, and thought about how the names of cities and towns in the U.S. would be different, such as "Bison, New York."

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"I... actually get a little frustrated by it, to be very honest," Duncan said.

He said people argue buffalo aren't the same species as the water buffalo or cape buffalo, for example, but he said "prairie dogs ain't dogs." As a writer, he said he wants to communicate clearly, and there's no confusion around the identity of the animal in the title.

"Are they bison? Or are they buffalo? The answer is, 'yes,' and 'yes,' and let's just sleep well tonight," Duncan said.

So what happens next, after the series?

Plugging her fellow panelists, LaPier said a companion book is also being released, "Blood Memory: The Tragic Decline and Improbable Resurrection of the American Buffalo," by Duncan and Burns. She said it offers expanded interviews, information that couldn't fit in the series.

Moving forward, LaPier also said a conversation needs to take place about restoration of bison as a free species, not one that's behind fences. She said tapping into knowledge of Indigenous people in wildlife biology, anthropology and other topics will be critical.

"I think that we just really need to take time to allow Indigenous people to be able to be the ones that take the lead," LaPier said.