Honouring the Buffalo:
A Plains Cree Legend

(Illustration: Mike Keepness)

Study Guide
HONOURING THE BUFFALO:
A Plains Cree Legend

Judith Silverthorne and Ray Lavallee,
Illustrations: Mike Keepness

Study Guide

by K. E. Olsen

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Book ISBN: 978-1-927756-33-1

Guide Concept: K. E. Olsen

Image sources:

Cover and interior painting illustrations: Mike Keepness

Buffalo skull: https://www.tumblr.com/search/bison-skull. Redrawn without background and colours by Billy Hamilton

All drawings by Billy Hamilton

Photographs by Jeff Sawatzky of artifacts held by the Royal Saskatchewan Museum

(Illustration: Mike Keepness)
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Introduction

This study guide provides a variety of activities to help young readers discover and appreciate the cultural importance of the buffalo to the Indigenous people of the Plains. The proposed exercises were chosen to permit students to understand better the importance and place occupied by the venerable buffalo in the culture of the Plains Cree people.

As an accompanying guide for the book Honouring the Buffalo: A Plains Cree Legend, the lessons were developed within a context of cultural customs and events that impacted the buffalo. The scope and sequence of activities relate to the outcomes of the arts education, language arts and social studies programs (Gr 1 – 8) in Saskatchewan. Each has a practical component making it accessible to a wide range of students whose needs may vary. Also, you will find a selection of projects and activities offered before, during, and after reading the legend: Honouring the Buffalo.

It is worth noting that an estimated 30-50 million buffalo lived on the open plains before the arrival of the European settlers. Today in Canada, about 5,000 buffalo roam free in protected areas in the south and northwest Saskatchewan, northeastern British Columbia, Alberta, and the Northwest Territories.

Buffalo or Bison? While bison is the term preferred for scientific purposes, buffalo or bison are used interchangeably and buffalo is the more common term used among the Indigenous People and in the book, therefore it is used throughout this study guide.

(Illustration: Mike Keepness)
Preparing to Read

- Describe ways in which communities help ensure basic human needs are met (e.g., food and water, shelter, clothing, education, safety).

**Session 1 – Survival on the Prairie**

**Teaching strategies:**

To facilitate active learning include discussion, debate, and reflection. The topic should be personally meaningful. Explore with students how people in the past met their basic needs in their natural environment such as: community connections, food, clothing and shelter.

Invite students to imagine that they no longer have grocery stores where they can purchase food and that they no longer have a refrigerator, running water, electricity, a stove or a house.

**Materials:**

- Large self-stick wall pad for the brainstorm session. Divide each sheet into four categories: Community, Food, Clothing and Shelter.
- Markers of various colours

**Time frame:**

30 to 45 minutes

**Grade level:**

Gr 4 to 6 – Outcomes may be adapted to meet the needs of students at other grade levels or with disabilities.

**Activity:**

Ask students to explain how they would survive if suddenly all of the modern commodities that they grew up with would suddenly disappear. How would they find something to eat? How would they find clothes to put on their back? How would they protect themselves from the elements, like the rain, the wind the snow and the cold winters on the open prairie?

Note all of the students’ comments under each category on large sheet.
While Reading

- Discuss the management of the natural environment

**Session 2 – Why Did The Buffalo Offer His Body?**

**Teaching strategies:**

Help students understand the importance of the buffalo in the survival of the Indigenous Plains People and how they fed themselves if the buffalo was not found or when the hunt was unsuccessful.

Explain to the students, that the existence of Indigenous Peoples depended on:

- Hunting (buffalo, deer and antelope in the south, elk moose, caribou and deer in the North, goose and duck everywhere)
- Fish (trout, whitefish, pike and walleye)
- Trapping (beaver, rabbit, squirrel)
- Gathering plants and wild berries (wild rice, Saskatoon berries, bunches of cherries, blueberries)
- Fur (of the fox, marten, weasel, moose, deer, buffalo and beaver)

**Materials:**

- Bulletin board with a large illustration of a buffalo
- Markers
- Post-its
- String

**Time frame:**

30 to 45 minutes

**Grade level:**

Gr 4 to 6 – Outcomes may be adapted to meet the needs of students at other grade levels or with disabilities.

