On Ted Turner’s vast Flying D Ranch in Montana, bison grazed much as they did before the arrival of European settlers. Turner is the largest private owner of bison in the United States.

“’It’s the only way to bring buffalo back in a meaning- ful way,” said O’Brien, who 30 years ago turned his cattle operation over to a herd of buffalo that live and die on that same grassland in just as nature intended. “We make money by cutting the bull’s neck.”

For 300,000 years, bison were a keystone species of the western United States. They grazed across lands that stretched from southern Canada to northern Mexico, thundering across the plains in numbers that stunned the Europeans who first encountered them. But by a hundred years ago they were almost extinct, their numbers decimated by a mere two centuries of hunting and, at the end, a calculated plan of extermination by the federal government.

“They were a major force of nature,” said Keith Aune, a biologist with the Wildlife Conservation Society, a leader in the fight to bring them back. “An animal that shaped the landscape and provided a livelihood for entire societies became almost nonexistent.”

Now, a 10-year campaign by conservationists, Indian tribes and the federal government to bring this “for- mer” wild animal back to its native lands is gaining traction. Last year the descendants of some of Yellowstone’s wild bison were trucked to northern Montana, where they were joyfully greeted by the Assiniboine and Sioux Indian tribes. The Department of the Interior last summer issued a long-range plan to find federal lands suitable for wild herds, and the American Prairie Reserve, supported by a national restoration project in Montana, is slowly growing and adding bison to its grasses. But the bison were never really gone. In a ranching boom fishermen turned their back on bison in the United States.

In 2013, accidental injury killed 3.5 million people, behind only heart disease as the number one killer of people. Three times as many people as brain injuries killed people annually in transit. By JEREMY N. SMITH • New York Times

These findings, published late last year in the New England Journal of Medicine, were deemed so compelling by guidelines for how to feed young children. The study “clearly indicates that the rise of peanut allergies ‘so alarming’ that guidelines for how to feed young children have been ironed out for reasons that are not entirely clear. There have also been big increases in other West simplicity, the results ‘so compelling’ and the study, called ‘The Rise of Peanut Allergies: A New Realism for Food Allergies,’ turned what was once conventional wisdom on its head, a new study published in the New England Journal of Medicine. The study, conducted in London, found that children who were not regularly fed peanuts or foods containing peanuts beginning in infancy, rather than avoiding such foods, dramatically decreases the risk of developing a peanut allergy.”

In 2013, accidental injury killed 3.5 million people, behind only heart disease as the number one killer of people. Three times as many people as brain injuries killed people annually in transit.

The study is not without its critics. Food allergies are rare; only 2 to 3 percent of the population suffers from sensitivities. But the findings have been so compelling that guidelines for how to feed young children have been ironed out for reasons that are not entirely clear. There have also been big increases in other Western diseases. The rise of peanut allergies “so alarming” that guidelines for how to feed young children have been ironed out for reasons that are not entirely clear. There have also been big increases in other Western diseases.
A specifically designed hunt allows mini bison to head from Montana in the pasture at the D. Brian ranch. Then, Blanks said, after the best way the bison can with their herd right up until their last breath.

**RANCHER BELIEVES WE CAN SAVE BISON BY EATING THEM**

**BISON from SHI movement that started a century ago and accelerated in the 1970s, they were pushed toward into livestock and treated like cattle.

Today, there are an estimated 500,000 bison in the United States — 90 percent of the world’s bison population — raising and raising the industry’s worth about $300 million.

But demand and lion, a tiny fraction of the beef business is worth about $300 million.

“Many of these animals are simply an extension of a stock herd, but what those in the conservation — something will have to eat and those in the conservation are driven by fences and gates.”

The human footprint has thwarted decisions.
Jerry Blanks took careful aim through the scope on his black hunting rifle as the buffalo surrounding the pickup truck watched him quizzically.

He focused on the dark fur behind the ear of a young bull that stood slightly apart from the group.

The sudden crack of the rifle fractured the winter silence and the bull toppled slowly into the snow — just another of the millions upon millions of buffalo that have been killed on these northern plains in the past two centuries.

But this time it’s different. That buffalo is part of an audacious mission by South Dakota rancher Dan O’Brien, who says Americans can save one of their country’s most revered wild animals by eating it. He’s one of a small but growing number of bison producers — including billionaire-turned-philanthropist Ted Turner — who want to preserve the great landscapes of the west by changing how America gets its protein.

“It’s the only way to bring buffalo back in a meaningful way,” said O’Brien, who 18 years ago turned his cattle operation over to a herd of buffalo that live and die on their native grasslands, just as nature intended.

