

# Buffalo Nations Grasslands Alliance (BNGA)

## *Grasslands for Generations*

### DRAFT Regional Conservation Plan

April 11, 2022

*This is a draft regional conservation plan for BNGA, and we invite comments on it, as it is a work in progress.*

#### **Executive Summary**

Grasslands provide the foundation for Native lifeways in the Northern Great Plains. Lifeways are the interwoven economic activities, food cycles, health maintenance practices, lifestyles, cultural and ceremonial activities, belief systems, and politics of a people. Indigenous lifeways are place-based, and Native peoples in the Northern Great Plains view nature, people, and culture as being interconnected. Historically and traditionally, Native peoples of the region hunted bison, elk, and other grassland wildlife<sup>1</sup> for food, clothing, tools and shelter. Grassland ecosystems were intimately connected to native food cycles and the products and practices used to maintain human health and resilience. Native grasslands continue to be vitally important to Native peoples today. After the near-extirmination of bison, Native nations<sup>2</sup> have worked to restore them, along with other formerly abundant species such as swift fox and the rare and elusive black-footed ferret. Native plants and animals such as sage, sweetgrass, pronghorn, deer and others are still spiritually and culturally important to many people, and essential components of healthy native grassland ecosystems, as are soils, rocks, roots, and all ecosystem relationships with Mother Earth. Many tribal members also collect native plants for food, medicine and ceremonies, and rely on clean water from rivers, lakes and streams that grasslands help purify.

Other ways that natural resources support community wellbeing in Native nations include hunting (including but not limited to ungulates and game birds) and fishing programs, which can provide essential food, resilient health, employment, and local economic benefits. Livestock ranching – the foundation of the economy for many Native nations – generates significant revenue for tribal governments, that in turn provide vital public services to tribal members. Sustainable ranching keeps grasslands intact while still providing habitat for wildlife. Additionally, ecotourism brings revenue from outside reservation boundaries and can promote cultural knowledge and the protection of natural resources.

When grasslands are converted to cropland or development, wildlife lose habitat, ecosystem services are degraded, and Native peoples lose plant and animal resources essential to their physical, cultural, and spiritual well-being. Sage grouse and pronghorn, for example, avoid cultivated lands, and agricultural expansion is a leading cause of population declines and local extinctions of migratory

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<sup>1</sup> In this document the term “wildlife” refers to all native plants and animals (including fish) collectively.

<sup>2</sup> This document uses the preferred term “Native nations”, but also the corresponding terms “tribe/tribal”, “tribal member”, and “Indian Reservation” as legal names.

ungulates<sup>3</sup>. The ecosystem services that intact grasslands provide have societal benefits that extend far beyond the region – including flood control, nutrient recycling, water purification, soil conservation, and maintaining environmental flows for wetlands, rivers, and aquifer recharge. Grasslands also store carbon, playing a critical role in stabilizing our climate. Avoiding conversion of grasslands in the United States would prevent the release of an equivalent of 24 million metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub> each year<sup>4</sup>, making protecting grasslands in the Northern Great Plains a key climate change mitigation strategy.

Native nations constitute a significant portion of both the population and area of the Northern Great Plains, and wish to maintain and enhance intact grassland ecosystems for the ecological, economical, and cultural benefits they provide. Tribal programs and Native-led organizations, such as fish and game, environment, and land and range programs, and Tribal colleges, support and restore native wildlife species, restore grasslands and wetlands, encourage better ranching practices, provide educational programs about nature, enable world-class sustainable hunting experiences, and combat the spread of invasive species.

Unfortunately, three main barriers curtail grassland conservation and erode its foundational support of human wellbeing in Native nations: insufficient political will, insufficient infrastructure and equipment (e.g., safe office buildings for natural resources and educational staff, vehicles, computer systems) and capacity (e.g., staff recruitment and retention), and insufficient management integration and collaboration. State, federal, tribal, and private institutions frequently overlook grasslands' importance or fail to provide the political and financial support for conserving grasslands and strengthening vital connections between Native people and the ecosystems on which they depend. As a result, tribal programs and Native-led organizations lack sufficient and consistent funding to develop and expand essential initiatives that will allow them to drive the recovery and maintenance of ecosystem health and community wellbeing. For example, many Native nations lack sufficient funding to hire a single wildlife biologist or provide adequate facilities and equipment for their staff. Funding sources are typically small and based on one- to three-year grants cycles, leading to short-lived programs that miss major opportunities to protect grasslands and restore ecosystem relationships.

Finally, settler colonialism installed many federal, forced policies and Native nation governance systems that have frequent turnover and artificially silo natural resources management and educational efforts, curtailing institutional knowledge and holistic approaches to conservation. Similarly, there are many opportunities for Native nations to increasingly collaborate in pursuit of shared visions and goals in the region, amplifying landscape-scale integrated natural resources management.

