# A Lakota historian on how the railroad impacted bison in the 19th century: “The buffalo would not cross the tracks”

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Olivia Weitz

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Donovin Sprague

There's a growing movement to restore bison to tribal lands. The animal has long been important to Native Americans, but in the 19th Century, bison were killed as the government forced people onto reservations.

As bison were nearly extirpated and pushed around the landscape, so were the Lakota people.

Donovin Sprague is a member of the Minnicoujou Lakota tribe and an instructor at Sheridan College. He said the railroad took a big toll on bison habitat.

Sprague spoke with Wyoming Public Radio's Olivia Weitz about the arc of buffalo -- and Indigenous -- presence in and around Wyoming.

*Editor's Note: This story has been edited for clarity and brevity.*

**Olivia Weitz**: Tell us a little bit about the Lakota. Tell us about where they were traveling and living prior to being forcibly relocated.

**Donovin Sprague**: We had several locations and then also being nomadic and traveling and following the great herds of buffalo [in the] 1850s time period. Then there was a lot of movement between our tribes clear across the Northern Plains, current North Dakota, South

Dakota, Nebraska, Northern Kansas, Northeast Colorado, much of Wyoming, heavily from the central to the eastern part, and the same way with Montana, from the central to the eastern, and then on up into Canada. There was no boundaries between [the] U.S. and Canada.

**OW**: In the early 1800s, about how many bison were there on the Plains? How many bison did it feel like there were at that time?

**DS**: I think some of the early estimates were something like 30 to 60 million. And the numbers were pretty hard to find with all that; there's quite a variety. But there were a lot of buffalo. And you know how far you can see out in this area: for miles and miles and miles, just blackened with solid buffalo. Then it dropped down to about in the 300 range. This is just a period of about 100 years from 1800 to 1900. So, very serious. Then it's like, 'What are we going to do - they are going extinct?'

**OW**: I know this is kind of a big question, but from the Lakota perspective, what were some of the events and factors that led to the decline of the buffalo?

**DS**: The things that led to the decline of the buffalo was not over hunting and all that of the tribes that some people suggest, but it was just the settlement of non-Indians coming out. One thing that happened too was the transcontinental railroad when that was finally completed about 1869. The buffalo, most of them, would not cross the tracks. It split the herd right there into a great Southern herd and a Northern herd.

But then the railroad had a terrible effect on all this because people hunted from the train and just for sport, just shoot them. All this buffalo was just left, the carcass was left. Sometimes they would take the tongue and the robes. You see those pictures of all those buffalo skulls, the heads stacked up, looks like a mountain of them stacked up and there'll be some fur trader up on the top standing, posing... just a terrible slaughter, senseless slaughter of all that.

**OW**: As the railroad was pushing further west, what was happening to the Lakota people at that time and also to bison habitat?

**DS**: As the railroad came out in completion like 1869, that totally changed the locations and the habitat. It also sent a lot of the buffalo further north, like up into Saskatchewan and those areas. Then they also had certain areas, new areas, that they would move into, because just like real wildlife today, whether it's a moose or a bear, the more contact, that's going to move them further and further into isolation.

So that's what was happening to the buffalo until they were just like the Plains Indian, was that they went as far as they could. They couldn't go any further. And all the land is almost taken. So we were by 1877, it's as far as we could go with what happened at [The Battle of The] Little Bighorn. Then only a year after that, we're surrounded. There's no place we can do but surrender. And then it was the same way with the buffalo. They totally thought that the buffalo and the American Indian would be a thing of the past, that they're going to just be gone and no more.

It's just like conservation and preservation. People wait too long for all that. Instead of practicing these things ongoing in your life, you overextend yourself on the environment and resources and on other people. You've done all this damage, and then it's like, 'Well scratching my head, maybe we should do something, maybe we should start preserving this.' That's the way it is still, a lot of things, the air gets real bad, and then, 'Well, now we gotta do something; we're in trouble.' But why weren't precautions being taken before? And I see that as a parallel with the American Indian and the buffalo.