

The American Bison



During the 15th century, buffalo dominated the American plains with numbers over 60 million. The Plains Indians followed herds sometimes up to 200 miles across the prairies. The Indians depended on the animal for survival and used every part of the buffalo. They used: hides for teepees and clothing, bones for tools and toys, the meat for food, tendons and muscles for sinewy sewing thread and bowstrings, horns for cups and spoons. They used the brains for hide tanning, the eyes for liquid paint thickener, and the buffalo chips for fuel and baby powder. The destruction of the animal, leading almost to extinction, began in 1830 when government policy advocated their extermination to subdue the "hostile" tribes through starvation. By 1900, less than 1000 buffalo remained. But thanks to federal regulation and careful breeding, there are now about 30,000 buffalo in national parks and privately owned rangeland.

A buffalo's habitat varies. They live primarily on plains, prairies, river valleys and sometimes forests. Free ranging buffalo occur only in national parks and reserves such as Yellowstone and Custer. While we often call these animals buffalo, their proper name is bison. True buffalo only live in Africa and Asia.

The American buffalo is the largest terrestrial animal in North America. Bulls can weigh up to 2000 pounds, but are very good swimmers in spite of their weight. A buffalo will eat anywhere from 2% to 3% of their body weight "A DAY!!!" This means for every 1,000 pounds, 20 to 30 pounds of food is needed. Bison can weigh up to 2,000 pounds so if you do the math, that is over 60 pounds of food per animal per day.