### **BNGA's vision**

*Native nations unite to ensure the diversity of life in the Northern Great Plains flourishes for current and future generations.*

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<sup>3</sup> Tack et. al. 2019. Beyond Protected Areas: Private Lands and Public Policy Anchor Intact Pathways for Multi-species Wildlife Migration. *Biological Conservation*.

<sup>4</sup> Fargione et. al. 2018. Natural Climate Solutions for the United States. *Science Advances*.

## **BNGA's mission**

The mission of the Buffalo Nations Grasslands Alliance (BNGA) is to ensure that Native nations have the technical and financial resources to plan and act on the vision for their traditional lands and waters, which includes ensuring that:

- Tribal members thrive by sustainably stewarding and connecting with natural resources
- Grasslands and native wildlife are restored or enhanced
- Fish and game departments have the capacity to deliver conservation impacts at scale

## **Geographic Scope**

### *Northern Great Plains Ecoregion*

The Northern Great Plains ecoregion<sup>5</sup> spans 180 million acres of short- and mixed-grass prairie, most of which lies in the rain shadow between the Rocky Mountains and the more humid tall-grass prairie east of the Missouri River. The ecoregion includes areas in the United States and Canada and encompasses vast expanses of grass, low hills, and island mountain forests like the Little Rocky Mountains. It contains much of the enormous Missouri River watershed and is one of only four remaining large, intact temperate grasslands on Earth<sup>6</sup>.

### *Tribal Lands Eligible*

BNGA focuses on tribal lands in the Northern Great Plains ecoregion that are in the United States<sup>7</sup> (Figure 1). All fifteen Native nations with land in the ecoregion (including those whose land partially overlaps with the ecoregion) are invited to participate in BNGA. These Native nations (and their lands) include:

1. Blackfoot Nation (Blackfoot Indian Reservation)
2. Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe (Cheyenne River Indian Reservation)
3. Crow Nation (Crow Indian Reservation)
4. Crow Creek Sioux Tribe (Crow Creek Indian Reservation)
5. Aaniiih and Nakoda Nation (Fort Belknap Indian Reservation)
6. Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara Nation (Fort Berthold Indian Reservation)
7. Fort Peck Assiniboine & Sioux Tribes (Fort Peck Indian Reservation)
8. Lower Brule Sioux Tribe (Lower Brule Indian Reservation)
9. Northern Cheyenne Tribe (Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation)
10. Oglala Lakota Sioux Nation (Pine Ridge Indian Reservation)
11. Chippewa Cree Tribe (Rocky Boy's Indian Reservation)
12. Rosebud Sioux Tribe (Rosebud Indian Reservation)
13. Standing Rock Sioux Tribe (Standing Rock Indian Reservation)
14. Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians (Turtle Mountain off-reservation trust lands in the ecoregion)
15. Yankton Sioux Tribe (Yankton Indian Reservation)

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<sup>5</sup> Forrest, S.C., H. Strand, W.H. Haskins, C. Freese, J. Proctor and E. Dinerstein. 2004. *Ocean of Grass: A Conservation Assessment for the Northern Great Plains*. Northern Plains Conservation Network.

<sup>6</sup> World Wildlife Fund. Northern Great Plains. Accessed February 11, 2020: <https://www.worldwildlife.org/places/northern-great-plains>

<sup>7</sup> The terms "Northern Great Plains" and "ecoregion" in the rest of this document therefore refer to the portion of the ecoregion that is south of the U.S.-Canada border.

## Native Nations in the Northern Great Plains



Projects focusing on the following lands within the ecoregion will be eligible for funding through BNGA:

- Tribal and individual trust land (whether on or off a reservation)
- Fee simple land held by a tribe or tribal member (whether on or off a reservation)

Projects focused on fee simple land on a reservation that is not held by a tribe or tribal member will not be eligible for funding.

More than 10 million acres<sup>8</sup> in this region would be eligible for funding as part of BNGA. Collectively, the fifteen Native nations include approximately 250,000 members<sup>9</sup>, most of whom live in the region.

### **Main Threats to Grasslands and Community Wellbeing in Native nations**

Addressing the major threats to Native nations in the Northern Great Plains will help meet a pivotal opportunity to protect people and grasslands. This section outlines the major threats to community wellbeing and grasslands.

