

Buffalo Trace Education Box Lesson 9

Where Did the Bison Go?

Purpose: Students will learn about the decline of the bison population in the United States. Students will speculate about the causes and effects of the declining bison population.

Subject Areas: Math, Science

Materials Needed: four hula hoops, index cards, marker, yarn, four plastic baggies (Optional: one inch paper figures of a person, one inch paper figure of a bison, cause/effect graphic organizer)

BEFORE the lesson:

A. Each hula hoop will represent the United States at different time periods associated with the bison population. (The yarn will be placed inside two of the hula hoops to show fractions of the U.S.) Prepare these index cards or have the students participate:

- "1800"
- "1830s"
- "1890s"
- "Today"

B. Prepare these index cards or have the students participate. Write the bison populations listed below (information has been estimated from numerous sources):

- On 10 cards, write "6 million"
- On 7 cards, write "5 million"
- On 2 cards, write "200 thousand"
- On 2 cards, write "5000"
- On 2 cards, write "one hundred"

C. Prepare these index cards or have the students participate. Write the information listed below:

- "One bison herd was the size of Connecticut."
- "Mississippi River"
- "1830 -- The last recorded killing of a wild bison in Indiana."
- "1833 -- Bison are extinct east of the Mississippi River."
- "1890 -- 50 wild bison are in Yellowstone National Park."

D. Prepare the four baggies or have the students participate. Write the information listed below on the outside of the baggies:

- "Yellowstone National Park" (Place the index card "5000" in the baggie)
- "Bison Ranches" (Place the index card "200 thousand" in the the baggie.)
- "Bison Farms" (Place the index card "200 thousand" in the the baggie.)
- "Other National Parks" (Place the index card "5000" in the baggie.)

Steps: (Suggestion -- As you read aloud the information below, have volunteers place the index cards in the proper time periods.)

1. Lay the four hula hoops on the classroom floor (or larger area). Place the index cards with the time periods in sequence under each hula hoop.

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2. Read aloud the information about the size of the bison population in 1800 (the first hoop).

- It is estimated that before 1600 there were 30-70 million bison in North America. One herd could cover 400 square miles and include tens of millions of animals. At the start of the 1800s millions of buffalo roamed the middle of America. (Scatter the ten index cards with “6 million” in the hoop.)
- One herd was allegedly the size of Connecticut. (Place the index card with that information in the hoop.)
- (Optional: place the one inch paper figures in the hoop to show the size comparison. A one-inch figure on a football field would show the comparison of one bison herd and a person.)
- Calculate the bison population by multiplying the “6 million” cards (60,000,000).

3. Read aloud the information about the size of the bison population in the 1830s (the second hoop).

- In the 1830s, settlement of the Plains marked the beginning of the end for the great herds of bison. Hunting groups would kill thousands of bison for their hides. (Place a piece of the yarn so that the hoop is divided into half. Place the index card “Mississippi River” on the yarn.)
- In 1830 the last recorded killing of a wild bison in Indiana took place. (Place the index card with “1830 -- the last recorded ...” toward the right of the “Mississippi River.”)
- In 1833 the bison became extinct east of the Mississippi River. (Place the index card “In 1833 the bison was extinct...” to the left of the “Mississippi River.”)
- (Scatter the seven index cards with “5 million” to the left of the “Mississippi River.”)
- Calculate the bison population by multiplying the “5 million” cards (35,000,000).

4. Read aloud the information about the size of the bison population in the 1890s (the third hoop).

- The peak of the hunting of the bison took place from 1870-1890. During 1-2 days, 250,000 hides could be auctioned off. The population was reduced to a few hundred. (Place the two index cards with “one hundred” in the hoop.)
- There were only 50 wild bison that survived in the Yellowstone National Park. (Place a circle of yarn in the hoop. Place the index card with “50 bison...” in the circle of yarn.)
- Calculate the bison population by adding the “one hundred” cards and “50” card (250).

5. Read aloud the information about the size of the bison population today (the fourth hoop).

- Today bison herds are protected in Yellowstone National Park. The bison population in Yellowstone is about 5000. (Place the baggie “Yellowstone...” in the hoop. The baggie represents how bison are protected.)
- Other national parks also have bison herds and protect them. (Place the baggie “Other National Parks” with the index card inside for “5000.”)
- Many people raise bison on private ranches and farms. (Place the other two baggies “Ranches” and “Farms” with index cards inside for “200 thousand.” The baggies represent how the bison are fenced, not free to roam.)
- Calculate the bison population by adding “5000” and adding “200 thousand” (410,000)

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6. Have students complete a cause and effect graphic organizer about the decline of the bison population.

- As European settlers came to the U.S., Native Americans were infected with diseases. Many died. The bison population increased.
- In the mid-1800s the climate got warmer and drier and the grasslands changed. Many buffalo died.
- At the same time, the government went to war with the Native Americans over the land for settlers. White settlers saw the bison as an obstacle to be removed.
- The hunting of the bison contributed to the defeat of the American Indians during the Indian Wars. Traditional village life could no longer function.
- Due to the commercial slaughter for meat and hides, the U.S. military were encouraged to destroy the Native American's food supplies.
- Many considered bison hunting great sport and railroad lines advertised that bison could be shot from passenger cars. People wanted hides for coats, blankets and leather for belts. A hide would sell for \$1-\$5 (which was a worker's wage for an entire day).

Resources:

- Actual Size (Sunflower Education)
- National Wildlife Federation "Bison Mystery Box"
- Ranger Rick, July 1998, by Carolyn Duckworth "When Buffalo Ruled."
- National Park Service, Theodore Roosevelt Park (nps.gov)
- Indiana Magazine of History "The Bison, or Buffalo, in the United States," Volume 6, Issue 3, 1910, pp 114-117.
- American Bison, Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve, Kansas (photos of piles of bison skulls and hides)
- Tallgrass Prairie Information, Illinois
- www.fws.gov/bisonrange/timeline.htm
- "Where the Bison Roam" (ReadWorks.org) passage and questions for students