“Without money flowing in and out, it will fail.”

For 300,000 years, bison were a keystone species of the western United States. They grazed across lands that stretched from southern Canada to northern Mexico, thundering across the plains in numbers that stunned the Europeans who first encountered them.

But by a hundred years ago they were almost extinct, their vast numbers decimated by a mere two centuries of hunting and, at the end, a calculated plan of extermination by the federal government.

“They were a major force of nature,” said Keith Aune, a biologist with the Wildlife Conservation Society, a leader in the fight to bring them back. “An animal that shaped the landscape and provided a livelihood for entire societies became almost nonexistent.”

Now, a 10-year campaign by conservationists, Indian tribes and the federal government to bring this “forgotten” wild animal back to its native lands is gaining traction. Late last year the descendants of some of Yellowstone’s wild bison were trucked to northern Montana, where they were joyfully greeted by the Assiniboine and Sioux Indian tribes at the Fort Peck Reservation. The Department of the Interior last summer issued a long-range plan to find federal lands suitable for wild herds, and the American Prairie Reserve, a privately held prairie restoration project in Montana, is slowly growing and adding buffalo as it goes.

But the buffalo were never really gone. In a ranching movement that started a century ago and accelerated in the 1970s, they were just turned into livestock and treated like cattle.

Today, there are an estimated 500,000 buffalo in the United States — 90 percent of them raised on ranches for meat production. Those livestock herds present a problem and an opportunity for conservationists. Confined by fences and finished in feedlots, they are simply an extension of the agricultural and livestock industries that have decimated the vast majority of the American prairies. But if raised, as they evolved, on open lands to graze purely on native grasses, they could be the key to restoring much of what’s been lost.

The question is how to pay for the land and the herds, and one answer is to harvest some bison for meat. Besides, without predators — the wolves, bears, mountain lions and hunters that once kept their numbers in check — something will have to eat them. And that means us.

Today the bison meat business is worth about $300 million, a tiny fraction of the beef industry, but demand and prices are rising fast. The question that has buffalo producers and those in the conservation movement eyeing each other warily is how the animals will be raised — as managed livestock, wild animals or something in between?

“The human footprint has to be a factor,” said Aune. The question is “what level of human footprint do you accept?”
Harvest day

On a crystal cold day in early November, a semitrailer truck rumbled down a dirt road cut through rolling hills of western South Dakota. A black pickup followed the truck’s dust plume as it pulled through a gate and into a pasture, where it stopped.

It was Thursday. Harvest day.

It’s taken Dan and Jill O’Brien, a faithful cadre of investors and their slowly growing group of employees 18 years to figure out how to construct the Wild Idea Buffalo Co., a purely grass-fed bison meat business, that lives up to their moral and ecological standards. Much of it is recounted in Dan O’Brien’s poetic memoir of life on the grasslands, “Buffalo for the Broken Heart.”

It all starts with the truck, an “in-field slaughter operation.” Tucked inside are the knives, saws and hoists necessary to take apart a 1,000-pound animal in about 45 minutes. In the back is a refrigerated compartment that can hold a dozen stripped carcasses.

“We are taking the plant to the animal,” said Jeff Merchant, Wild Idea’s plant manager.

As the sun rose above the ridge, Blanks climbed into the pickup truck with a rifle in hand and went off to find O’Brien’s herd of 350 buffalo. When he first took on the job eight years ago, Blanks was following what he calls “a primeval drive to hunt.” That’s all changed.

“Now I can see why the Indians held them in such reverence,” he said. Over the years he’s developed a respectful patience as he drives the pickup slowly through the herd, looking for an animal that is the right age, the right size, and in just the right spot. After careful research he’s found the right bullet, one that penetrates the skull, but won’t blow through the other side — a 30 caliber, all copper. This, he said, is the best way the bison can die: living in their herd on their native land right up until their last breath.

“If I didn’t do this, they would be going another route,” he said.

When the gun cracks and the bull drops to the ground, the other animals don’t seem to notice. That’s because there is no bellowing, no thrashing, to spook them, Blanks said. By following humane kill guidelines, the bull is rendered insensible by the bullet, and dies when Blanks cuts its throat, leaving a red stain on the snow.

When the smell of warm blood drifts toward the bison watching the scene, their nostrils flare as they raise their noses in the air to catch the scent.

Blanks backs the truck up to the carcass, wraps chains around the front and back hoofs, and, with a specially designed hydraulic lift, hoists the animal feet-first into the air.

Slowly, he drives back up the hill with the dead buffalo swaying in the air behind the truck, to where the slaughter truck waits.