Land loss and historical trauma wrought by settler colonialism created a situation where Native nations in the Northern Great Plains are located in six of the ten “worst counties to live in the United States,” in terms of poverty rate, educational attainment, and life expectancy.<sup>10</sup> One in four Native Americans is food insecure, but levels are 40 percent or higher on certain Northern Plains reservations compared to other regions.<sup>11</sup> Disturbingly, Native cultures, land ethics, and languages are rapidly disappearing as Indigenous knowledge-holders struggle to connect with Native communities and as Native citizens’ connections to the land and to each other erode. In addition, Native nations own only a fraction of their historic territory. The land base itself, the keystone of Native cultures and lifeways, is fragmented and threatened by ongoing habitat loss, degradation and climate change.

The principal threats to natural resources on tribal lands in the Northern Great Plains are habitat loss and degradation, and climate change. Conversion of grasslands to cropland is a primary threat, which is exacerbated by insufficient land use planning/zoning, perverse policy incentives<sup>12</sup>, and market forces. From 2012-2017, grasslands were converted to cropland in the Northern Great Plains at a rate of approximately 1 million acres per year<sup>13</sup>. Cattle overgrazing is another significant threat. Degraded grasslands increase soil erosion, promote noxious weed invasions, and reduce habitat quality. Altered fire regimes and the loss of herbivorous native wildlife such as prairie dogs and bison have resulted in invasive species, like eastern red cedar and Rocky Mountain juniper, encroaching onto grasslands and making them less suitable for many wildlife species. Energy development fragments grasslands and poses a major pollution risk to water and wetlands, and human health and safety.

Conversion, overgrazing, altered fire regimes, invasive species, and energy development all interact with rapidly changing climactic conditions. The climate crisis threatens people, grasslands, and wildlife by increasing temperatures, causing more frequent and severe floods and droughts, increasing the spread of invasive species, exacerbating disease outbreaks, and decreasing the levels of nutrients in forage.

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<sup>8</sup> The figure of 10 million acres excludes some off-reservation trust lands, as well as all fee simple land held by a tribe or tribal member because the data was not available.

<sup>9</sup> Bureau of Indian Affairs’ Rocky Mountain and Great Plains regional offices.

<sup>10</sup> Stebbins, Samuel. 2021. The Worst Counties to Live In. Wall Street Journal Special Report dated Marcg 29, 2021. Accessed from <https://247wallst.com/special-report/2021/03/29/the-worst-counties-to-live-in-6/>

<sup>11</sup> Bauer, K.W., Widome, R., Himes, J.H., Smyth, M., Holy Rock, B., Hannan, P.J., and M. Story. 2012. High Food Insecurity and Its Correlates among Families Living on a Rural American Indian Reservation. *American Journal of Public Health* 102(7):1346-1352.

<sup>12</sup> Crop insurance is a frequently cited subsidy that drives conversion, e.g. Jisang Yu, Aaron Smith, Daniel A Sumner, Effects of Crop Insurance Premium Subsidies on Crop Acreage, *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, Volume 100, Issue 1, January 2018, Pages 91–114

<sup>13</sup> WWF Plowprint Report, unpublished data

In addition to habitat loss and degradation, native wildlife face threats like unsustainable farming practices, eradication by ranchers and farmers, fencing that impedes movements and migrations or causes injury, disease, illegal harvest, and lead poisoning from ammunition and lures. For example, the fate of the black-footed ferret, one of the most endangered mammals in North America, depends upon conservation of its prairie dog prey and protection from habitat loss and non-native disease. And although the Northern Great Plains is a critical breeding area for grassland birds, a recent study showed that 74% of its avian species are in decline<sup>14</sup>.

### **A Pivotal Opportunity**

To address threats to grasslands and community wellbeing in Native nations in the Northern Great Plains, BNGA is pursuing three main strategies. First, BNGA is coordinating regional efforts to build collective action, ensuring more political and financial support to conserve grasslands and enhance Native communities' wellbeing.

Second, BNGA is seeking to create long-term, sustainable funding for Native-led natural resource stewardship by establishing a conservation trust fund. Generating and then consistently distributing funding on an annual basis to Native nations over the long term will enable Native nations to recruit and retain skilled staff. Consistent financing will sustain multi-year program support towards achieving flourishing grasslands and communities.

Third, BNGA is strengthening its position as a regional, non-governmental institution that will incentivize integrated nature stewardship and cross-sector innovation so that people, wildlife, and lands of the Northern Great Plains can continue to help one another thrive. Ultimately, BNGA was established to build capacity and raise the sustainable funding needed to accomplish four goals over ten years to realize the vision of Native nations uniting to ensure the diversity of life in the Northern Great Plains flourishes for current and future generations.

### **Goals and Indicators**

Climate change will significantly affect how people, habitats and wildlife of the region interact, and the challenges they face. Therefore, all goals must consider the expected impacts of climate change, and all activities to implement goals must reflect climate risks.