**Activity:**
Read the first three pages of *Honouring the Buffalo: A Plains Cree Legend* to the students. Invite small groups of students to prepare labels to identify each part of the buffalo’s body. Then distribute to each student the name of an object made from part of the buffalo written on a sticky-note. Next, invite students to match the object that was used by the two-legged people living on the prairie with the correct part of the buffalo’s body. As the legend is read, students will add labels to complete the bulletin board.

For some images, and activities, you may also find this site useful:

http://americanhistory.si.edu/buffalo/hideactivity.html

*Blank diagram follows for student’s use ➔*
While Reading

- Speculate upon various challenges faced by communities in meeting needs and wants, with evidence gathered from examining pictures, viewing media, and interpreting stories using a variety of fiction and non-fiction texts.

Session 3: The Buffalo Giver of Life

Objectives:

Explore other resources to better understand that a natural resource has limits and must be protected in order to sustain it.

Invite student to visit the following site of the Canadian Museum of Civilization:

http://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/aborig/rodeo/rodeo63e.shtml

Materials

- Blank recipe cards for student notes
- Markers
- Glue and scissors
- Computers and access to a printer

Time frame:

30 to 45 minutes in separate sessions

Grade level:

Gr 4 to 6 – Outcomes may be adapted to meet the needs of students at other grade levels or with disabilities.

Activity:

Divide students in seven groups. Read with students the introduction to the site. Invite each group to choose a topic. Each group will be responsible for a theme found on the site of the Canadian Museum of History. Students will prepare a summary with illustrations on their cards and report their finding to the class. After, presentation cards can be glued in student’s journal.

- Hunting Methods
- Products of Life
- Buffalo and Deer Imagery
- Buffalo ritual
- Decimation of the Buffalo and Deer
• Re-emergence of the Buffalo
• Transition to Cattle ranching

Read pages 4 to 6 of Honouring the Buffalo: A Plains Cree Legend. Invite students to add labels to the bulletin board of the buffalo to show how each part of the body of the animal was put to use by the Cree people.

(Illustration: Mike Keepness)
While Reading

- Give examples of how culture is reflected in daily life in various communities, and examine why these cultural elements are important (e.g., language, stories, cultural traditions, religious traditions, recreation, art, architecture, clothing)

Session 4: Draw Me a Buffalo

- Interpret and create representations of the buffalo.
- Create objects made from the hide of the animal.

Objectives:

Invite students to discover how the Cree people used the hide of the buffalo to represent their stories.

Invite students to make an object created for daily use from the hide of the buffalo.

Material:

- Scissors
- Markers and colouring pencils
- Large role of butcher paper (brown paper used to wrap parcels to be sent by mail)
- Computer used to find objects made from buffalo hide
- Printed documents or images projected on a screen

Time frame:

45 to 60 minutes over two days

Grade level:

Gr 4 to 6 – Outcomes may be adapted to meet the needs of students at other grade levels or with disabilities.

Activity:

The image of the buffalo is usually represented as a whole but most often in profile. The animal is drawn or carved on common and sacred objects. Sometimes only the head and horns are used to represent the noble beast. A more abstract pattern involves making hoof prints. Cut pieces of rawhide are beaded with buffalo effigies that we used to be made into other sacred objects such as the medicine bag that
people wore for protection. This object also means the special relationship of the wearer with the spirit of the buffalo. Buffalo carvings were put on pipes and pipe stems, because this animal, like pipe smoke, is the go between humans and the spirit world.

- **Painting On A Buffalo Hide**

Discuss with students the reasons why illustrations like this would have been painted on buffalo hides.

Following the exchange of ideas, invite students to create their own story on torn brown paper made to look like buffalo hide.
• Making A Parfleche

(Illustration: Royal Saskatchewan Museum artifact, photo by Jeff Sawatzky)


The parfleche was used to carry dry food, medicines, and personal items.

