



**BISON BULLETIN BISON BULLETIN BISON BULLETIN**

On August 29, 1990 the long-awaited report of the Northern Diseased Bison Environmental Assessment Panel was released to the public. The panel recommended that the largest free-roaming herd of bison in the world be destroyed and replaced by captive-bred animals. An accompanying press release described this course of action as "the largest wildlife conservation effort to save a sub-species ever undertaken in Canada." The Canadian Nature Federation strongly disagrees with both points.

Some 50 percent of the approximately 4,000 bison in and around Wood Buffalo National Park (WBNP) are infected with either bovine brucellosis, tuberculosis, or both diseases. Agriculture Canada advocates the slaughter to maintain Canada's "brucellosis-free" status and to enable the Canadian cattle herd to be declared "tuberculosis-free." (For more information on the issue, see Nature Canada, spring 1990 and Almanac, Vol. 4, No. 1.) The panel has concluded that no risk, however small, of transmission of either disease to humans, cattle, or healthy bison in the MacKenzie Bison Sanctuary (MBS) is acceptable.

Since 1925, when the first diseased plains bison were released in WBNP, there has been no documented case of cattle or humans contracting either disease from the herd in the park. And the possibility of contact between the WBNP and MBS herds is based on a single sighting by tourists of three bison to the south of the MBS, a sighting that could not be confirmed by government officials who attempted to find the animals. Despite the lack of evidence of risk, the panel concludes that "eradication of the existing bison is the only method of eliminating the risk" and recommends that "all free-ranging bison now living in Wood Buffalo National Park and surrounding areas be removed and replaced by disease-free wood bison."

While the panel questions the effectiveness and feasibility of implementing alternatives to the slaughter of the bison, it does not examine the feasibility of eliminating every last bison in the region, an achievement crucial to the success of the recommended solution. It simply accepts, on faith, that it will be done, if enough "diligence" is applied, even though the bison range over a vast wilderness composed of extremely difficult terrain, and no comparable feat has ever before been attempted. If only one diseased bison survives, the exercise will have been for naught.

What's more, the panel focuses all of its attention on WBNP and makes no recommendations for preventive efforts outside of the park. Cattle are being moved too close to the park and are encroaching on bison habitat. Yet the panel does not make a single recommendation requiring the agricultural sector to minimize the risk through use of permanent buffer zones, bison-proof fencing, or vaccination. Nor does it recommend restrictions on cattle grazing in the area or the establishment of a plan for agricultural development in the region, the absence of which it accepts unquestioned.

Neither does the panel consider that, even if the diseased bison are eliminated successfully and replaced with healthy bison, there remains a distinct possibility that tuberculosis and/or brucellosis may reappear in the replacement herd. Although Canada was declared brucellosis-free in October, 1985, several cases of the disease have been reported since that time. This demonstrates that the disease can remain undetected in animals for years. The disease could also enter Canada via imported cattle. If either scenario takes place, the largest and most diverse gene pool of bison in the world will have been destroyed at an expense of more than \$20 million and absolutely nothing will have been accomplished.

One of the panel's justifications for the slaughter is to