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Buffalo Commons, 20 years later

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Franks and Deborah Popper remember when all hell broke loose out here in the Great Plains.

They - otherwise obscure East Coast university professors - remain amazed and pleased by reaction to a research paper they called "The Great Plains: From Dust to Dust," published 20 years ago.

In it, they proposed a Buffalo Commons for the sparsely populated regions of 10 states from western North Dakota clear to Texas.

They suggested that the vast grassy region was stuck in a cycle of decreasing population and emptying towns and farms, and the best use for it would be a vast preserve and wilderness for bison and wildlife. They proposed the federal government, like it did in the '30s to create the National Grasslands, could buy back the land it gave free for homesteading.

They say most of what they foresaw has come to pass, but differently.

The Great Plains continue to empty, except for in larger population centers. And, a Buffalo Commons is happening, only through a private conservation movement, not through government intervention.

The Poppers say they were far more right than wrong.

In their view, conservancy-style purchases of the Great Plains' prairie, plus the strength of the buffalo industry highlighted by Ted Turner's conglomeration of Montana ranches into a bison empire are signposts pointing the way.

Those indicators, plus groups like the Great Plains Restoration Council, the Inter-Tribal Bison Cooperative, the American Prairie Foundation and the Grasslands Foundation, all put flesh to the concept and make it material, they say.

"There's no question now that the Buffalo Commons will happen," Frank Popper said in a recent interview. "The interesting questions are how."

Richard Rathge, who directs the state's population data center, says he frankly thinks that's hogwash, or more accurately, buffalo-wash.

He said the Poppers based their proposal on the notion that places like North Dakota had no ability to create a different economy and that buffalo parks would be a sustainable use of the region.

"That didn't happen, nor will it happen," Rathge said, partly because buffalo ownership is mainly privatized in a cattle-style industry.

More importantly, though, he thinks the Poppers failed to recognize that a population resurgence was possible in western counties and towns they saw as spiraling toward extinction.

The latest data show that for the first time in more than two decades, 10 of 15 counties either west of or on the Missouri River in North Dakota show growth.

Those counties - including McKenzie, Dunn, Hettinger, Morton, Williams and Sioux - have seen an influx of people because of energy development and eco-tourism.

"The key is the diversification of the economy," he said.

Shaking things up

The Poppers' beliefs that the Buffalo Commons "will happen" are not the fighting words they were 20 years ago.

Then, the idea sounded faintly ridiculous.

On the other hand, with a deepening drought, Yellowstone National Park on fire, an oil recession and towns across the plains for generations birthing far fewer people than they buried, they touched a nerve that maybe it could really happen.

It was to that "other hand" that the Poppers were called on to defend their research in overheated meeting rooms up and down the Great Plains. Strong words were said and meant.

"We were the damned last straw," Frank Popper recalled.

In Montana, people wore jackets with the picture of a bison surrounded by the circle-slash stamp for "no." In Kansas, a meeting with the Poppers was cancelled because of a death threat against them. In North Dakota, a McKenzie County newspaper publisher angrily asked them, "What do you want us to do? Leave?"

For all the heat it generated, the Poppers' work created an equal amount of light.

Jim Gilmour remembers both the fire and the illumination.

Gilmour is a Fargo city planner, a city of fortune far outside the Buffalo Common fray.

Back in 1987 he was working for the Lewis and Clark Council for Regional Development that included 10 North Dakota counties. Most of the counties - Grant, Sioux, Sheridan, Hettinger - were on the Poppers' dire demographics "hit" list for having towns that were dying on their feet.

Looking back these 20 years, Gilmour said the Poppers did some good.

"People get accustomed to the gradual decline and don't realize what the situation is," Gilmour said. "Having that prediction caused people to realize they needed to create their own future."

In fact, Gilmour was among those to first read the Poppers' Buffalo Commons theory in the American Planning Association magazine. He invited them to speak at a 16-state Western Planning Conference in Bismarck, July 1988.

It was hot. It had barely rained for months. Crops were burning up. Water in the huge Missouri River dam basins was shrinking.

"Suddenly, I was not a joke or some kind of bizarre prophet, the intellectual clown act that I'd been (earlier)," Frank Popper said. "They were taking us very seriously indeed."

The media showed up, including the Chicago Tribune.

Until then, the Buffalo Commons theory had four hooved feet that were trampling humans in their most fragile places. With the attention of Chicago, the New York Times to follow, the "Today Show" and others, it grew wings. Within months the Poppers and Buffalo Commons were part of the regional lexicon.

Timing was everything

While the Poppers were battling up and down the plains, George Sinner was North Dakota's governor, winding down the first of his two terms in office.

His administration dug hard into North Dakota's economic development movement and fostered an eventual understanding that growth would come bootstraps up, not dispensation down from state government.

Sinner had his hands full. There was the drought, a prolonged struggle to keep the Great Plains Synfuels Plant up and running and communities like Belfield and Watford City reeling from the implosion of the oil boom.

Still, Sinner said he didn't believe in the Poppers' theory, even though he had a congenial half-hour meeting with Frank Popper during that planning conference.

"I still don't believe it," Sinner said.

Looking back now, he sees that some of what they predicted has come to pass.

What the Poppers failed to take into account was that the tide could turn, Sinner said.

There has been a rebirth in western North Dakota, with ethanol production, a new promising run in the oil fields and a number of coal projects under development. Good crops are cyclical, but the world demand for food will only ever increase, Sinner said.

Judging the future by what happens over a relatively small time span is short-sighted, he said. "I don't think anybody in my office was very alarmed," Sinner said.

Conversation long overdue

Rathge said the Poppers started an important conversation about depopulation in the plains. The numbers had always been there, but tying them to the empty wildness of a Buffalo Commons gave the discussion an unprecedented urgency, he said.

Even with modest growth in some western counties, the same trends that have always plagued the state still do. Six counties contribute to the slight but steady increase in the state's population over the past 50 years. All other counties have declined in population with only a recent improvement for some that could go away if the energy and oil boom do.

Rathge said he's optimistic, but people and communities still need to be innovative and diversify.

Deborah Popper says when she rereads the original paper she is struck by its sweeping, vivid language.

"It was much more powerful than I would write it now," she said.

What most sticks with the Poppers is the conversation - occasionally a shouting match - that occurred up and down the plains when people were confronted with such a dramatic view of how the future might unfold.

Deborah Popper said ultimately people used their work to define what they didn't want to have happen to their communities and the land they loved and lived.

"The Buffalo Commons became one piece of the way to articulate that," she said.

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