• It was made of a single tanned piece of buffalo hide, folded to form a pouch, and tied with leather straps on the die and front to close it and protect its contents.

• The exterior of the parfleche was decorated with patterns and symbols of its nation.

• The larger size of the parfleche was used as a saddle bag.
3. Making a Pair of Moccasins

- Hard-soled moccasins were made with the raw and tanned hide of the buffalo. They used either rawhide for the sole or several layers of tanned buffalo hide. Originally, moccasins were made from one piece of leather sewn around the foot.

- Dyed porcupine quills were used to decorate them. Later, beads acquired in trade from Europeans were used.”

- Plains Cree moccasins often left the cuff undecorated, but geometric bead and quillwork patterns often decorated the instep portion, or around the circumference near the sole. Some Plains designs covered the entire top of the moccasin from the heel to the toe.”

  [http://www.nativetech.org/clothing/moccasin/moctext.html](http://www.nativetech.org/clothing/moccasin/moctext.html)

![Illustration: Royal Saskatchewan Museum artifact, photo by Jeff Sawatzky]

Instructions for how to make your own moccasins


Material:

- Heavy paper (like a strong paper grocery bag), to make the pattern pieces
- Leather or felt (enough for two feet)
- Thread (or sinew)
- Needle
- An awl for punching holes, if using leather

NB: Make separate patterns for each foot. Cut out all the pattern pieces first. You can baste the patterns together before cutting the leather/felt to make sure they will fit.
Figure A
For the sole, trace the outline of your foot on the heavy paper and cut it out.

Figure B
Place the template on the felt or leather (with the grain) and draw a line with a 2.5 cm seam allowance all around.

Figure C
For the top, place the template on the felt, draw the upper front of the foot. Continue drawing down the sides, gradually expanding the width in the mid-foot to about 1.5 cm in width in the mid-foot. Draw a curve. Check the pattern by setting foot on the sole, lift both sides and put the top on foot. The sole and the top should overlap slightly 2-3 mm.

Figure D
For the heel, make two notches in the sole with a length of 2.5 cm on each side of the heel. (The width of the heel should fit between the two notches). For the sides, cut two strips of 4cm in width, the length of the foot.
**Figure E**
Fold up the sides of the sole to form the sides. Lay the top on the front of the moccasin.

**Figure F**
Sew the top onto the front and sides, puckering the front as needed. If you are using leather, holes will need to be punched with an awl before the pieces are sewn together.

**Figure G**
Sew the heal into the shape of the moccasin.

**Figure H**
Glue or sew together the strips to the sides. Glue or sew together and choose Cree patterns to decorate the top of the foot and the strips. (Embroider with thread, pearls or paint).

Put moccasins created by students on display as an art exhibit.
While Reading

On a map locate traditional First Nations and habitation areas in the era prior to European arrival, on the Plains and Eastern Woodland (Map of the territories occupied by diverse First Nations people: http://dragonflycanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/map.jpg)

• Delineate ways in which cultures might change over time

Session 5: The Buffalo Jump

Objectives:

Begin this session by reading 7 and 8 of Honouring the Buffalo: A Plains Cree Legend. View map of territory occupied by the Cree Nation indication that it once covered parts of Saskatchewan, southern Manitoba in the Churchill River all the way to the Hudson Bay. Members of a branch of Cree family were reportedly allied with the Assiniboine. They moved to the southwest territory of the buffalo and became the Plains Cree. It is likely that they were the ones who introduced the hunting technique of driving the buffalo into a fenced area, a method used by the Woodland Cree to hunt deer.


Material:

• Markers and colouring pencils
• Computers to consult sites
• Printed documents or projected onto a screen.
• Maps of hunting territories

Time frame:

45 to 60 minutes over a two-day period

Grade level:

Gr 4 to 6 – Outcomes may be adapted to meet the needs of students at other grade levels or with disabilities.

