

At Home on the Range

Utah Social Studies

Materials

- ◆ Student worksheets
- ◆ U.S. map

Background

The American bison belongs to the same family of mammals as domestic cattle—the Bovidae family. Early explorers often mistook bison for beef cattle. The Spanish explorer Cabeza de Vaca called bison “Indian cattle” and early French explorers called them “boeuf,” (pronounced buff), the French word for beef. The English took that name and changed it to buffalo, the name most people now have for the bison. In fact, the true buffalo is related to bison and cattle, but is an oxlike animal that comes from Europe and Asia. The water buffalo is one example.

Because bison have so much in common with domestic cattle, pioneering ranchers on the Great Plains thought it would be worthwhile to capture and protect small herds from the hide hunters that nearly wiped them out between 1871 and 1873. Since the bison had adapted to the harsh conditions of living on the Great Plains, some cattlemen hoped they could develop heartier breeds of cattle by breeding bison with their cattle.

Bison go off to calve by themselves and need no assistance from man. The calves are immediately on their feet after birth and easily keep up with their mothers on a steady run. Bison work together in herds to protect each other against predators and the environment. They can weather storms and help their newborn calves survive in blizzards. Bison stand facing the winter winds instead of moving with the wind like cattle do. Their heavy winter coats protect them from the bitter cold. Bison can root through heavy snow to get to the grass below. If necessary, they can eat snow to survive. Some live to be 40 to 50 years old.

Bison have poor eyesight but a keen sense of smell. They appear slow and awkward but can outrun and outmaneuver most horses. They are incredibly fast, can pivot on their hind feet and their front feet, and can jump over a fence with ease.

Private ownership of bison has quadrupled in the last 20 years. Farmers and ranchers can place bison on range and pasture land that is not suitable for growing crops. Their numbers have grown so large on government reserves that government officials have started to sell the excess animals at public auctions. Many people buy these animals to start their own herds.

Bison are also playing an important part in restoring our prairie ecosystems in places like the Tall Grass Prairie Preserve in Osage County, Oklahoma. The large herds fertilize the land with their droppings while their hooves plow it. In turn, the prairie’s grasses feed the bison.

Bison meat has a flavor similar to that of beef. It has a similar protein content as well, but is lower in fat and cholesterol. That’s



Time: 1 hour

Grade Level: 5

Social Studies, Standard 1

Students will understand how the exploration and colonization of North America transformed human history.

Objective 1

Describe and explain the growth and development of the early American colonies.

- Analyze contributions of American Indian people to the colonial settlements.

Objective 2

Assess the global impact of cultural and economic diffusion as a result of colonization.

- Analyze and Explain the population decline in American Indian populations (i.e. disease, warfare, displacement).

Social Studies, Standard 4

Students will understand that the 19th century was a time of incredible change for the United States, including geographic expansion, constitutional crisis, and economic growth.

Objective 1

Investigate the significant events during America’s expansion and the roles people played.

- Identify the key reasons why people move and the traits necessary for survival.
- Examine causes and consequences of important events in the United States expansion (e.g. Louisiana Purchase, Lewis and Clark Expedition, treaties with American Indians, Homestead Act, Trail of Tears, California Gold Rush).
- Compare the trails that were important during westward expansion (e.g. Oregon, Mormon, Spanish, California)
- Assess the impact of expansion on native inhabitants of the west.

because bison get all their food from grazing and do not get supplementary feeds like cattle do. A three-ounce serving of bison meat is 21.7 percent protein and contains 1.9 grams of fat, 93 calories, and between 43 milligrams and 100 grams of cholesterol. Bison meat is considered a gourmet item and is usually more expensive than beef. On the shelf, it is a darker red than beef and is sometimes mistaken for old beef.

Activity Procedures

1. Hand out student worksheets. Have students read the information about the bison on Student Worksheet A before completing Student Worksheet B.
2. Have students locate the American Great Plains on a map of the United States. Share background material.
3. Lead a discussion in which you ask some of the following questions. Accept all reasonable answers.
 - Would settlement have been possible in parts of the Great Plains if the bison had not been nearly wiped out? (Probably not since there were so many of them and because of their roaming tendencies.)
 - Why would killing the bison help the government control the Plains tribes? (The Plains tribes depended on the bison for food, clothing, shelter, etc. Without the bison the tribes would not be so strong and would have to depend on the government to meet their needs.)
 - Why do you think ranchers and other conservationists thought it was important to save the bison from extinction? (The bison provided valuable food and were able to survive the harsh conditions of the Great Plains.)
 - List some reasons that other kinds of conservation (soil conservation, water conservation, wildlife conservation) would be food for the farmer or rancher.
 - What replaced bison as the means for survival on the Great Plains? (cattle ranching)
 - The Plains tribes built their culture around the bison. Can you think of something in our own culture that has the same importance that the bison did to the Plains Indians? (Lead the discussion toward the importance of agriculture to our culture. What kind of culture could we have without agriculture?)



