

Yukon Wood Bison Recovery Program: Challenges from the Community Perspective

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Wood Bison (*bison bison athabasca*) are currently classified as threatened in Canada. After the last ice age, wood bison ranged from central Alaska down through the Canadian Prairies. However, over the past few centuries their number and range declined. In 1800 there were an estimated 180,000 wood bison but that number was reduced to 250 by 1900. Recovery efforts began in the early 1900s and in 1980, the Yukon became a participant by committing to establish a free roaming herd in the territory. An enclosure was established near the Nisling River and between 1986 and 1992, 142 bison were brought to the Yukon from Elk Island National Park. These bison were all eventually released and the Yukon now has a free-ranging herd of approximately 500 bison.

The Yukon's bison recovery program has been a success as the bison herd is now well established and flourishing. Governments (federal, territorial and First Nation), local Renewable Resources Councils, hunting organizations and the Yukon Fish and Wildlife Management Board have all played important roles in ensuring the success of the recovery and management of the herd. However, the program has had its challenges and these are important to consider. Concerns about competition with other species such as moose and caribou, disease transfer, habitat alterations and a lack of local support for the introduction of the herd have had to be addressed.

This presentation will provide an overview of the Yukon's wood bison recovery program and focus on some of the challenges that arose from the communities that were involved and how they were, or were not, addressed.