Activities:

• Discuss with students the diverse hunting methods and the reasons for their use. Have students prepare a list of questions about this topic.
- Invite the group of students who did a presentation during session 3 on the theme: *Hunting Methods*, to redo their short talk.

- Discuss with students the fact that when the Cree hunted the buffalo, the hunters sometimes wore a headdress which almost completely covered their head. It was decorated with the horns and they also wore a tunic made of buffalo hide. This type of camouflage permitted the hunters to approach the imposing animals and kill them.

  Source: [https://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/settlement/kids/021013-2161.8-f.html](https://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/settlement/kids/021013-2161.8-f.html)

- Have students consult sites to find a map of the territories occupied by First Nations in Canada. Using a template of a map of Canada, have students draw in the areas using different colours and label the map correctly. Have students paste their map in their journal.


- The buffalo hunt was the means by which Plains peoples acquired their primary food resource until the decimation of the buffalo herds in the 1880s. Discuss what impact this had on the Cree people.

  *(Illustration: Mike Keepness)*

Complete the bulletin board of the buffalo.

Read the rest of *Honouring the Buffalo: A Plains Cree Legend.*
From another perspective

Invite students to write a newspaper article about a buffalo hunt in their journal. Encourage students to use the questions who, what, where, and why, when, and how in order to build their text. Encourage them to assume the role of the hunter or the buffalo to bring their experience to life.


- Melina is 12 years old girl, a young Métis whose ancestors were French and Ojibwa. At school, she feels a bit lost among the other students. One day, she agrees to participate in the simulation of a buffalo hunt. This simple class project leads to new friendships, taking risks certainly, feelings of unease, but also on a full journey of discovery. Through the buffalo hunt, Melina understands the richness of its culture and its vast potential.

(Illustration: Mike Keepness)
After the Reading

- Identify the impact of the natural environment on the lifestyle of the people of Saskatchewan, including First Nations.

**Session 6: The Saskatchewan Buffalo**

**Objectives:**

The proposed activities are to be used to extend the reading and/or as enrichment.

**Material:**

- Markers and colouring pencils
- Computers
- Printed documents or projected on a screen
- Maps
- Worksheet

**Time Frame:**

45 to 60 minutes over a two day period

**Grade level:**

Gr 4 to 6 – Outcomes may be adapted to meet the needs of students at other grade levels or with disabilities.

**Activities:**

- Have students identify the buffalo’s territory today: [http://www.ultimateungulate.com/artiodactyla/bison_bison.html](http://www.ultimateungulate.com/artiodactyla/bison_bison.html)

- Have students identify the physical differences between the Plains Buffalo and the Wood Buffalo.
6.1 Prairie or Wood Buffalo?

Go to the following site and find the differences between the two types of buffalo. [http://www.usask.ca/wcvm/herdmed/specialstock/resources/Smokearticles/1994_Nov_Subspeciesdifferences.pdf](http://www.usask.ca/wcvm/herdmed/specialstock/resources/Smokearticles/1994_Nov_Subspeciesdifferences.pdf)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Illustration of a Plains Buffalo</th>
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<th>Illustration of a Wood Buffalo</th>
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Extending the Reading

- Paraphrase a traditional narrative about the origins of the First Nations or Inuit peoples, about the relationship with the natural environment, and connections between spirituality and the natural environment.

The Legend of the White Buffalo

- Listen to the music on the following site:
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FyRBkq20PPA

- While music is used as background, read the Legend of the White Buffalo to students. Use the following text from this site:
  http://www.kstrom.net/isk/arvol/buffpipe.html

Objectives:

The activities in this session are proposed as an extension an enrichment to the buffalo theme.

Material:

- Computers

Time Frame:

30 to 40 minutes over a two-day period

Grade level:

Gr 4 to 6 – Outcomes may be adapted to meet the needs of students at other grade levels or with disabilities.

Activities:

- View the legend of the White Buffalo. Discuss with students the messages and teachings found this story.