Adapted from Oklahoma Agriculture in the Classroom.

At Home on the Range A

Read the information below, and use it to answer the questions on Student Worksheet B.

Bison once roamed the Great Plains in numbers so great the early explorers could not count them. One explorer said there were so many they made the countryside look like one big buffalo robe. Bison have lived in all parts of North America, but the largest herds lived on the Great Plains—from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains. The strong grasses that grew there provided the best food for them.

Historians estimate there were 60 million bison in North America in 1492. When European settlers first began moving onto the Great Plains in the 1800s, there were still about 30 million. By that time, several Native American tribes had built their cultures around the bison. These tribes depended on the bison for food shelter, tools, and fuel.

The bison has been called the most important wild animal in the development of the West. Bison provided food for early explorers and for settlers crossing the Great Plains. Settlers who chose to stay on the Great Plains hunted bison for food until they could get their farms established. Since there were very few trees on the Great Plains, they made fires for warmth and for cooking from bison droppings.

By the 1800s, many people in the Eastern United States had tasted bison meat. Some liked it even better than beef and were willing to pay good prices for it. Many hunters began to think hunting bison on the Great Plains would be a good way to earn a living.

More and more hunters began coming onto the Great Plains to kill bison. Some began taking just the bison's tongue, hump, and hide because those were the easiest to get. They

would leave the rest of the carcass on the Plains to rot. The Plains tribes who depended on the bison to feed their families began to get worried that these hunters were killing too many bison and wasting too much meat. Many people from back East became upset, too, because the wasted meat could have fed many hungry people all over North America.

Some people wanted the bison wiped out, though, because they thought it would help the government control the Plains tribes.

In the 1870s, a German tanner found an easy way to make leather from bison hides.

After that, many companies began paying high prices for the hides. The hunters discovered they could make much more money if they killed many bison at one time, took their hides, and left the rest to rot.

Between 1871 and 1873, 2,000 hide hunters slaughtered thousands of bison. By the end of the 19th

Century, there were only 541 bison left on the Great Plains.

By this time, cattlemen had started moving large herds of longhorn and other cattle onto the Great Plains. Some of the ranchers saw the value of the bison and rounded up some of the younger ones to protect them and save them from extinction. One rancher, Charles Goodnight of Texas, thought bison could be crossed with cattle to produce a breed that would do well on the Great Plains. For awhile he was very successful with his cattalo. Modern breeders have been successful with a similar mix, which they call beefalo.

Because of the efforts of cattlemen and conservationists, like Charles Goodnight, the bison is no longer an endangered species. Over 140,000 bison now roam on private and public lands in North America.



Name _____

At Home on the Range **B**

Read the information on Student Worksheet A to answer the questions below.

1. What two geographical formations mark the boundaries of the Great Plains?
2. Why were there more bison on the Great Plains than anywhere else?
3. Between 1492 and the 1800s the bison population in North America had been cut by ____ percent.
4. Why was the bison called “the most important wild animal in the development of the West?”
5. White hunters first began killing bison and using all their meat, but later they began taking just the bison’s _____, _____, and _____.
6. What technological development caused the price of bison hides to rise and led to the massive slaughter of bison between 1871 and 1873?
7. What is the main reason the bison herds were wiped out on the Great Plains? Circle the answer.
 - a. The Plains Indians killed too many.
 - b. Too many settlers and explorers liked the taste of bison meat.
 - c. Hide hunters wanted to make more money.
 - d. The government was trying to get rid of the Indians.
8. Which of the following saved the bison from extinction?
 - a. Hide hunters
 - b. Explorers
 - c. Historians
 - d. Ranchers and other conservationists



Utah Agriculture in the Classroom

Name _____

At Home on the Range (Answers)

B

1. What two geographical formations mark the boundaries of the Great Plains?

The Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains mark the boundaries of the Great Plains.

2. Why were there more bison on the Great Plains than anywhere else?

The strong grasses growing on the Great Plains was the best food for them.

3. Between 1492 and the 1800s the bison population in North America had been cut by 50 percent.

4. Why was the bison called “the most important wild animal in the development of the West?”
Bison provided food for the settlers and explorers to eat and fuel to help keep them warm.

5. White hunters first began killing bison and using all their meat, but later they began taking just the bison’s hide, hump, and tongue.

6. What technological development caused the price of bison hides to rise and led to the massive slaughter of bison between 1871 and 1873?
The price of bison hides rose after some German tanners developed a better method for tanning bison hides.

7. What is the main reason the bison herds were wiped out on the Great Plains? Circle the answer.

a. The Plains Indians killed too many.

b. Too many settlers and explorers liked the taste of bison meat.

c. Hide hunters wanted to make more money.

d. The government was trying to get rid of the Indians.

8. Which of the following saved the bison from extinction?

a. Hide hunters

c. Historians

b. Explorers

d. Ranchers and other conservationists