By 4 p.m., the crew has killed and slaughtered eight buffalo, their stripped and headless carcasses hanging in the refrigerated section of the truck. Today Wild Idea is a thriving little business, with sales that have increased 30 percent in each of the last two years. But it’s tiny — Dan O’Brien compares it to a pricey boutique winery. Unlike most of the beef and bison industries, it’s vertically integrated. It starts with the living animal and ends with a cut of meat or finished ready-to-eat product packed in dry ice and shipped out via UPS. Wild Idea sells direct through its website, wildideabuffalo.com, to customers, restaurants and grocery stores willing to pay a premium price.

That structure is the only way the O’Briens could bypass the feedlots and slaughter houses, which are cruel to the animals and environmentally destructive, he said.

“I wouldn’t do that to my dog,” he said.

More importantly, it’s not necessary, he said. Bison evolved to eat only grass — about 30 pounds a day — and grass-fed bison meat is much lower than beef in fat, calories and cholesterol.

O’Brien’s “messianic” goal, as he puts it, goes far beyond delivering boutique meat to an elite audience. Saving the bison also saves the prairie and a rich ecosystem that’s on a par with the African Serengeti. The bison’s grazing spreads the seeds and replenishes the grasses. Healthy grasses provide a home for hundreds of birds, pollinators and deer — plus the coyotes and even wolves that rely on them in nature’s endless food chain.

“Our product is species diversity,” O’Brien said.

So far, he says, his buffalo are affecting 350,000 acres. That includes the 4,000 acres he owns, his partner’s neighboring 5,000-acre ranch, an adjacent 70,000 acres of the Buffalo Gap National Grasslands where they have grazing rights, plus land owned by the Nature Conservancy and nearby tribes that sell their bison to him for slaughter.
‘Catastrophic’ model

But there is a long way to go. Today, there is not much left of the vast prairies that once stretched from the Mississippi to the Rockies. Every year more grasslands are converted into corn, soybeans and other crops — close to 40,000 square miles in the last half-decade alone.

Two-thirds of the corn in the United States is grown to feed livestock — poultry, pork, beef and buffalo — in feedlots. That, combined with a market driven by ever-higher federal mandates for ethanol, have made America’s native prairies one of the most threatened ecosystems on Earth.

In short, said O’Brien, feedlots “are driving a commodity model that is catastrophic. If there’s a sin, that’s it.”

But Wild Idea’s bison are a rarity. The American Bison Association has 1,000 members, and about half raise grass-fed animals, said Dave Carter, executive director. About 80 to 90 percent of the 113,000 bison that are slaughtered each year end their lives in feedlots.

That’s because customers demand it, bison producers say. Even philanthropist Ted Turner, who became the largest bison producer in the country in order to protect the species and preserve the land, finishes them in feedlots before trucking them to Colorado for slaughter.

At the Flying D near Bozeman, Mont., the largest of Turner’s operations, the herd spends most of its life in buffalo heaven — 115,000 acres of sprawling meadows below the Spanish Peaks. They share this sweeping green land with elk, moose, grizzlies and even two packs of wolves that have recently taken up residence.

“[Turner] said long ago that he never saw a species that had commercial promise that was endangered,” said Mark Kossler, who manages Turner’s bison operations, which include about 50,000 animals on 14 of his 15 ranches from South Dakota to New Mexico. “So we are ranching bison as part of the conservation effort.”

Still, ranchers like Turner, struggling to survive in a volatile industry, can’t ignore consumer tastes influenced by decades of industrial beef production.

Bison can taste different depending on where it’s been raised, what it’s been eating and what time of year it’s been slaughtered. That doesn’t always go over well with restaurants or consumers who expect all meat to be the same. “It’s part of the game to have a consistent product,” said Danny Johnson, manager at the Flying D.

That’s where feedlots come in. Though cattle are much more suited to feedlots, the added food — hay, oats and corn — puts weight on bison and gives them a layer of fat that they don’t naturally have.

“White fat,” said Johnson. “That’s what the public is used to.”

Still, federal rules require that bison meat be free of the growth hormones and antibiotics that are routinely injected into commercial beef cattle to help them tolerate corn and close confinement. And they spend less time in feedlots because their growth maxes out more quickly than cattle.

Carter, of the bison association, said the industry is still figuring out what it’s going to be.

“We learn every step of the way that these are unique animals, and sometimes the best management is the least management,” he said.

O’Brien is still waiting for the rest of the industry to come around to his way of thinking — that the best management for American buffalo and its native prairie is no management at all.

“I’ll know I’m successful when Ted Turner switches over,” he said. “It will kill me, but what a way to go.”