- This second legend can be done as a reader’s theatre. Invite seven students to become one of the characters of the legend.

- Or students may read and illustrate the story.
In the middle of the vast prairie, at the edge of a small stream, seven young aboriginals lived in a solitary tepee. Their parents had abandoned them to go hunting. The lost boys were as poor as field mice. To forget their lack of food, they sang to calm their hunger. Also, they had nothing for clothing. Because they were ashamed of their nakedness, they hid from the people who lived in the neighbouring village.

At night, in silence, they would leave their tepee and light a great fire to chase away the cold. Contemplating the flames, they imagined great feasting and dancing until dawn to forget the hunger that gnawed them.

One evening, the oldest boy lit a big bonfire and called his brothers to take place around the blazing council fire. “My brothers,” he said. “We are weak, and we are wasting away each day because of our lack of food.”

For a long moment, all stood there; without saying a word and without moving, until the youngest broke the silence by speaking.

“The Earth is not a place to live,” he said. “We should become rocks, that way we would never be cold or hungry ever again.

“To become a rock,” said the second youngest, would mean death. We should become beautiful tall trees.

“But the storms could knock us down,” said the third brother. “We should become water, that way no animal or human could harm us.”

“Have you not thought about the sun?” asked the fourth brother. “Instead, we should become the night; she, at least, has always protected us.”
After a while, the oldest boy spoke once more:

“Everything, endlessly comes through ...,” as he turned his gaze towards heaven, contemplating the brightness of the night. After a moment, he suggested to his brothers who were watching him with their large eyes. “What if we changed ourselves into stars?” he asked. “That way, we could forever shine in all this vastness.”

“Yes! Yes!” cried the fifth of boys. “We will become stars.”

Then all seven boys rose to their feet and threw all the wood they had in the fire. The massive blaze lit up the whole meadow. The brothers joined hands and danced. First, their feet were heavy and slow as they danced around. But with every step, their fatigue dwindled, and their heels hit the ground more quickly. Soon, it seemed that they hardly touched the ground. Then still holding hands, they began to swirl and ascend higher and higher up into the air.

When they finally stopped dancing, the night sky was holding them in her arms. The boys saw seven magical tepees and ran to their new refuge. Inside, beautiful golden clothes and untold riches awaited them. They donned their new clothes and went out of their tepee. In their best clothes, they sparkled and shone like the light of thousands of diamonds.

The first boy spoke up again: “The Great Spirit has granted our wish because we have all become stars.”

Since that day, it is possible to see the seven boys who became the Pleiades, except in spring when the constellation disappears. At that time, the buffalo calves are born with their red skin. The constellation appears again in the fall when the dress of each calf becomes dark brown as that of their parents. Since that time, the Cree paint these stars on the smoke flaps of their tepee to remind them never to neglect their children.

Translated from: http://aedes.over-blog.com/pages/La_legende_indienne_des_Sevent_freres-1958671.html


(Illustration: Mike Keepness)
**After the Reading**

**Evaluation: Summary of project**

In previous lessons, students expressed their ideas, created objects, participated in readers' theatre, and delved into the topic by finding other information about the buffalo and its importance in the culture of Indigenous peoples. Here is a grid of self-assessment to measure their investment, and their participation throughout the project.

- 1 = Work incomplete or insufficient
- 4 = Participation and completed assignment are exceptional

Instructions: Colour in one numbered area only for each statement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-evaluation grid</th>
<th>Name:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I participated in all discussion and shared my ideas.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I took excellent notes on the themes found on the History Museum site.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I illustrated in a very creative way my understanding of the subjects covered in this project.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I was able to identify and note the physical differences between a prairie and wood buffalo.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I participated activity in the readers' theatre.</td>
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<td>I made one of the objects suggested according to the First Nations traditions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I correctly used the writing conventions in all my journal entries and assignments for this project.</td>
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</table>
After the Reading

