



The American Bison
A conservation biology story



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University of Colorado students chose the American bison, or the buffalo as it is often called, as the mascot of CU Boulder in 1934. By that time, bison had been hunted nearly to extinction despite having thrived in North America for the past 2 million years. While efforts were made to recover the bison population, the animals we see today are primarily cow-bison hybrids—the result of interbreeding with domestic cattle. In fact, only a few genetically pure bison herds are currently known to exist.

To continue the conservation of true bison, we need to encourage animals with high percentages of bison DNA to reproduce with one another. By identifying DNA that belongs uniquely to cows, we can infer which animals are closest to genetically pure, uncontaminated bison and focus our efforts on those populations.

While conservation genomics gives us hope for threatened and endangered species, we must be careful not to create an ecological imbalance by giving some animals unfair advantages for survival over others.