**Goal 1:** In ten years, 30% of Tribal land in the Northern Great Plains is under Native-led conservation management (this number may change based on current evaluation of the baseline)

**Main indicator:** Acres of grasslands and wetlands on Tribal lands (whether on or off reservation) where Tribal governments, local Native organizations, or individual Native producers are driving management for the benefit of habitats and species, including biocultural practices and activities (e.g. Tribal natural resource departments leasing land to benefit habitats and species, Native-led economic development corporation purchasing land for a buffalo range, Native farmers and ranchers entering into voluntary agreements to support wildlife, etc.).

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<sup>14</sup> Rosenberg, et al. 2019. *Decline of the North American Avifauna*. Science magazine.

**Goal 2:** In ten years, ten paths of connectivity\* (on Tribal, public, and/or other lands) secured for Native nations in the Northern Great Plains, supporting culturally and ecologically important wildlife species through Native-led conservation management

*\*“Paths of connectivity” refers to lands in Tribal management, conservation status, and/or public lands with limited barriers to wildlife movement, and that provide access for Tribal education, Tribal management, and/or Tribal ceremonial activities. Paths of connectivity can be at different scales (e.g., within reservation boundaries, across reservation boundaries, etc.).*

**Main indicator:** Number of paths of connectivity secured (e.g. by purchasing land, removing physical barriers such as roads and fences, eliminating policy barriers, renaming a place, etc.; activities to strengthen connections between people and the land are included under Goal 4)

**Goal 3:** Create new, sustainable and natural resource-based enterprises and jobs in Native communities (bison management, local foods, ecotourism, hunting/fishing, renewable energy, etc.)

**Goal 4:** Preserve and strengthen tribal members’ understanding of connections between people and nature, promote indigenous lifeways (native foods, medicines, customs, etc.), and create opportunities for tribal members to engage with nature (recreation, etc.)

#### **Eligible Organizations**

Once a conservation trust fund is established and capitalized, any tribal department or tribal organization that implements activities to achieve BNGA’s goals would be eligible to apply for funding from BNGA, including Native Nation governments (or districts/segments within a Native Nation), community development corporations, colleges, and other tribal 501(c)(3) organizations. Tribal consortiums (e.g. InterTribal Buffalo Council, Native American Fish and Wildlife Society) would not be eligible to receive funds.

#### **BNGA’s Board of Directors and Contact Information**

In 2021, BNGA formed a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization to ensure the sustainability of tribal wildlife conservation for current and future generations by creating sustainable financing, engaging local communities and leadership, and connecting conservation with culture.

Sustainable financing can only be achieved with the cooperation and support of involved Northern Great Plains Native nations, while recognizing that they are independent, sovereign, and unique. This effort will require that Native nations work together on agreed-upon goals and approaches in a regional effort, which can potentially attract greater funding, increase revenue from sustainable hunting and tourism, and support greater knowledge-sharing.

BNGA’s Board of Directors serve in an individual capacity or as representatives of an organization. The Board invites Advisors to participate in discussions. Advisors have expertise in topics such as natural resource stewardship, education, tribal governance, planning, tourism, and conservation finance. Advisors are not considered members of the Board and have no voting privileges. However, Advisors attend general BNGA monthly meetings, assist with revising plans, make suggestions and proposals, help

develop key documents where appropriate, and suggest people to invite into planning processes. Since June 2019, 25 Advisors from Native nations have contributed suggestions and strategies to the Alliance. The Board and Advisors together include tribal members from fourteen Native nations.

A Coordinator promotes BNGA by advancing the Board's directives, enhancing communication flow among the Directors and Advisors, conducting face-to-face outreach with Native nations, seeking out people with key information, connecting the Directors with expert knowledge, managing consultants/interns, conducting literature review/research, facilitating meetings, and offering strategic guidance to the Board.

**Board of Directors**

Shaun Grassel, PhD (Citizen of the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe): BNGA Chairperson

Monica Rattling Hawk (Citizen of the Oglala Lakota Nation): BNGA Vice Chairperson

Emily Boyd-Valandra (Citizen of the Sicangu Lakota Oyate): BNGA Secretary & Treasurer

Terry Tatsey (Citizen of the Blackfeet Nation): BNGA Board Member

M. Wes Stops, Jr. (Citizen of the Crow Nation): BNGA Board Member

Jennifer Martel (Citizen of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe): BNGA Board Member

Martha Kauffman, Vice President WWF's Northern Great Plains Program: BNGA Board Member

**For additional information, please contact the Coordinator:**

Libby Khumalo, PhD

Northern Great Plains Program, World Wildlife Fund - US

13 S. Wilson Ave. Suite 1, Bozeman, MT 59715

Office: (406) 582-0236 x117 | Cell: (406) 214-1473

Email: [Libby.Khumalo@wwfus.org](mailto:Libby.Khumalo@wwfus.org)