Evaluation: - Summary of project

Extension: Multiple choice questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What do you know about the buffalo?</th>
<th>True</th>
<th>False</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The buffalo is the largest land mammal of North America.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Buffalo measure between 1.8 and 2 metres (6 to 6.5 feet) at shoulder height, and 2.7 and 3.6 metres (8.5 to 12 feet) from nose tip to tail.</td>
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<td>3. A buffalo can live on average of up to 10 years.</td>
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<td>4. The male and female buffalo (buffalo cow) have a big head, a shaggy beard and tapered and curved horns that can measure up to 61 centimeters long (2 feet).</td>
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<td>5. The buffalo does not like to run or jump.</td>
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<td>6. When needed, it can run up to 64 kilometers (40 miles) per hour over a distance of up to 0.4 km (0.25 mile).</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. The buffalo is not a good swimmer. It does not easily float and it head, hump and tails do not stay out of the water.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Although the buffalo does not a good eye sight, its hearing and sense of smell is excellent. It can smell an animal three kilometers away.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Buffalo have a winter fleece so thick and well insulated that snow can cover their backs without melting.</td>
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<td>10. The hump of buffalo consists of muscles supported by long vertebrae. The strength of these muscles allows him to use his head as a snow plow when it searches for food in winter.</td>
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<td>11. Buffalo move over large areas, without stopping, to eat plain grass plains, shrubs, and twigs. They</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>regurgitate their food and chew the cud before the final digestion.</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>12. The buffalo cow is the head of buffalo families while they graze freely. The males are alone or in small groups much of the year, and join the herd for mating season.</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>13. Buffalo eat early in the morning and in late afternoon, but they are most active at dusk and at night. During the day, they rest, ruminate, or roll on the ground.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>14. The hooves of buffalo till the soil, which helps the growth of many plant and animal species.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>15. Grizzly bears, gray wolves, and cougars are predators of the North American buffalo.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>16. The North American buffalo is not a dangerous animal.</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>17. Fossils have shown that Yellowstone National Park is the only place in the US where buffalo have lived continuously since prehistoric times.</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>18. For nearly 4000 years, the Indigenous people of North America hunted buffalo by bringing herds to jump off the precipice of Head-Smashed-In, Alberta, Canada.</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>19. It is estimated that between 30 and 50 million buffalo have lived between northern Canada and northern Mexico, and across the great plains and forests of the east and to west of the Rocky Mountains.</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>20. The loss of habitat due to large-scale settlement, the appearance of firearms and uncontrolled hunting, sports or for buffalo hides, deprived Indigenous peoples of their most important natural resource. To survive, most Indigenous peoples</strong></td>
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signed treaties forcing them to live on reservations. By 1889, the buffalo population was barely 1100 animals.

21. Today, there are about 100,000 buffalo in North America. Only 10,000 are considered wild buffalo.

22. In Canada, about 5,000 buffalo roam free in protected areas in the south and northwest Saskatchewan, northeastern British Columbia, Alberta, and the Northwest Territories.

(Illustration: Mike Keepness)
Answer Key

1. True – It weighs on average 725 kilograms (1 598 pounds).
2. True
3. False – A buffalo can live 25 to 30 years.
4. True
5. False – A buffalo can jump as high as 1.8 metres (6 feet) and is able to turn and change direction rapidly to face and fight predators.
6. True
7. False – The buffalo is a very good swimmer. He can easily float and his head, his hump and his tail remains above water.
8. True
9. True
10. True
11. True
12. True
13. True
14. False
15. False – The grizzly, the grey wolf, and the cougar are predators of the North American buffalo.
16. False – The buffalo is the most dangerous animal in North America. Three times more people are killed by the buffalo than the bear, according to reports from Yellowstone National Park in the United-States.
17. True
18. False – During almost 6 000 years, the Indigenous People of North America hunted buffalo by bringing herds to jump off the precipice of Head-Smashed-In, Alberta, Canada.
19. True
20. True
21. False – Today, it is estimated that 570,000 buffalo live in North America. Only 20,000 of these are still considered wild buffalo.

22. True